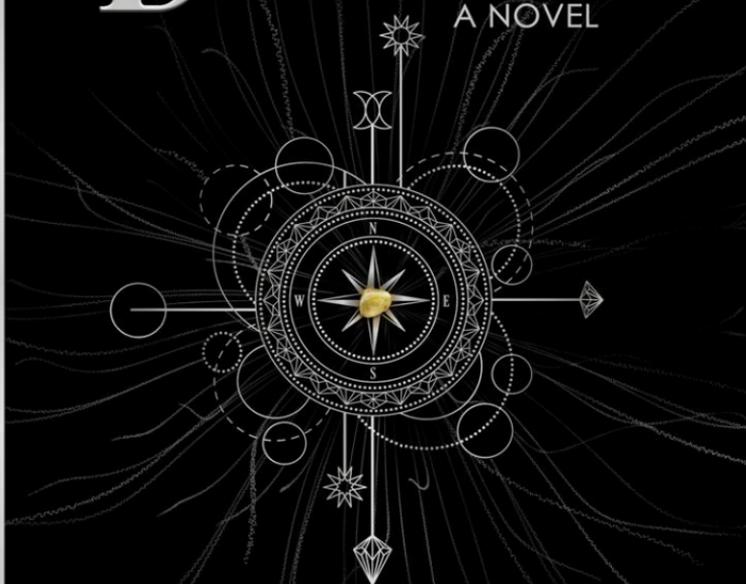


LIGHT. WATER. AIR. LIFE.

A
DIM HOPE

A NOVEL



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE STONES
THAT POWER YOUR WORLD ARE DYING?

KATIE CLARK

A Dim Hope

Katie Clark

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A Dim Hope
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*
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Publishing History
First Watershed Edition, 2022
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0364-0
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

In loving memory of my precious Emma, my planning
partner for this story.

For all my loves, always.

In honor of my Lord, the only true Lifeforce.

What People are Saying

For Shadowed Eden:

"Shadowed Eden is a unique and intriguing tale that will keep the reader guessing and turning pages to find out the secrets of this mysterious story, and the suspense doesn't stop until its surprising end! I highly recommend it." ~ Melanie Dickerson, award-winning YA author of *The Merchant's Daughter*

For the Enslaved Series:

An action-packed emotional ride, *Redeemer* is a story of finding faith in the darkest of times.

~Kelly Hashway, author of the *Touch of Death* series.

Hana has been demoted to Lesser City 4, but that only strengthens her determination to be Free. Follow her through the twists and turns of "*Redeemer*", the third and final book in the *Enslaved Series* as she and her friends risk everything -- including their very lives -- to overthrow Supreme Moon's secret plans before it's too late.

~ Donna Marie West, contributing author for *My Friend* and *The Conqueror*

1

Amber gripped the rocky cliff wall that rose at the edge of the governor's pasture. Two horses grazed in the tall, pale grasses nearby. She had crept into the pasture undetected, and now she would do her best to scale the wall without disturbing the horses.

"What are you doing back there?"

Amber gasped and lost her grip. Skin met hard stone as she tumbled from her low place on the cliff and landed on her back on the ground with a thud. Her long brown skirts tangled around her ankles and her brown scarf slipped from its place around her head and into her eyes. Without the scarf, her unruly brown curls spilled around her shoulders.

Her sister stood above her, laughing. Apparently, Amethyst was better at sneaking than she.

"If you must know, I was perfecting my adventuring skills in case I have to take your place on the expedition tomorrow." She glanced at the horses, who had skittered away several feet. She frowned. "Thanks for the interruption."

Amethyst laughed and reached down. Amber clasped her hand to haul herself from the ground. "Madame Governor is calling for you. She needs you to go to the village for her. The flowers and milk were

not right." Her pale purple headwrap draped loosely over her left shoulder, concealing her own brown hair. Her long purple robes flitted in the breeze.

Amber sighed at her free time being cut short as they moved toward the house. She tucked her curls back into place and wrapped her scarf around them. The cooler temperatures of midyear gave way to the heat of summer. Soon, the well would run low and the water conservation would begin. The drought would last until next spring, nine long months away. Then the waters would again flow from the mountaintops, replenishing TerraQuadro.

