

THE D-EVOLUTION - BOOK TWO

# DECLINE



SEAN ALLEN

# Decline

The D-Evolution: Book Two

Odyssey of the Serum: Part One

Sean Allen



## A Hard Drink to Swallow

Tyrobus jogged back up the street that had led him to the pier and smiled. *You did it. You drew the sword of your will against temptation and won a great victory. Father would be proud.*

Tyrobus stopped running, panting breath as he stared at a yellow shop on the left side of the street. Several glowing lanterns hung from the covered porch, and a carved sign above the door read *Zaku*, just like Captain Okaru had said it would. Tyrobus winced, trying not to picture the look on the old sailor's face when he tossed back the ticket. *You did the right thing*, he told himself, hopping onto the stoop. *You honored Raijen.*

He pushed open the door, and a cluster of wooden shoots dangling above the entrance rattled together, clunking a hollow tune. Tables filled the left half of the room, stools stacked neatly on top. Tyrobus stepped inside, and three mew sitting at a long counter glanced at him. Two of them lost interest almost as soon as they'd looked over, turning back to the drinks in their hands, but the mew closest to him held Tyrobus in a hard stare. Another mew stood behind the counter, drying cups with a cloth. He met Tyrobus's eyes and bowed his head.

"Welcome!" he said. "There's plenty of room at the bar." He motioned to a seat with his cloth, then plunged it back into the mug he was holding. Tyrobus walked to the counter and pulled out the chair. Its legs honked across the floor and everyone looked again. He leaned his Kenai against the half wall at his waist, sat down, and smiled politely.

"Hmph." The mew sitting on Tyrobus's left—the one who'd been watching him—shook his head, then tended to his cup again. He had yellow eyes, a white patch of fur around one of them, the rest of his face all black.

“Now, what can I get you?” the mew behind the counter asked. He was tall and thin, with a kind face, his fur a bronze color, speckled with dark brown spots, the same shade as his eyes.

“I’m looking for my brother,” said Tyrobus. “His name is—”

“Sorry, friend. I might know about your brother and I might not. But to find out, you have to order something to drink.” He frowned. “I don’t mean to be rude. It’s just handing out free advice won’t keep the lanterns outside burning, that’s all.” The mew with the towel smiled again.

“Oh, my apologies,” Tyrobus said. “In that case, I’ll have a cup of white blossom tea.” The mew on Tyrobus’s left snickered.

“This is a Zaku bar. No white blossom tea here.”

“Oh—er—um. I guess, in that case, I’ll just have whatever they’re having.” Tyrobus looked down the counter at the other mew.

“One Jujuntu Sweet Zaku with ginger, comin’ right up.” The barkeep reached onto a shelf along the back wall, removing a curved vase and a small basket. He uncorked the decanter and poured the contents into a cup. He rummaged through the bin, fetched out a gnarled brown root, and set it down on a board in front of him. The mew twirled a knife, silver flashing Tyrobus’s eye. He smiled and set to work on the twisted plant, humming a song, blade clicking against the board as the barmew plied his craft.

“There you are,” he said, setting the cup in front of Tyrobus. A redbark blossom, sculpted from ginger, floated on top of the brew. He leaned over and took a deep breath. The ginger had a sweet smell, like flowers, but what he assumed to be Zaku tingled his nose.

“You gonna drink that Zaku or just sniff at it all night?” Tyrobus turned to the mew sitting on his left. He was dressed like a shendo, with loose pleated pants and a robed vest beneath his brown cloak, and his Kaiten leaned against the counter between them. But he certainly didn’t act

like a shendo. His speech was unrefined and his manner rude. Tyrobus didn't like the mew one bit, but he'd hold his tongue.

"Akashi, quit pestering the kid, would ya?" The mew behind the counter was drying dishes again.

"Shut up, Ichara. I'm not talkin' to you. I'm talkin' to the little shoshun here."

Tyrobus brought the cup to his lips, and Akashi and the other two customers grinned. He took a big drink, bunched his face, and swallowed hard. Tyrobus coughed, chest lurching as he thumped on it with his hand, hoping the blows might put out the fire pouring into his belly. Akashi and the other two mew in the bar crowed, laughter shaking them so hard Tyrobus thought they might fall off their stools.

"Here, kid," Ichara said, sliding Tyrobus a big glass. He snatched it up, gulping down whatever was inside without knowing what it might be. Thankfully, the mug was filled with ice-cold water, and it tamed the burning in Tyrobus's chest. "Don't pay any attention to these guys. They have no joy in their lives, so they have to make everyone else miserable." Ichara shot each of them an irritated glance. "And that kind of a draught earns you anything I might have on this brother of yours. What'd you say his name was?"

"Blangaris," Tyrobus choked out. He bumped his chest with his fist again, hoping to coax his voice back from the dead. "Blangaris Daelekon."

The laughter died, and Ichara's mouth fell open. His eyes flashed to Akashi, then back to Tyrobus. "Get outta here, kid. Get outta of here now!"

