

“Impossible. I am the Sword of Swords. I am the Sword of Swords! I am the—”

-Last words of Huen-Vai, God of War, Sword of Swords, shattered by the once-mortal Zein
Thousandhand in single combat

12-9
Godslayer

Zein strode.

Calamity followed.

She lashed out first not with an umbrella or blade, but with a reaching hand, her fingers clenching around time itself. Before Kae could root her in place using her maelstrom’s directional anchoring; before her flesh was shattered, dissolved, or warped; before Dice could close an exchange, Zein *cut*.

But not any of them.

No. She used her manifested blade and parted existence itself.

The rushing water of chronology was **Partitioned** into six branching streams.

The future came as a roaring flood, and at a glance, none among the cadre stood affected. But Avo felt it. He felt his internalized Domain of Chronology strike him six separate times, each path rushing alongside the other, all spilling forth from a shared headwater—*Zein* herself.

In an instant, the group was separated. The surrounding environment did not change. The rules of space and geometry continued to apply. Yet, each member of the cadre found themselves suddenly alone except for the shard of Avo buried in their Metaminds.

Across parallel paths, Avo could feel his splinters—his companions. But they were all progressing along different tracks into the future, forced into singular duels.

And across from them stood a single constant. One entity that stood immutable even as they all retaliated.

Zein.

Dice and Draus moved first, reflexes surging, their bodies instruments of violence and velocity. The former was faster, the icons of her empowerment flaring hot as she exploded across the lobby, clearing the ten meters between her and Zein in an instant. Draus engaged as the soldier she was. Replicas surged forward first—a charge of mirrored pawns that was little different from

a testing jab. Around them, glass began to creep across the environment, light painting new reflections into existence.

She tried to vitrify Zein herself. It didn't work. A reverberation danced across Zein's sheath—her body now a chimera of matter and passing time.

Zein strode and met Dice's charge first. In a parallel moment, gunfire erupted from across the room, seeking to consume her. Thousandhand reacted to both: evading the latter by engaging the former. They fought them apart but they dueled her together. The intent behind her actions was clear—she sought to prevail against them all as one, but also individually dominate them in the process.

And with Avo linking each of their minds, even their separation across the paths would not deny them the truth of her might.

Sound shattered as Dice greeted Zein. The girl was destruction in motion, each step a tremor, each dash faster than the last. But even as Avo wove skill into her derived from over a million templates, a separation made itself known.

There were masterful combatants among Avo's templates. Elites among elites across the martial spectrum. Merged together, what emerged was greater than the sum of their parts, a practitioner few could ever hope to match.

But there was only one Godslayer.

[Wait—] Abrel's warning came a moment too late.

As she was now, Zein was slower than Dice, but she moved with impossible position and alacrity, knowing exactly where to stand, where to strike, and where to move thereafter.

Servos roared. The internal magnetic accelerators within Dice's Railjumper fired. Where she was merely fast before, she was as if a rail-launched flechette accelerating by the exponent. The air around her rippled.

Zein twisted, flicked, and rolled. She didn't stay in one place—rushing on to meet Draus' replicas now, her liquid blade weaving around her, deflecting a rainstorm of gunfire.

By the time Avo invoked his **Halt of the Passing**, Dice's leg coils had been severed clean and Thousandhand was upon the replicas, her temporal blade splitting into a thousand different strokes, parrying plunging lances of glass and sweeping munitions fired from hidden gun lines aside.

[Get her back up,] Abrel said, the template's mind drifting to Dice. **[And get the rest them to—]** Zein shed an echo in her place as the Fardrifter's Hell sought to bind her in chains. She

stepped—and was suddenly between Draus' replicas, her armor aglow across the right shoulder, kissed by blinding lances cast out from fusion burners across various reflections. Abrel sighed. **[Alright. A bit too optimistic to hope that the Godslayer was just going to be leashed by your stasis so easily.]**

As she spoke, Avo constructed new legs for Dice—rebuilding her using his **Haemokinesis**. The girl had not stopped in the meantime, clawing furrows into the ground and launching her using her arms.