She wanted to enjoy the nice weather as long as she could, but such was the life of a bond slave—her time was not her own. At least, not until she turned twenty-one, two years from now.

They reached the end of the pasture. "The flowers and milk? Why isn't Mayville taking care of it?"

Amethyst shrugged. "Madame sent Mayville home early to prepare for the festival tonight, and I have to practice with the players, so I can't go."

Amber frowned as they reached the two-story wood house—the second largest in the township, bested only by the K'Luren's. White walls rose toward the sky with dark beams crisscrossing the front, sides, and back. Sand and reeds serving as decoration adorned the perimeter.

"Flowers and milk." She sighed. "I don't suppose we could make do with the flowers the miller sent and add our own honey to the milk?"

Amethyst held up her hands in an uncertain ges-

ture. "Madame likes things to be perfect as we all know. She is proud of the Servants' Festival each year. Don't blame the messenger."

"Amber, is that you?" Madame's voice reached them through the open doorway of the house.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm coming." She gave her sister one last glance and glided through the doorway. "What can I do, Madame?"

Madame held out a huge basket of flowers. The blossoms were purple—most of the blossoms in Nul-laboro were purple—and they overflowed the basket to the brim. Their sweet scent filled the room. "These were supposed to be the larger flowers, not the smaller. I want them exchanged. And the milk." She grabbed a woven sling from the table. Two jars rested inside, and they clanged together with the sudden movement. "The milk isn't sweet enough. Have the milkman add more honey."

"Of course, Madame." Amber took the milk. Making it to the village without spilling the flowers or the milk would be no easy feat. Still, she wouldn't question Madame. No one often did as they all loved her so. Besides that, Amber and Amethyst had no choice in the matter. They had worked for Madame Governor for three years, since their mother had died. Madame had taken them in to give them shelter and food—and so they could finish paying off their mother's debt. Madame was a generous master, one who had allowed the sisters much freedom, even paying them small earnings that they could save for the future.

Amber arranged the milk in the sling across her

back to be sure she would not drop anything.

"I'll return soon."

Madame returned making marks in her ledger.

Amber headed out of the house and down the lane toward the main village thoroughfare. A moment later, her sister caught up with her. "I can walk with you. The players and I will practice at the sanctuary."

Amber frowned. "The priest allows that? The sanctuary is holy."

"Let me amend my words, dear sister." Amethyst, tall and thin, bested Amber's shorter, curvier frame by at least three inches. "We are practicing in the yard of the sanctuary. In the back, enclosed by the fence, so as not to spoil the surprise for the servants and villagers tonight at the festival."

"Ah. I see." The milk seemed to be gaining weight as they moved. "Care to take these flowers, as we'll be going the same way?"

Amethyst took the basket from her. "I should have offered. I'm sorry, Amber." She sighed.

Amber studied her sister. Her best friend. Separated by only a year, they loved almost all the same things. Had almost all the same dreams. The difference between them was that Amethyst was disciplined enough to contain herself and her excitement, waiting patiently for the right opportunities to present themselves. She worked hard, gave generously, and gained love from everyone she met.

Amber, on the other hand, busied herself with making sure no one took advantage of her sister's kindness. She stood up for her sister, and herself, and

she did not keep her desires for travel and adventure to herself, much to the dismay of everyone in the village. Though they often indulged her with chuckles and good-natured compliance. It didn't hurt that she made the best festival cakes in the whole township, and she shared them freely.

Now Amber looked to her sister. She hadn't noticed before, but Amethyst did seem preoccupied. "Are you nervous for the expedition?"

Amethyst would be leaving in the morning to travel on a scientific expedition to the Basiin. Madame had allowed it as Amethyst's service to the scientists would pay off one of Madame's old debts. Amber longed to travel with the expedition herself, but Madame wouldn't hear of both girls leaving. Since Amethyst was the oldest—and most likely because she was more disciplined—she was chosen to go instead of Amber.

Amethyst glanced at her. For a brief moment, Amber saw something there—something like fear, or maybe sorrow—but it was gone just as quickly. "I suppose I could be nervous."

Surprise flickered through Amber. Surprise that her sister would be nervous for an adventure they'd been dreaming of since childhood, but also surprised her sister would lie to her. She'd said, 'she supposed.' Amber knew her sister's every quirk, including her tendency to say she *supposed* when, in actuality, she was avoiding giving a true answer.

