

Dyre: Zenarians, book three

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She will test his allegiance...

As the captain of the red guard, Dyre is aware that most Zenarians fear him. He's often been forced to use that fear to uphold the six laws and protect the Zenarian race. With the rebel faction increasing their numbers every day, all his focus is centered on securing the mountain they call home from any and all threat. When he spots a human female much too close to their border, Dyre quickly captures her. His intention to interrogate the pretty brunette goes up in smoke the instant his wings encircle her small, curvy body. She stirs his creature. When Dyre notices the cuts and bruises littering her fair skin, he breaks protocol and brings her home.

Jade is on the run from the law. Or more accurately, the law according to Granger Wasser. As sheriff of Macone County, Granger has appointed himself judge and jury and everyone in town is too afraid to oppose him. When Jade turns down his marriage proposal, it sets off a chain reaction that forces her to flee to parts unknown. Imagine her surprise when she runs smack into a crimson-winged alien! His gentle touches ignite her blood and Jade wants nothing more than to surrender to the wildfire brewing between them. Still, Dyre is a man. And trusting a man is how she ended up falling down the rabbit hole, to begin with.

Dyre: Zenarians Series, Book Three

Chapter One

"You can't be serious, Granger. I'm not marrying you." Jade shoved at his chest, but he didn't move. He was over six-foot-tall and well-muscled from the hours he spent at the gym. At one time she'd found him handsome. His charm was fast wearing off. "I thought we were going to lunch when you called and told me your afternoon was open. Instead, you bring me to your estate and ask for my hand in marriage. We've only gone out a few times, for crying out loud!" What Jade didn't say was that she'd planned to use their lunch date to gently give Granger the boot. The sparks weren't there and she was ready to move on. Apparently he had other plans for them.

"You will marry me or you'll go to jail. Pick, Jade. Now, I'm losing patience with you."

"This is insane," she muttered. "You have nothing to arrest me for so get the hell out of my way." She swatted his arm and glared. "Now, damn it."

He laughed at her feeble attempts to move him away from the doorway. "Or you'll what? Call the police? I am the police, sweetheart. I'll make up something and haul your ass in. I've done it before. It's not that difficult when everyone in this podunk town trusts me."

She'd suspected he'd abused his power, but having it confirmed made her sick to her stomach. Granger Wasser was a bully. *He thinks people trust him? Wrong, they fear him. Big difference.* Her temper reared its ugly head. "Screw you. I'm not afraid of you, Granger. I don't care about your money or your status."

His indulgent grin morphed into pure rage. The slap took her completely off guard. She fell backward, smacking her hip into the edge of the coffee table before landing on her side on the floor. Pain shot up her arm and through her lower back. The left side of her face stung. He stepped closer and grabbed hold of her arms, yanking her to her feet. "You bitch," he bit out as he hit her again.

She screamed as her fight or flight instinct finally kicked in. She swung a fist at his chin. It barely registered to him, but the pain in her hand told her she'd surely broken a few bones. She raised her knee and jammed it into his crotch, hard. He paled and doubled over, giving Jade just enough time to wrestle out of his tight grasp and stumble for the door. A large body appeared and she lifted her head to find Roger Flemming, Granger's drinking buddy, blocking her way. The ugly smile on his greasy, pockmarked face gave her shivers. He liked causing women pain. Got off on it. She'd heard the rumors in town about his depravities. She tried to get around him, but he was bigger and meaner than Granger. His right jab sent her several feet backward. She landed hard on the expensive, Italian marble floor. The last thing she saw was a booted foot coming down hard on her face before everything went hazy. She fought to stay conscious, but

like the rest of her day, that too was a losing battle. A sense of dread filled her belly as the darkness eased in around her.

Hushed voices were the first thing she heard. Jade stayed still, feigning sleep.

"You broke her fucking jaw, Roger," Granger complained. "She's not one of your junkies that will do anything for a fix."

Roger cursed. "Did you want her getting away? She has a big mouth, Granger, she would've told everyone what went down here."

"She wasn't getting away. I had her, damn it. Now, it'll take weeks to make her presentable for the wedding."

"Christ, what is it with this bitch? You have at least three women ready and waiting to be Mrs. Granger Wasser. And they're more than willing to do whatever you want."

