

The background of the book cover is a lush, fantastical landscape. At the top, a waterfall cascades down, illuminated with a vibrant purple and pink glow. Below it, a stream flows through a verdant, glowing green forest. The ground is covered in various colorful flowers, including purple lupines and yellow daisies. The overall atmosphere is magical and ethereal, with soft lighting and a sense of wonder.

Resonance

A GIFT TAINTED.
HOW WILL THEY GET BACK?

— SPIRIT WALKER, BOOK TWO —

DIANNE J. WILSON

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Dedication

To Mom, who taught me to see more than what is visible. I wish you could read this.

Spirit Walker Series

Affinity
Resonance
Cadence

1

"I want Bree to be alive as much as you. But even if she is, we can't get back." Kai sat on the windowsill of Torn's office, his feet drawn up underneath him. He avoided looking at Elden, who glowed enough to make Kai's eyes ache. Sunlight streamed through the windows, but it wasn't enough to warm the chill in Kai's bones.

Elden paced. "But Zee opened the doorway before. She can do it again. I don't see what the problem is."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this from you of all people." Kai's nostrils flared. "Zee hasn't moved from the bed since we put her there. She's so pale she's nearly blue. Have you seen her?"

Elden nodded, "I know but—"

"She's wiped out," Kai continued. "You have no idea how much that took out of her. She's resting now, but even when she recovers, we can't ask her to do it again. We have to find another way." Kai didn't say what he was really thinking—if she recovers.

"But you crossed over. You got yourself back to the spiritual realm. How did you do it? Maybe we can all do whatever you did!"

"I got hit by a bus, Elden. Are you suggesting we line ourselves up at the bus stop and take turns stepping out in front of them as they pull in to park?"

Elden ran fingers through his hair. "Well no, not exactly." He paused for a moment, nose wrinkling,

“Wait. Do you think that would work?”

“I’m not even going to answer that.” Kai pushed himself off the windowsill, rubbing the back of his neck. A dull ache was building, creeping up his scalp. “We’ll come up with something. I know we need to try and find Bree. I feel the urgency, too.”

Elden’s eyes narrowed. “Sure you do.”

Kai let it slip. Being drawn into an emotional argument would be the last thing Bree needed. Mounted on the wall just behind Torn’s desk, the automatic air freshener released a puff of lavender scent into the room. Strange. Kai wouldn’t have thought of Torn as a lavender kind of guy. He sneezed as the fragrance curled up into his nostrils. “So we agree that it’ll just be you and me going back, yes?”

“Agreed.”

“It’s been a long day. Give me until morning to come up with something. Try and rest.”

“Sure. Rest.” Elden prickled with impatience as he spun on his heel and left the room.

Kai rubbed his temples in a vain attempt at pushing away the pain that had his head in a death grip. He craved silence, time to think. So much had happened on the roof and the room below. He needed to process and figure it all out. He eyed the window. It wouldn’t be too hard to climb through and down. Just maybe he could get away and...

A knock sounded on the door. Without waiting for an invitation, Runt poked her head in. “They want you downstairs.” Humming a tune he didn’t recognize, she skipped across the room, grabbed his hand, and twirled herself under his arm. Her brown hair was tied up into two shiny pigtails that bobbed as she moved.

“What do they want? And who are *they* anyway?”

His sourness appeared to bounce off without denting her happy mood. “The kids from the school, silly. They don’t know what to do now. They’re a bit lost. You need to tell them what to do.” She stopped twirling and tugged on his hand until he nearly tripped over his own feet. ““Don’t be grumpy. You’re important now. Just as I told you, you would be.” She gave his arm an extra hard tug.

“I dunno, Runt. I wouldn’t call this place a school. You’re being very generous.” The OS: Open Sessions in the natural, Obsidian Square in the spiritual realm—a seedy nightclub to anyone passing on the street. Those recruited knew it as a cover for a dark Affinity training facility whose methods leaned toward more torture than training.

“Whoa, careful. You’ll break my nose. I’m coming.” Kai tripped on the mat and nearly face-planted.

Still holding Kai’s hand in a death grip, Runt skipped out the room and hauled him down the passage toward the lift. She seemed to ignore his reluctance.

They took a lift one floor down and got out. He knew this floor well. Runt led him straight to the room where he’d first played guitar the night the real guitarist had gotten drunk and passed out. A low buzz of muted conversation filtered through the air, and it was hard to judge how many people waited for him.