It occurred to Avo that Zein could have cleaved her across the middle. Dice's survival had been a deliberate decision on the Godslayer's part.

Chambers and Kae finally reacted by this point, and Denton was beginning to move. A rush of misshapen bioforms flooded the megablock lobby in one path, more creatures spawning with the spiking temperature. In another, Kae tried to bind Zein in place—only to catch echoes instead.

From each of their perspectives, the ancient Godclad looked as if she was fighting an invisible foe, her gleaming blade a whirlwind of motion, sparks, and impacts flashing upon its edge.

But beyond all their paces were the Godslayer and Regular, two living weapons meeting each other in exchange for skill and strategy.

Draus was a soldier at her core, and momentum and purpose guided each of her actions. Her replicas were thrown forth. Expendable pawns and fortifications both. They swung and shielded synchronously with her, mimicking each of her attacks perfectly. In this though, was weakness. Uniformity meant a shared counter or a singular flaw.

Zein retaliated as the duelist she was, her blades cutting out in different strokes, her ontology unfurling forth as every strike or guard she could have made across the currents of time.

Mirror-made swords descended, alive with thaumaturgy. Spatial reality parted in division folds beneath their fall. But whipping glaives of time rang against them in retort, saying: *+Fool girl, I am every blow that could have been made across time, a foretelling in motion.+*

No dialogue was joined. Draus simply fired another salvo from her Arsenalist, and it was multiplied across each of her replicas and reflections, positioned tactically to box Zein in. Rockets, particle beams, ferro-mag munitions, concussions, gauss flechettes, fusion burners, and more spilled out.

But from Zein also came a mutual flood. Time slithered beneath her being, and a wave of counter-projectiles came sallying forth.

Between Draus and Zein there was a stalemate. Between Chambers and Zein, bioforms splattered and died. A stray missile struck Dice but did nothing to slow her coming charge. A fusion unzipped a portion of Kae's maelstrom into steam and Avo had to drain a spike of terror from the Agnos' mind to ensure her enduring focus.

Zein was playing with them still. Sampling them one after another.

This was exploitable hubris.

Avo refrained from casting more of his splinters at Zein as she fought. With how cuts flowed out of her, how she drifted across the battled inexorable, as if the coming of the future, he studied her, and contemplated potential solutions.

He had no idea how much Rend she accrued or how long she could endure. He had struggled against her for some time before his cadre entered the fray. But that was a secondary issue behind the fact that nothing they did seemed to affect her.

There was a component of *skill* in all her miracles. Every strike she made was one she could have delivered normally—albeit all delivered at once. All the phenomena spawning forth from her being were past occurrences she survived; resurrections of remembered history externalized in these paths.

If Avo was a gestalt of countless lives consumed, then Zein was a single life standing over countless years conquered: a testament of the many against the legend carved by one.

Massist. Saintist. But Godclads both, and time-touched as well.

He understood little of his new chronological capabilities before the senses they offered. Perhaps he needed to update his Frame with new canons for them to take effect, but considering how *ingrained* the Domain felt within him—Soul-deep and closest to his blood—there might be something more he could do.

As things were, he detonated the two active sheaths he had in Zein's current path as he constructed another five to support his isolated allies.

A vicious laugh sang loud from the Godslayer, her reaching blade bifurcating before even the light touched her.

[Holy fuck, she's awesome,] Abrel said, her head spinning.

[Holy fuck indeed,] Kassamon said, wonderment shared. The same applied to Lip, Corner, Osjon, Glitch, and Benhata.

Draus' template simply snorted, mind locked on the fight like a nu-dog that tasted blood.

+Avo,+ Zein said, her thoughts echoing into him across time. +*A dangerous gamble*—+

He vented all three of his Heavens at her in Kae, Dice, and Draus' paths. The canon of **Waybreaker** distorted all directionality within the maelstrom, but Zein's strokes blossomed out, a tide of gouges carving the quartz flooring deep, coming at him from all angles.

He detonated that body—and also that path as well.