"Shut the fuck up, Ichara!" barked Akashi, snatching his sword as he slid off his stool, "or I swear to Glane, we'll find out if that little knife of yours is any match for my Kaiten." The barkeep scrambled back, bumping into the wall behind the counter, and the two mew at the end

of the room circled around to join Akashi. “I just can’t believe it, boys. It’s one of the mighty saviors of Raijen, in the flesh, and he’s down from his pedestal next to Glane himself to grace us with his presence. What, you come to town to see what kind of tail your godlike status could get ya?”

Tyrobus stood up and turned to face them. He could see they were angry, but he didn’t know why. “I don’t understand,” Tyrobus said. “Is there something wrong with the one I have?” He curled his tail around his side and glanced at it.

“What’d you just say, wiseass?” Akashi’s eyes flared, his right—the one flanked by black fur, instead of the white patch—seeming to burn a hotter yellow than the other. “Oh, boys, I don’t think this little shit knows how close he is to losing his first house. And he hasn’t even made it to Raijen Do yet.”

“Please,” Tyrobus said. “I’m sure we can resolve this honorably if you could just explain why you’re so upset.”

“Are you kiddin’ me, boy?” Akashi paused, glaring Tyrobus up and down. “Shit. You aren’t kiddin’ me, are you? But that makes sense. That old mew of yours was about as stiff as they came. I guess the sapling grows in the same direction as the tree, doesn’t it.

“Well, since the great Esukai Daelekon, commander of the Tukshon Army, kept you in the dark, let me turn the lights on for you, hmm? When the purring piles of gorulshit we call leaders withdrew us from the war, our people were lost. Billions of warriors without a soul to fight, can you imagine?” Akashi scoffed. “Of course, we held out hope the council would see their mistake and send us back into battle. But the years passed, and as we grew restless, many of us started finding new, and more profitable, uses for our skills.” He swept his cup from the counter, Zaku sloshing over the side, and took a drink. “It was tough at first.” Akashi slapped his glass back

down and dragged a sleeve across his mouth. “Mostly fighting the damn guilt demons, going against something you believed all your life. And then, of course, there was getting off-world from a planet whose people wouldn’t know technology from a hole in their asses.”

“They’re ikshon—broken swords. They sell their Kaiten skills to the highest bidder.”

Tyrobust had almost forgotten about Ichara behind the counter.

“I told you to keep your mouth shut,” Akashi snapped. “Broken swords are exiled by the council for disobeying Raijen, and they never gave us that little honor. And *that* is exactly the point, isn’t it?”

Tyrobust stared at Akashi, his face blank.

“Ah, I forget. You’re too young to remember the days before we left the war. You couldn’t fart within three hundred miles of Red Tree without worrying a Red Ward might show up and take your head.” The scowl on Akashi’s face twisted harder. “There wasn’t a mew alive willing to take the smallest risk against the Way. And I’ll tell you something Raijen never taught me, Shoshun. No risk, no reward. And I’ve grown quite fond of my rewards.” He narrowed his eyes and growled. “I’ll be damned if I want to see Raijen saved.”

Akashi disgusted Tyrobust. He’d confessed to dishonoring the Way, and had Tyrobust been a shendo, with a real Kaiten at his side, he would’ve cut the mew down. He would have to put Akashi and the others at ease, so they’d let him go. Then he’d come back to the Zaku bar with his father, once Esukai had returned from Red Tree, and see if these mew chose their words more carefully. As Tyrobust thought of a way out, something the mew had said kept spinning through his mind—*one of the saviors of Raijen*.

“I beg your forgiveness, Master Akashi,” Tyrobust said, bowing his head. “This has all been a terrible misunderstanding, and I—”

“Save your breath, kid.” Akashi drew his sword. The two mew standing to either side of him pulled their blades, then circled around to flank Tyrobus. “You didn’t really think we were gonna let you walk outta here so you could tattle to your daddy about how we’re shunning the Way, did ya?”

“Holy shit!” the barkeep said. “You guys can’t just kill him!”

“One more fucking word, Ichara. And you’re gonna end up in an off-world grave without your head, just like little Shoshun Daelekon here.” Akashi flicked out his blade, the tip pointing at the shopkeeper’s throat.

“I’d rethink that plan, if I was you.”

“What the hell?” one of the mew gasped, flinching as he turned. A hooded figure sat in the front of the room. All of the stools at his table had been taken down, as if he expected company, and a cup rested in front of him. He picked up the drink and sipped.

“Ahh,” the stranger said. “You make a fine Zaku, Master Ichara.”

“Who—who—who are you?” stuttered the shopkeeper. “How’d you get in here?”

“I hope you don’t mind, but it seemed like you were finished with your drink.” The stranger didn’t single any of the mew out, and they all glanced at the bar. The rogue who’d been sitting farthest away from Tyrobus stared for a moment at where his cup used to be.