Runt led him to the door, spun around, and blocked his way inside. “Wait! You need this.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a necklace. A pendant hung from the chain—a small glass bottle that appeared to be empty. Runt yanked on his T-shirt until his head was low enough for her to reach, slipped the

necklace over his head, and patted his chest. He straightened up. Runt skipped into the room ahead of him, and he stepped away from the open door to tuck the necklace under his shirt so it couldn't be seen. He could only hope that she wouldn't be offended.

In a blink, Runt came back. She pulled him in line with the doorway, stood behind him, and shoved. Kai flew into the room with arms pin-wheeling. He only just managed to stay on his feet. Silence snuffed the conversation as all eyes focussed on him.

He walked to the stage feeling like a cancer cell making its debut under a microscope. Sunlight streamed in through the high windows, taking the menacing edge off the place, but highlighting how old and dirty it all was. Tables had been pushed to the back of the room and chairs had been brought forward—lined up in messy, semi-circle rows, which covered most of the floor space. As far as he could see, not a single chair remained open. There was no sign of Elden. He was probably back at Zee's bedside.

Zee's friends sat in the front row, arms tight across their chests. They'd all been through Affinity training with her, and Kai could only imagine that her absence would make them suspicious. They glared at him hard enough to drill holes through his chest. Kai resisted the urge to cross his arms in retaliation and avoided meeting their eyes. He took to the stage, palms itching for his guitar. What should he say to a room full of people who'd just been rescued from something they may not have wanted to be rescued from?

Kai scanned the crowd, trying to gauge the mood. Some of them eyed him with suspicion; others seemed happy but bewildered. Most of them just looked lost, staring up at him with their bright eyes as if seeing

their savior. Nearly all of them glowed a faint green. Broken. It had always been this way for Kai. Glowing green was a clear sign that something—or someone—was messed up inside. His Affinity meant that he knew how to fix it. If only he had time, he could do something about the murky sea he faced. But for now, they wanted answers. Answers that he didn't even have questions for.

A girl with her hair scraped into a bun stood at the back and wiped her hands on an apron. There was something different in how she carried herself.

Kai waved her over. As she approached him, he read her name badge—kitchen staff. In a flash, he knew where to start. He pulled her close and whispered in her ear, “How fast could you feed these kids?”

She glanced across the room with her nose wrinkling in concentration. “We have tons of frozen meals ready for the trainers. I just have to warm them. I'd guess about twenty minutes.”

“Great. Do it. Take some kids to help you.”

The girl grinned and gathered a few younger ones to go with her as she left.

Kai held up both hands and waited for the room to quieten down. The green glow across them all made his stomach turn. “I know you have many questions. For now, I'm going to ask you to hold onto them and work with me. You've been in a training program to enhance your ability to see and operate in the spiritual realm. Some of you would know it as Affinity. Here's what you might not know: this school has been training you in what I think of as dark Affinity. Your experiences here have been carefully designed to taint what you see, hear, and feel. I want you to know there

is another way. You'd gotten a taste of it when your greentube turned amber. Do any of you remember that?"

Across the room, kids leaned toward each other whispering, nodding. When they turned back to him, some of their faces had softened a degree. Kai took the moment and carried on. "It will take time to undo your training, and we're going to start in the most practical way I can think of. If you trust me, I want you to bring back the tables and set up chairs around them. In a few minutes, we're going to have lunch. This time, all of you get to eat the good food. Nobody goes hungry. As long as there is food in this building, you will all get to eat."

The crowd sat in silence. One girl jumped to her feet and cheered. She was so skinny her arms looked as if they might snap.

A tall boy with hollow cheeks and blonde hair that stuck out like an exploded feather duster stood to his feet, fists clenched. He snarled at Kai but addressed the crowd. "Are you all idiots? What makes you think we can trust him? Haven't we been told this before? This is another one of their tricks. Can't you see it? What is wrong with you all?" The cheering girl deflated and sank down into her seat with a fist half-raised, blinking in confusion.

Kai turned and forced patience into his tone. "And you are?"

"Ruaan. What's it to you?"

Runt scrambled up onto the stage and stood in front of Kai with her arms crossed, staring down Kai's challenger. Kai leaned down. "Go to the kitchen and tell them we need the food now," he whispered into her ear. "Don't you glare at me, too. Off you go. Run."

Runt stood, torn between protecting him and doing as he'd asked. With a stomp of her foot, she made her choice and jumped off the stage. By the time she'd worked her way through the crowd and out of the room, half of them were on their feet, twitchy and agitated. The rest stayed sitting.

It was only a matter of time before they started throwing chairs. The noise level climbed. There was no way they'd listen if he tried to speak. Every instinct told him to run, find somewhere to hide, go back home and leave this bunch to sort themselves out. But he didn't. He stood facing them, his face grim.