Ducking under a replica's jab, a shrill whistle echoed out from Zein's being—a noise cast into the future—and Draus' glass vibrated, then shattered. The unexpectedness of the attack didn't phase the Regular. She accepted and fought on—even as Soulfire flared out from her ontology in a corona—thaumic backlash triggered.

Zein slashed. Strikes flickered into existence. Draus moved as if a projectile herself—a veil of guns spreading like wings from her back, barrels searing red from the constancy of their firing. Miracle greeted Rend as blades bit into a shroud of entropic gale covering the Regular.

Some of the cuts passed through still, the origination of the blows more than mere matter. Others dissolved, merely slashes born of mortal skill.

With her reflex booster overclocked by her newest implants, Draus stood the fastest of the cadre as Dice's momentum had been recently broken. Even so, she didn't fight alone. Synced to Avo's mind, he filtered his mem-data over into her Metamind, allowing her cog-feed to overlap what was happening across the various paths, reuniting the team cognitively.

As the world erupted into shearing edges, Avo stopped venting his Woundmother to briefly activate his **Fortress of Luminosity**. Draus never stopped shooting, her own ontology more akin to a bullet in motion by this point, Avo's sheath flowing close behind her in tendrils of lapping blood.

During this time, Chambers settled on his second assault, deploying a legion of phallic horrors against Zein. The crone offered the stampede a disappointed side-eye before cutting into them. But as glaive kissed veiny flesh, steam, and pus exploded from the cuts, and a swarm of burning wasps erupted from bursting biomass.

Caustic fluids and tides of force actually made Zein stumble. In the same instance, Kae finally clenched in place, causing her to jolt and shed an echo.

She remained in place a microsecond too long.

A barrage of fire swept over her as more weapons spilled out of Draus as hills of expended magazines, battery cores, and worn barrels cascaded across the cracked ground. Zein's painted

defensive strokes in blinding motion. Sparks and splashes peeled around her body. The first sparks splashed across her armor, shrapnel striking her like flint.

Then, Avo, Dice, and Chambers were on her at once.

A storm exploded across all the paths. Boulders of blood-shaped matter joined Draus' firepower as artillery. A maw of wind swallowed Zein—and bound her to a fixed trajectory with Dice. The girl struck her with enough force to collapse a megablock down through its foundation layer. Zein pumped her footing as a veritable sea of strikes erupted out from her, fists and hands leaping out from her time-forged glaive, shifting her weight as an army of echoes settled around her, working one-as-all to redirect the Heaven of Strength.

Dice wasn't just Dice. And the cadre wasn't just the cadre. And Avo wasn't just Avo. Requisite experience and muscle memory materialized and flowed into whichever mind was in need. A Haemokinetic claw redirected aided Dice's twisting posture, pushing through Zein's counter. Concurrent a shard of glass flashed and lengthened nearby, and rounds came in a sudden stream.

A beam nicked the top of Zein's left shoulder.

She staggered.

Momentum turned.

Dice struck her in the same moment that Avo dissolved her armor using his Techplaguer. Zein blocked—time spilling around her like an aegis, a hundred arms sprouting out from the streams coursing through her being as she cut at all three of them. Dice ignored the strike. Draus dove through a passage—shattering it before the pitch could follow. Avo dismantled his body into flowing blood and reformed as the strike passed through him.

Kae closed her maelstrom.

Insects struck Zein and detonated. Sneering laughter came as the anthem of the half-strand. As something between a fiery cloud and a swarm of stinging insects, Chambers entered the battle in earnest, this miracle clearly taking no small amount of inspiration from their comrade, Sunrise.

Zein turned and an uncountable amount of blows followed. But Chambers was both fire and flesh. What burned could mend. And what bled could burn.

The Godslayer shed a final echo and flowed along one of Dice's punches. The girl's arm pistoned outward. Wind and power displaced the air, and if Kae wasn't there to keep the collateral in check, a third of the surrounding structures would have been little more than dust. Zein slid through Dice's guard, slashing through the splinter spearing out at her, slashing through the haemokinetic mirror Avo was growing along Dice's chest, allowing Draus to fire

through, slashing through bugs as her edge shifted out to hew the girl's sheath in half—just below where her brain was still stored.