"I've told you all this before, but since you're dumber than a fucking rock, I'll explain it again. She's the most beautiful woman in this town. She doesn't sleep around. She's respected by all the women and admired by all the men. Also, none have her standing in the community."

"What does that even mean?"

Yeah, that's what I'd like to know, Jade thought.

"You've seen the way people respond to her. She talks and everyone listens. Her family has been a part of Macone County since it was formed. She's the last of her line. With her on my arm, the election will be a cinch."

"You are so hellbent on being mayor, but I don't get why. Your daddy has millions."

"It's not about the paycheck. Hell, do you think a Macone County mayor makes any money? That job isn't much better than the position of sheriff."

"Then why?"

"Because this is my town and I'm tired of Mayor Banbridge running it."

Roger snorted. "Wait him out. That fat slob is bound to have a coronary any day now."

So, Granger had only been after her for her name. *Nice*. Could she have picked a worse candidate for a date? It had been exactly four weeks and three days since that first fateful day when she'd run into Granger outside the post office. He'd smiled and she'd found him endearing. Charming even. Their first date had been to a little diner on the other end of town. It'd been fun listening to old fifties music and sipping on root beer floats. She'd liked the uniqueness of it. He'd pushed her to go to bed with him that first night, but she'd held out. They'd made out a few times, but she hadn't let him go below the waist. There'd been something a little too calculating in his touch. Now that Jade knew the real Granger Wasser she was glad her instincts hadn't failed her on that score at least.

"I think your future wife is waking up," Roger remarked, his voice strangely high pitched for a man his size. It had always grated on her nerves.

She opened her eyes and tried to move her right arm but couldn't. When she noticed the chair and the rope, Jade knew why. They'd strapped her in tight. She was still clothed, thank God. It made her queasy to think of Roger and Granger touching her while she'd been unconscious. She shifted a little but didn't feel any pain between her legs. They hadn't raped her. Her face hurt. Her arm felt bruised and her hand throbbed from when she'd punched Granger. She definitely had some broken parts.

"I can see the concern on your face, sweetheart, but there's no need."

She rolled her eyes at that stupid lie. "You beat me and tied me up. Sure, I should be happy as a lark right now."

He frowned at her. "It could've been avoided if you hadn't acted like a little hellcat."

He stepped closer and stroked a finger down the side of her face, directly over the area he'd smacked. "I don't like seeing you in pain, Jade. And I greatly dislike the bruises forming on your fair skin. It isn't very pretty."

He was in sweet, indulgent mode. Okay, she could work with that. It was better than the rageful man she'd come up against earlier. "Release me and I'll go to the hospital. They'll fix me right up." She smiled, but it hurt. "Please?"

He moved to sit in the chair opposite her. He held a glass of whiskey in one hand and stared at her as if he wasn't quite sure what to make of her. She let her gaze travel the room and found Roger near the door, staring at her crotch. It gave her the willies.

"You know I can't do that," Granger said, his voice gentle as if he were soothing a child that had just been disciplined by a caring parent. "But I'm going to have Brian examine you. He's gotten very good at first aid."

At the mention of his nephew, Jade perked up. Brian was the only one of the bunch that wasn't a bushel short. He was in college studying to be a registered nurse and he didn't seem to approve of his uncle. She wasn't quite sure why he continued to live with the overbearing man, but Jade was

glad for it. Maybe he'd take pity on her and let her go. It was a thread of hope and Jade clung to it.

"I'm never going to marry you, Granger," Jade gently explained, hoping to get him to see reason. "I mean no offense. I'm just not the marrying type." The lie came easy, considering her life was most likely on the line.

"Come now, sweetheart, you are too beautiful to waste away. As my wife, you would want for nothing. I would shower you with jewels, trips to exotic locales, all the luxuries that are due to a Wasser wife."

Buy time. Maybe he'd leave her alone when Brian arrived. She could escape then. "I appreciate all that. I truly do. But we don't love each other. What kind of marriage would that be?"

He leaned forward, excitement making his calculating blue eyes gleam. "A profitable one. I get to have the town's sweetheart in my corner and you get a beautiful home and all the money you could ever want. I would even be willing to supply you with a child if that's what you desire."