They reached the edge of the village. Amethyst held out the basket of flowers. "I must return these to

you now and bid you farewell.”

“I’ll see you shortly.” Amber took the basket, the heady fragrance again wrapping around her.

Amethyst veered off the path and through the grassy yard of the sanctuary.

Amber continued down the dirt road. Her first stop would be the milkman’s stables. That would lighten her load considerably.

She passed a pigpen and a chicken yard and turned left into the stables. Mr. Wassenbyrg squatted near a goat, feeling the animal’s belly. He was a giant of a man, tall in stature and wide in girth. He wore a light brown tunic, breeches, and a cap.

“Good day, Mr. Wassenbyrg.”

He glanced her way. “Hawthorne girl! Which one are you, again?” But he grinned, and Amber knew he was teasing her as he always did. He spied the milk jars. “Something wrong with the brew?”

“Madame wants it sweeter, please.”

He wiped his hands on a rag at his belt and then took the sling from her back. “I’ll add more honey then. Will you wait for it?”

“No, I’ll stop by in a bit. I have to exchange these flowers as well.”

He nodded. “Getting everything perfect for the festival tonight, eh? This year feels especially grand what with the expedition leaving on the morrow. The villagers are mighty excited to be sending our own explorers to the royals in Keturaa. I’m betting your sister is excited to be going.”

Amber tried to mirror Amethyst and keep her feel-

ings in, but she only just managed it. She smiled tightly. "Very excited, yes, sir."

Mr. Wassenbyrg didn't seem to notice her discomfort and burning desire to travel. "And right she should be. It will be good to learn where the Lifeforce stands." He pointed to the leather bracelet with the yellow stone she wore on her wrist. "It'll be good to restore those to their full power, eh?"

Amber glanced at her bracelet, the yellow stone dim instead of glowing with life. "That's our hope." She curtsied. "If you'll excuse me, I'll get these to the miller."

"Sure, sure." Mr. Wassenbyrg waved. "Come back whenever you're ready."

Amber rushed out and headed to the end of the lane where the mill was situated. The miller's wife, Madame Upton, pruned flowers while her husband ground meal in the mill. She ran a booming business in the brief three months of spring and in the one month directly after.

Amber thought on Mr. Wassenbyrg's words as she walked. With her free hand, she rubbed the stone on her bracelet. It brought her comfort as it had for three years now. A reassurance that she had power available if needed. She wouldn't have to suffer. Not like her mother had when she'd died. Mother hadn't had access to any stones when she'd become ill. Since then, Madame had given Amber and Amethyst stones of their own...stones that promised healing and life if used correctly.

The stones' power wasn't what it once had been,

but the expedition team would find the main veins of the Lifeforce, study its environment, and determine what could be causing the waning. It was everyone's hope that they would then be able to find a way to reverse the effects.

Madame Upton spotted her, and her eyes narrowed. "Don't tell me those weren't right, either," she huffed.

Amber paused. "Madame said they were supposed to be larger blossoms."

Madame Upton *tsked* and shook her head. "As I told Mayville, those are as large as I've got. I am loyal to the governor, but I can't do miracles." She snatched her own leather bracelet from the nearby table and shook it. "There ain't much power left in these useless stones, and all the crops are dwindling as Madame Governor rightly knows. It's a wonder we have enough meal to last us through the harsh nine months of summer ahead of us!"

Amber stood, frozen in place, still holding the basket of purple blossoms. The crops dwindled? She knew the stones weren't yielding as much power as they once had—power that weaved through the soil bringing air, water, and light—but she assumed it was a minor problem. Something they would see fixed with the upcoming expedition, and that would be the end of it.

"What would you have me tell Madame?" She found her tongue at last.

Madame Upton sighed. "I don't suppose it's any fault of yours, child. Tell her them are the best blossoms I've got, and I do right apologize."

Amber nodded and turned on her heel. She would retrieve the milk and head home, but her mind worked quickly. First Amethyst had been acting strangely, and now Madame Upton had not only denied the governor but also revealed her Lifeforce stone hadn't worked on her flower crops. Not that the governor would be terribly upset about the smaller blooms, but still.