Ruaan picked up his chair. As he lifted it over his head, a metallic clatter rattled down the passage. The room hushed, and they all turned to see what monstrous nightmare would make such a noise. Kai sniffed the air...roast meat. Food was coming. "Quickly, get the tables set out!" He yelled, taking advantage of the moment of silence.

Zee's friends leapt to their feet, a tall blonde one leading. "Come on, everyone. Tables, now." The room full of kids who'd been a breath away from a full-on riot now scrambled to get ready for food. It took five minutes. Food trolleys rolled in and tin foil containers of steaming food were passed around the room until each one had roast beef and veggies sitting in front of them, a knife and a fork to eat it with, and a cup of clean water.

The girl from the kitchen came over, checking on all the trolleys as she passed. She slipped Kai a plate of his own with a shy smile.

"This is incredible. How did you organize this all so quickly?"

"The kitchen is kitted out to feed a small army. I

can't tell you how good it feels to actually be able to serve proper food to everyone." She turned away from Kai, but he heard the emotion quivering in her voice. She was not a willing party to the OS training methods.

"Listen, that is all over now. Things are going to be different."

She smiled but her eyes remained sad. "That would be nice."

Kai stood. His heart swelled with emotions he didn't dare explore. *Tau, thank you for this food.*

~*~

Hours later, Kai pulled the office door shut behind him and sat on the couch, looping his arms around his knees. For some reason, he'd adopted Torn's office even though he didn't like the man at all. Maybe this was one way to make sure that Torn didn't try to sneak back in. He'd disappeared after the rooftop spectacle, but that was no guarantee he wouldn't try to come back and cause trouble.

Kai had wanted to check on Zee, but Elden had grown roots next to her bed. Kai backed off noiselessly rather than have to deal with all the man's angst. He had no desire to tangle with Bree's brother again. Elden had always struck him as cool and collected. But right now, he was so tightly wound, Kai feared he might snap. In this state, Kai wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere with him.

Kai stretched out and kicked the desk leg, finding satisfaction in the rhythm of his foot connecting wood. If he could figure out a way of getting back and looking for Bree by himself, he would. It had taken himself, Runt, Zee, and Elden to open a doorway and

send all the darKounds back through to the other side. Nasty things, darKounds. Slick, blue-black dog-like creatures with acid-laced claws and a tendency to fill ones head with rotting thoughts. It was a sweet victory, but the story didn't end there. Now they sat with a building full of displaced kids who all needed to be reoriented to light Affinity and then sent home. As for those who couldn't go home...he didn't want to think about them.

His kicking nudged a desk draw open. Kai leaned over to shut it, but something caught his eye: a flat circular dome the size of his palm, with a separate inner and outer circle on the one side. It was stored in a harness of sorts, with a strap that looked long enough to go over one shoulder and tie around the waist.

Kai picked it up and turned it over in his hands. It didn't look particularly menacing. He pushed the inside button first. Nothing. He pushed the outside and nothing happened either. Maybe it needed batteries. He dumped it on the desk and flopped back onto the couch. It was a puzzle that intrigued him, but right now, his brain was mush.

Kai's eyelids grew heavy, and he eased himself over sideways, stretching out on the cushions. Today had been a victory, but it had cost them all. He fumbled for the threadbare throw over the backrest and pulled it over himself, tucking the edge right up under his chin.

A sharp knock at the door woke him out of sleep that had sneaked up on him. Sunlight streamed through the window, and he shielded his eyes. A full night's sleep on the couch had tied a knot in his neck and laced cottonwool through his brain. He swallowed against the dryness of his throat and coughed. With all

the mush in his head, he couldn't figure out how to invite the knocker in, but he didn't have to. The handle swung downward without invitation.

"Kai, is that you?" Pete Zappiro, AKA Zap, poked his head nervously around the door. A wide smile cracked his face, and he bobbed into the room in his customary bouncy way.

Kai pushed himself upright, tossing the throw over the back of the couch. "Pete. Come on in. I thought I saw you on the roof. I've been dead worried about you." A skullcap of bright green lines criss-crossed Pete's skull. Affinity training had done some significant damage.

"You've got company, I see." Pete thumbed toward the end of the couch. Runt lay curled up at Kai's feet, her small body tucked into a ball.

Kai didn't remember her coming in. He took the blanket he'd discarded off the back of the couch and covered her, happy to see the contentment spread through her features and colour return to her pale cheeks. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

Pete shrugged. "Seeing you here is even more surprising."