An image of Granger naked on top of her tore through her. She tasted throw-up and had to swallow to keep herself under control. "Wouldn't it be better if we dated for a while first? I mean, it would seem odd if we were suddenly married. People would think you knocked me up and was forced into it. That sort of thing doesn't go over well in a town like ours."

He tilted his head to the side and swirled the liquid in the glass before saying, "I do see your point."

She breathed a sigh of relief. If he thought she was willing to date him then that meant he'd release her. She wiggled her wrists, pain shot up the left one. "This is very uncomfortable, Granger."

He leaned forward and started to stand, but a figure at the doorway caught his attention. They all turned to see Brian striding into the room. He was tall and had shaggy blond hair. Every time she saw him he reminded her of one of those popular clothing store models. As if he'd be more comfortable in board shorts and hanging out on the beach instead of a classroom learning all about the human body. He carried a black bookbag in one hand. He stopped dead in his tracks when he spotted her. "What the hell?"

Granger quickly stood. "Jade suffered a few injuries when she fell down the stairs leading to the second floor."

Brian quirked a brow. "And the restraints?"

"I'm afraid our Jade has broken the law, but that's not for you to be concerned about."

He continued into the room until he was standing directly in front of her. He dropped the bag at her feet and placed an index finger against the side of her face. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

She tried to smile, but it hurt so she nodded instead.

Brian jerked his head toward Granger. "Don't you have a charity function to attend, Uncle? It's an important one, right?"

Granger checked the display on the expensive gold watch strapped to his wrist and cursed. "I do. Thank you for the reminder, Nephew." He turned to leave, then stopped and warned, "I wouldn't be pleased if Jade should escape custody. See to it that doesn't happen." He motioned for Roger. "Come along. Brian doesn't need us hovering."

Roger didn't budge as he continued to stare at her parted thighs. He licked his lips. "Are you certain she should be left alone with him?"

Granger pushed him hard enough to cause the other man to stumble. "Stare at her pussy one more time and I'll cut your fucking dick off," he bit out. "She's mine."

Jade cringed. Granger had attempted to keep his voice down, but sound in the room carried and she heard every word anyway. She kept her head lowered until she heard the door close.

"They're gone," Brian uttered.

She looked up and saw the genuine concern on his face. Her bravado vanished and her lower lip quivered. "Help me," she begged. "He'll kill me. I really think he'll kill me."

Brian frowned, clearly undecided. Going against his uncle was asking a lot, but Jade had no other choice. Finally, he asked, "Why did he strike you?"

Tears slipped down her cheeks. "He was angry when I turned down his marriage proposal."

"And I'll bet Roger had a hand in all this, huh?" She nodded. Brian shook his head. "He's a sadistic bastard. My uncle is corrupt as hell, but I've never known him to abuse women." He probed her chin and cursed. "I'm pretty sure he broke a few bones. Assholes."

"Roger clocked me pretty good. Then he stomped on my face. I think I broke a few fingers when I hit your uncle too. Not that it did me much good."

He passed a hand over his face. "Jesus. They've both gone too far this time." He turned and glanced around the room until he spotted the large, mahogany desk against the opposite wall. He rushed over to it and grabbed something off the top, then came back to her side, a pair of scissors clutched in his right hand. "I can drive you out of town before he gets back. You'll need to disappear though. If you come back he really will throw you in jail and you won't ever see the sunshine again."

"Thank you, Brian," she mumbled, her voice shaking with relief that he wasn't just going to leave her there for her uncle to do God knows what.

He winced. "Don't thank me, Jade, I'm as guilty as he is for letting it get this far."

She wanted to protest that, but when he began to cut through the ties binding her wrists, then went to work on the ropes around her ankles, it distracted her. Once free, Jade tried to stand, but she wobbled a little. "Concussion," she groaned.

Brian quickly reached an arm around her waist and held her steady. "I'll see that they pay for this. I swear."

Fear for the younger man had her going rigid. "If he comes back and sees me gone he'll lose it. Come with me."

Brian smiled at her and it reminded her of just how youthful he was. She hated the idea that his pure heart could be corrupted by the likes of Granger and Roger. "Uncle Granger won't touch a single hair on my head."