“How the hell did you do that?” the mew said. “Who the hell are you?”

Tyrobus saw confusion on every face around him, but he knew exactly who was taunting them. “Blangaris, don’t do anything reckless. We need to—”

“Blangaris?” Akashi chuckled. “Well, would you look at that, boys. We can cut the heads off both these pricks, squash the return of Raijen, and get shitfaced drunk to celebrate—all without leaving our favorite little Jujuntu hangout. This night just keeps gettin’ better.”



“Ty,” Blangaris said, rising to his feet, “the next time some assholes aren’t trying to kill us, remind me to have a little chat with you about surprise and how useful it can be in a fight.”

Tyrobus couldn’t believe the words coming out of his brother’s mouth. He sounded just as crude as Akashi. Not only that, but he wasn’t wearing the white robes of a shoshun. Instead, his chest was covered in plates of black armor. Blangaris swept back one side of his cloak, revealing the handle of a Kaiten, and Tyrobus gasped.

“Well, well,” Akashi gibed. “Looks like the little shoshun here likes to dress up and play shendo.”

“I’ll make you a deal, Akashi. If the three of you leave my brother and the barkeep out of this, I’ll take on all of you with only that Kenai.” Blangaris nodded at the wooden practice sword between the bar stools. “Oh, and I promise I won’t kill you.” He gave a strange bow, placing one foot behind the other as he tipped forward.

“Boys,” Akashi said, “let’s kill this arrogant little fuck!”

All three mew roared, charging forward with their swords at the ready. Blangaris whipped his leg out from behind him, and the stool he’d been sitting on flew from his foot. It crashed into the mew rushing him head on, smashing his face in a shower of splintered wood and shattered teeth, sword clattering from his hand as he fell limp to the floor.

“Son of a bitch!” Akashi growled as he swung his blade sideways. Blangaris launched from the ground, cartwheeled over both mew, and landed behind them. Akashi turned, shuffling ahead, chopping and thrusting at his foe. Blangaris folded his hands in the small of his back, stepping in reverse, smiling at his attacker as he dodged every strike. He gripped the Kenai still leaning against the bar as Akashi leveled a blow at his neck. Blangaris arched his back over the counter, and the blade grazed the fur on his throat.

Akashi followed through, and Blangaris slammed the wooden sword down on his arm, the bone snapping like a dry branch. He cried out, and Blangaris let go of the Kenai with one hand, turning his body as the other rogue brought his sword down from overhead. The blade chunked deep into the counter, and Blangaris swung his weapon onto the mew's wrists. He let go of his sword and dropped to his knees, howling in pain.

"You fuckin' piece of shit!" Akashi sliced down at Blangaris's back, one-handed. Tyrobus's brother spun, swinging the Kenai sideways over the bar. The wooden sword struck Akashi across the chest, and he sailed backward, crashing over a table and stools on his way to the ground. Blangaris lowered the Kenai and looked at Tyrobus.

"Oh, what have you done, Blangaris?" he said, his voice thin, stretched with horror. "What have you *done*?" Tyrobus reached up and pulled at the fur on his jaw, shaking his head as he looked at the three brigands lying on the floor.

"I just saved your dumb ass from getting killed. That's what I've done."

"What about Father? When he finds out—"

"He's not going to find out," Blangaris snapped, "because nobody in this room is going to say a damn thing to him!" He glared at Tyrobus.

"But—"

"Nobody, Ty!" Blangaris walked over to where Akashi lay on the ground, wheezing and groaning. "Did you hear that?" he said, stooping down. "We don't want Esukai to know about this any more than you. I'm saying this as a courtesy." Blangaris leaned closer and growled. "But if you mention this to anyone, or if you ever so much as think about shedding the blood of my House again, I'll rip your heart out so fast you'll see me eat it before you die." Blangaris stood up and walked to the bar. He looked around, reached into the folds of his cloak, and put a

handful of gold coins on the counter. “I trust that should cover everything, Master Ichara?”

Blangaris looked at the barkeep, who was staring at the pile of shiny metal in front of him.

“Master, Ichara?”

“Oh—oh, yes. That should be fine.”

Blangaris sharpened his brow with disappointment.

“Er—I mean—cover what?”

“Very good.” Blangaris turned to Tyrobus. “There’s a gorul tied to the post out front. It’s one of ours. Take it back home.”

“Take it back home?” Tyrobus said. “That’s what you have to say to me after all of this . . . this . . . I don’t even know what this was.”

Blangaris sighed. “Now isn’t the time, Ty. Ride home and we’ll talk in the morning, okay?”

“You’re not coming with me?” Tyrobus stood there, jaw hinged open.

“I have some things to take care of first. I’ll be home before sunrise, I promise. Now go.”

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Cover by 3 Deuces Design, Inc.

ISBN: 978-1-953949-04-2 (eBook)  
ISBN: 978-1-953949-05-9 (Paperback)  
ISBN: 978-1-953949-06-6 (Hardcover)