But before the Railjumper could come apart a second time, entire portions of Zein's armor broke apart into sprawling coins, raining gems, running ambrosia, and bricks of gold.

Again, the Godslayer stumbled—just in time for Chambers to close again, coming in for the kill.

For an instant, though, Avo's focus turned to Denton—the spy among them who had spent most of the initial exchanges simply muttering to herself, her mind a maze of numerous and encrypted information. Presently, her shadow had fallen in on itself like a trap door, and within its expanse was a plane of wealth and numbers built in the shape of an hourglass.

The top rained with the fragments she took from Zein while treasures flowed upward from below, an equivalent exchange still ongoing.

+*That's twelve-billion imps for thirty centimeters,*+ Denton muttered across the Nether.
+*Attuning market metrics to the Jun Dynasty for inflation-advantage.*+

A series of blasts followed, and Zein let echoes die in her stead.

A bark of glee escaped the ancient, but Avo saw her face twist into a scowl as a crudely shaped swarm came for her.

+*Castrate me now, sow,*+ Chambers cackled, a hive of burning bugs droning instead of his voice. +*You can't cut a sack that isn't there. You can't ram your tip into an ass that—*+

Dice moved to punch Zein again. Avo's tendrils reached out for her. Gauss flechette skipped off her thigh.

The Godslayer sheathed her blade of time and then *drew* it again with a calamitous stroke.

The currents in Chambers' path narrowed. Zein accelerated her passage through space. Impossibly, the Godslayer went from being a few heartbeats slower than Dice or Draus to outpacing them by magnitude.

Yet, there was nothing of speed in this change. It was another absolute. Another mandate inflicted upon reality.

Through Avo, the rest of the cadre felt her working as deeply as a blade slipping between their ribs.

A new canal formed at the center of each path, a stream within a stream, its currents running than chronologies it bifurcated.

Zein *had* to be faster than them now. Not because she manifested a Heaven of Speed. Not because she fired her armor's thrusters. No. It was simply so because of the rulings of a temporal canon.

She was the future. They were but the present.

One could only chase the other fruitlessly. Eternally. Feebly.

+*Third canon*,+ Zein said, a hum following her words. Her voice came from everywhere, but her cuts ceased in their entirety. +*Be proud of yourself, children. You all fill my heart with competition today. Now I grace you in return.*+

[*There*,+ Draus and her template pointed out at the same time. +*She's not slicin' hits ahead of time anymore. She's ahead of us now. Relative position change. Fixed vector; temporal. Move together. I'll suppress. Chambers: annoy. Kae: hold. Denton—bank-god shit. Dice: break. Avo: observe.*+

And Avo—along with the rest of the cadre—did. Before, when she cut, her blows drifted forward like missiles launched from the then-present, striking the future. Now, she was past that and seemed unable to strike at them from behind.

That begged the question if all her attacks were simply stored somewhere. Held and then unleashed. The same question applied to the rest of her inventory.

The questions were slotted to later as Zein moved.

And Avo immediately lost track of her.

When next she reappeared, Chambers was plunging back into reality. Soulfire poured from his orifices, the backlash already in process. From him rose the steam of an extinguished flame and thousands of falling wasps—each perfectly severed in half and split from their wings.

Avo only learned this in retrospect. The sheath he built to support Chambers was gone as well. Destroyed in vessel and mind before he could react.

An old fear flared in Avo. The bitter taste of inefficiency. The realization that you were slower, weaker, frailer, and softer than what you fought.

Obsolescence. Living by ignorance or on borrowed mercy.

But she doesn't know about me.

Draus arced through the air—the qualities of her being taking on traits of a smart-munition rocket as rings comprised of firing guns lit the air around her.

Then, in a fractured moment in time, she faced the Godslayer—champion against Regular, sword against gun.