She worried he was being naïve and underestimating his uncle. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because then Gramps will cut him off. I'm his favorite grandson. Uncle Granger is fucked if he touches me."

Granger Wasser Senior was worth millions. "That's one meal ticket Granger won't want to lose," she surmised.

He chuckled. "Exactly. Gramps likes me because I don't claw at his wallet the way Dad and Uncle Granger do. He respects that I want to make my way in the world."

"Good for you, Brian. I wish the best for you. I do." She thought of something else and her blood ran cold. "But stay away from Roger. He's sick. Twisted."

"You're right about that, but Uncle would bury Roger in a heartbeat if he so much as raised his voice around me. He takes Gramps threats very seriously. Trust me, Jade, I'm protected."

She nodded and let him help her get her coat on. It hurt to move her arm and hand, but it only took a minute before she was bundled up. Brian glanced around, then scowled. "Where's your purse?"

Crap, she'd completely forgotten about it. "It's still in your uncle's car." Her bank card and driver's license were in there. "It doesn't matter," she decided. "I just want to get out of here." She'd get to safety, then figure out the rest later.

He wrapped one arm around her waist and walked her out of the enormous mansion and to the little sedan he had parked in the driveway. She hadn't realized what an old junker it was until that moment. Brian hadn't been kidding when he'd declared he wanted to be his own man. With the kind of wealth, he was born into he could easily be driving around in a Porsche. Instead, he chose an old beat-up four-door that was probably on its last leg.

After he placed her on the seat on the passenger side, he jogged around the front and hopped in. He revved the engine, then turned and stared at her. His brows scrunched up. "I should've taken the time to dab something on those cuts around your wrists and that cut on your lip. I could've given you something for pain too."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, trying to breathe through the agony of having her face stomped on by Roger the dickwad. "There's no time for that. Just drive."

She felt the car moving. "Thank you for everything, Brian," she conveyed. "I'm in your debt."

"Just promise me you'll go to the nearest emergency room the first chance you get."

"I swear."

He nudged her arm. "And don't fall asleep. A concussion is no joke."

"I'm okay, I promise. It's all going to be okay now."

Every muscle in Jade's body ached. The bumpy road didn't help. They'd been driving for what seemed like an hour. She'd sort of lost track of time. "You've driven far enough. You need to let me off here."

"Are you certain? We're in the middle of nowhere, Jade. I can drive you over the county line to the hospital. I've been there a few times. It's first-rate."

She smiled over at him to ease his concerns. "I know this area well. I grew up here, remember?"

He didn't respond as he pulled to the side of the road. "You're sure about this?"

"I'm positive." She pointed out the passenger window. "See that valley there?" Brian nodded. "My mom used to take us there for picnics. We'd hike the trails all over this area. I'll be fine."

"I could just take you to your apartment instead. You could pack a bag and I can drive you to the bus station."

"You could, but that would leave a trail. Your uncle is the sheriff. He'll have everyone out searching for me."

He scowled. "And he'll pretend to be the distraught boyfriend crying for his missing girlfriend."

"Now you're getting it. This is better. I have friends that live about a mile from here. They'll help me out."

He snorted. "This place appears uninhabited. I expect a T-rex to come out of the woods at any moment."

She laughed, but the cut on her lip stung. "Spoken like a true city boy." Jade sat up straighter. She watched out the window. The Great Smoky Mountains were a beautiful sight. Vast acres of wilderness that she'd grown up exploring. She had always loved living in a small mountain town. Now that town would be her prison if she went back. Leaving for good would be the only way to escape Granger and his lackey. She didn't have anyone special she was leaving behind thank God, but she was still going to miss it. Macone County was her home. Always had been.

Brian reached across the middle console and opened the glove compartment. He pulled out an envelope and handed it to her. "Here. A gift from Gramps."

Jade opened it and her jaw nearly dropped. Would have too if not for the pain shooting along her cheek. "I can't take this, Brian. God, there must be over a thousand dollars here."

"Four thousand, and yes you can. Trust me, Gramps is loaded. I don't think you realize how rich the Wasser family is, Jade." He pointed to the envelope. "That's pocket change to my family."