"The day they took you from school, I should have come after you or something."

"Apparently, you did."

"No, I meant sooner. I should've gotten you out before they could mess with you." Kai searched his friend's face for any sign that he'd caused offense.

Pete dodged the unspoken questions in Kai's comment. "Speaking of messes, that's quite a mess you made downstairs."

Between his frown and his grin Kai couldn't tell if he was impressed or disgusted. Kai slapped the couch,

"Honestly. If one more person says that was my fault, I'm going to lose it."

Pete waved a dismissive hand and dropped into an open chair. "No worries. What now?"

"And again, you're asking me. Why me?"

"Aren't you in charge of this lot?" Pete waved a hand up and around.

The weight of responsibility crashed down on Kai. Pete might as well be referring to the universe.

"There's talk amongst the rabble of you starting a school or something. Try and get our heads right and save our souls." His fingers drew invisible quotes in the air, sarcasm thinly veiled.

"Oh, please. For a moment I thought that might be a good idea. Replace the dark Affinity school with one that can show a better way. Sounds fantastic, don't you think?" Kai didn't look up to see if Pete was listening. "Now, I just want to go back and see if there is any chance my friend might still be alive."

"That's noble."

"Geez, why the sarcasm? What have they done to you? I don't remember you being like this."

"Ah, don't mind me. Let's just say that you were right. Coming here has been...hard." Pete sat forward in the chair and sniffed the air. "Can you smell that? Smoke. Something's burning."

"I don't think so. It isn't normal smoke. Smells more like a vaporised damp forest." He eased off the couch, careful not to disturb sleepy Runt. "There's something coming in under the door, look."

Tendrils of green vapour curled up from the floor. Wisps trailed down from the air vent on the wall near the ceiling and rapidly spread toward the passage outside the office.

Pete stood. "Man, I don't like this. I know this smell."

Kai was mesmerised by the curls of soft green drifting toward him. His brain slowed and thinking became difficult. Pete smacked him on the shoulder. Focussing on his face took effort.

"Kai, we've got to get out of here. I know what this is, and it's not good. Don't breathe it in. We have to go." He scanned the room. "The window!"

Thick billows of green covered the floor to knee height. Kai fought the fog enveloping his mind. "Won't work, too high. We'll have to use the passage." He felt his way across the room, using his fingers like a blind man. Halfway across the desk he picked up the harness with the contraption. He hung onto it and moved toward the couch, where Runt lay sleeping.

"Just don't breathe it in." Pete coughed and sneezed.

Kai strapped the harness around his body to free up his hands. It fit neatly under the necklace Runt had given him. He scooped up Runt off the bed and threw the blanket over her face to keep the fog away.

Pete tugged at the door handle. "It's locked from the outside!" The whites of his eyes were showing, tinged green by the rising vapour.

"Who would do this?" Kai choked. The green mist had risen to chest height. He could taste it in his mouth, "I don't feel right. What is this stuff?"

Pete stumbled across the room and worked on the window catch. "Affinity enhancer. An adapted version of what they've been injecting into us. I worked as a trainee in the lab and watched them develop it. Well, a version of it anyway. This, though, is slightly different." He ran a hand through the vapour, "I don't

know what changes they've made."

"I don't plan on hanging around long enough to find out."

Pete smacked his fist into the window frame. "Window's jammed. We're trapped."

Kai's muscles strained under Runt's weight. "Throw something. Break it."

Pete shook his head. "They smash-proofed the windows long ago when drunk people started throwing things."

The vapour now filled the room, blocking morning light from the widow. It billowed thick enough that they couldn't see the floor. The floorboards under Kai's feet begin to slide, and the walls grew hazy. The circle of his vision tunnelled in closer, darkening around the edges. Runt was slipping. *Don't drop her.* He fell to his knees and eased her to the floor. His mind floated free from his leaden body. He keeled over sideways and felt the jolt through his shoulder as he landed.

I'm going to pass out. Any moment now.

Kai lay on his back watching the swirling emerald cloud pressing down on him. The ground shifted, rippled. His arms stretched out. He'd never been bucked off a floor before, but this might be the first time. The carpet beneath his fingers grew prickly, soft fibres morphing into sharp blades that bent at his touch. Grass.

A breeze picked up beneath his feet, billowing through the gas until the edges grew ragged, torn. Beyond the haze, there should have been walls, a ceiling, a window, a desk. Kai squinted through heavy eyelids, forcing them not to close. His eyeballs rolled back in his head. Do. Not. Give. In.

A small part of his brain was aware of Runt as she