They were both warriors to the root, but as one chased seeking to relish in personalized slaughter while the other dashed, content to achieve her goals at any distance, their natures deviated by a measure of ego.

Zein was a legend, and with each did her esteem grow.

Draus was a frame of economy. Purpose-built for war with little want for anything besides the battle and victory.

A shared merriment united them at that moment of moments.

But its departure came as Draus' Accelero—strained beyond stability—died against her spine.

The Regular fell in pieces. Severed guns descended with dismembered limbs. A seizure took her as her nervous system collapsed. She found herself staring at a bloodstained pillar of pale plascrete left buried in her gut, impaling her to the ground.

Avo's sheath splattered down next to hers, mangled and beaten by Thousandhand in the following instant.

Little more than heads attached to mutilated torsos, Avo hissed as he worked to mend them both.

Dice was coming forward again, an avatar of war and might. With each heartbeat, she grew terrifyingly faster. But that was relative to the rest of them. Zein would act first against her. Always.

[Well that was bullshit,] template-Draus said, filling in for her broken counterpart. Avo mentally grunted in agreement, annoyed at how Zein was beginning to fulfill her promises. [I'm not defeated. Just fucked up. Stick me back together. I'm gonna blow my Meldskin next time.]

+Yes! Yes! Not like a mindless dog! You have more than that.+ When Avo next reacted, he found all his remaining sheaths destroyed, one of his claws buried abdomen deep up Chambers *posterior*, Kae's mind a whirl of stress as she clutched echo after echo but never her true target, and Zein advising Dice while the latter tore from place to place, her sheath moving with velocity of an exponentially accelerating railgun.

+Avo...+ Chambers whimpered, the unimaginable agony he was in unable to stop his lustaway from triggering over and over while he tried to burn his body back together. *+I—I think she shoved the shit I was about to shit back up into my stomach u-using your hand.+*

Through the network of splinters, Kae shuddered and gagged. Her miracles expressed her disgust metaphysically. The maelstrom shivered and stumbled. *+Oh, gods.+*

Zein materialized before the Agnos. *+No, Kusanade! No! Do not falter! Rise! Stand! Ignore the hand I buried in the wretch's rectal passage.+* Blinked past-throwing a roundhouse. Zein called after her: *+Too much force. Too much force! Pursue! Pursue! Don't joust.+* Back to Kae. *+The city has failed you. Your order has shamed itself and abandoned you. The ones who would have been your Overclan shamed and broke you. You can be like them in this instant. Or you can stand defiant! Unsheathe your nature!+*

The elder Godclad was likely going to continue, but the ground beneath her turned to bubbling liquor.

A second later, Denton was limbless as well, staring up at the ceiling, expression entirely unchanged.

+Damn you, Denton,+ Zein said, standing over her, mind devoid of any particular rancor. *+I was speaking to the children.+*

They glaive just stared. *+They're not listening.+*

+Ah. As children often do.+

And she then was behind Dice, glaive falling just as the girl began to turn.

The future stood plain before Avo. Without their full manifestations, she could continue breaking them down. With, and they would reveal themselves to the district, and defeat the purpose of this exercise. Still, the powers she possessed were more fundamental than theirs—and Avo was only capable of perceiving her trail in the aftermath.

More than skill, she was Godclad from a bleaker age. One who made her name by cutting the divines down when she was still a mortal, though one not so mere.

She has an absolute advantage. All things flow along time's river. But sophonts think. And all minds are governed by memory.

And ignorance.

Cut the focus of your cadre.

Hide yourself within the girl's body.

She'll come close.

And she'll believe that she's won.

And then we'll share with a memory—and experience that will mark her as kindred to the Hungers.

A thought manifested in Avo's mind. A desperate scheme. He kept it close to himself on impulse—hiding his final bid from the cadre.

Trickles of blood flowed up into Dice's armor without her knowledge, and suddenly Zein was there again, smile wide, glaive raised, triumph at hand.

Then, Avo detonated the thoughtwaves of his splinters as his awareness melted into the falling edge of Zein's blade.