Pocket change? Holy mother. "I'll find a way to pay you back, I swear."

He patted her on the thigh. "As I said, just be safe. Get to a hospital. I'll deal with Uncle. He's got it coming, believe me."

That sent a shaft of fear through her. "Don't do anything crazy, Brian. When a guy like Granger is pushed into a corner, they'll do crazy things."

He smiled. "You're a good person. How you let him talk you into a single date is beyond me."

She tucked the envelope into her coat pocket, then grabbed the door handle. "I have terrible taste in men."

He shook his head and sat back. "That's kind of an understatement."

As she started to leave the car Brian called her name. She turned to see him holding up his cell phone. "Want my phone? I don't like leaving you out here without a way to call for help."

She shook her head. "And leave you without a way to communicate with all those college girls? No way."

He only shook his head. "Seriously, take it. I can get another within the hour."

He was a sweetheart and there was no way in hell he'd stay single for long. Some lucky woman was bound to snatch him up. "I'm fine, Brian. I'm going to walk about a mile, then I'll be all warm and cozy inside my friend's cabin. They'll take good care of me. They're friends of my mom's and we go way back."

He set the phone in the cradle attached to the dash. "If you're sure."

"I'm positive. Thank you for saving me."

She watched him drive off, a sense of dread filling her. She clutched at the pocket she'd tucked the envelope in. She would never be able to go back. Her home. Her people. She was alone in the world now. Tears ran down her cheeks as she headed off in the opposite direction.

Fifteen minutes later Jade was finally nearing Joan and Pete's cabin. She recognized the dirt driveway to the right. It would take her about five hundred yards, then open up to a neatly trimmed yard and a two-story cabin. She'd missed visiting them over the years. Last she saw them was at her mom's funeral. It'd been a sad day when Lily Talley had lost her battle with cancer. A year later her father had been killed while driving home from work late one night. A drunk driver had swerved into his lane, killing him instantly. Jade had all but shut herself off from her friends after that. She hadn't wanted to see the pity in their eyes or hear the way they would whisper about the poor girl who had lost both parents. But Joan and Pete were good people. They would take her in and help her leave town.

As she walked along the road, cradling her left hand, she noticed it was almost dusk. She quickened her pace, hoping to be at the cabin before nightfall. The engine from a truck caught her attention and she turned. A big black Hummer came barreling toward her. There was only one with that stupid GEW1 license plate in Macone County. Granger. Shit, how had he found her so fast? *Run to the woods!* It was her only hope. She knew the area, while Granger was still considered an outsider. He'd never be able to find her if she stayed off-trail. She stepped off the road and ran for the tree line. Tires squealed as brakes were applied too hard. She heard Granger calling her name behind her. There was no mistaking the rage in his voice.

"Jade, get your ass back here!"

She didn't respond, just kept running. The woods were close. Once the trees closed around her she'd have a better chance of staying hidden. His next words chilled her to the bone.

"You think I didn't have Brian's phone tracked? I knew exactly where he dropped you the minute I got home and saw you gone."

She kept running but sent up a silent prayer that Brian was safe. She hit the tree line and her foot caught on a fallen log. She tripped and went down, slamming into briars and thorns. Hearing Roger's voice behind her sent adrenaline flooding her system. She got to her feet and took off. She maneuvered around trees and brush. Her leg muscles groaned and her lungs burned by the time she no longer heard the loud stomps of Roger and Granger's booted feet behind her. She stopped and propped herself against a tree, listening for a sign they were still in pursuit. It was quiet. Everything seemed quiet. She couldn't even hear crickets chirping or tree frogs singing. It

was eerie calm. Her stomach churned and she felt like she might throw up after all. Probably from the concussion. Or fear for her life could certainly cause her to lose her lunch.

The sun had gone down and the forest was pitch black at night. If she tried to run now she could fall into a ravine. She needed to wait until morning before she went in search of the cabin. She slid to the ground and leaned against the cold, unyielding bark of a giant pine tree. Sap stuck to her hair and the damp earth seeped through her jeans. Screw it. She was safe. For a second she closed her eyes. *Just for a second. I just want to catch my breath.*

DYRE BY ANNE RAINY