Mr. Wassenbyrg had finished the milk when she arrived, and she thanked him then continued toward home. At the edge of the village, just as she passed the sanctuary, two figures rounded the corner of a small hut and ran into her. Milk sloshed out of the jars, but she quickly recovered them and saved the majority. Her clothes would dry stiff, but she could wash them easily enough.

"Pardon me." She moved to the side, working to keep from spilling more milk.

The strangers—a man and a woman—looked at each other and then at Amber. The woman mumbled an apology before they hurried on their way. They were dressed in dark brown robes with breeches visible underneath. The woman wore a light-colored scarf wrapped over her hair and face to protect from the winds. The man's hooded cloak fell from his face, and he quickly replaced it without a word.

Travelers.

Amber frowned after them but at last made her way home. Moment by moment, this day grew more peculiar.

2

Soft but lively bursts of music filled the air as the main Lifeforce stone in the sky dimmed. The stone rose like a beacon from the distant Basiin mountain range, high in the sky as their daily giver of light. Some said that, in years past, the beacons rose all around TerraQuadro. One for each of the four provinces. Regardless, today only one lit their world, and this evening it had begun its daily dimming into the night.

The sounds of the lute, strings, and drums strained through the open window, and the scent of festival foods filled the air. The music stirred Amber's soul, and she hummed to herself as she finished readying for the festival.

"Is it too many flowers?" She held up a small oval mirror. Her hair was piled atop her head in curly brown waves. Small, white flowers crowned her head, accentuating her white, flowing dress. She barely felt like herself in such dainty clothes—not that she didn't like it. She found it beautiful. But they didn't often get the opportunity to wear such things here in the borderland and certainly not as servant girls. However, Madame arranged a Servant's Festival once a year. It al-

lowed those in the township of Nullaboro—which included the village and the surrounding communities—to enjoy themselves to the fullest, even if for just one night. “I don’t want to look garish.”

Amethyst laughed. “I don’t think flowers can make one look garish. It’s just the right amount.”

Amber looked one last time. Then she and Amethyst made their way upstairs from their rooms in the underbelly of the governor’s mansion. Amethyst wore a pale blue dress with billowing sleeves and a draping neckline. The blue matched her eyes beautifully. Madame had given them both their dresses, which had come from the royal city in Keturaa. The thought was a reminder that the expeditioners would be traveling there to meet up with the other explorers.

Burning excitement coursed through Amber. She might not be traveling with the expedition like Amethyst but celebrating with the others at the festival would be fun all the same.

Madame spotted them from just outside her office door near the back of the stairs. “Leaving, girls?”

“We’re going to the festival now,” Amethyst explained.

“I won’t be long.” Madame retreated into her office. “Enjoy yourselves.”

Amber didn’t need to be told twice. They hurried out the doorway and down the dirt path toward the village green where the festival was being held. The music grew louder as they approached, and men, women, and children danced all around them. Other children raced about, laughing and flying small, color-

ful kites. A small stage had been set up near the center of the green—the color of which was closer to brown to match the rest of the borderland—and atop the stage sat the flowers Amber had carried earlier that day. Madame would arrive soon. She would stand on the stage and welcome everyone.

An odd feeling inched its way through Amber at the sight of the familiar purple flowers. It wasn't quite fear, nor was it excitement. Was there something between those two emotions?

"Dance with me, you old stick in the mud." Her friend Gavin stood in her path. He grinned from ear to ear. He wore brown trousers and a white tunic. His face had been cleaned of its usual dirt, and his dusty blond hair was washed and combed.

Amber rolled her eyes at him. "No one has ever accused me of being a stick in the mud."

Amethyst nudged her toward Gavin. "Go dance!"

Amber grinned and grabbed Gavin's hand. "Come along, then."

They joined the other villagers who danced merrily in the village green. Amber lined up with the other women and Gavin took his place directly across from her with the other men. Amber clapped with the music, skipping and leaping as the steps called for it. At the end of the song the ladies twirled. Amber spun, but her white linen dress caught around her ankles, and she stumbled into a couple of the other dancers—Myrna Upton, the miller's daughter, and Oliver K'Luren, the security chief's son.

Oliver caught her by the arm before she tumbled

to the ground, but she could hardly contain her laughter enough to apologize.

“Now you’ve soiled your dress!” Myrna said.

Amber met Oliver’s serious gaze—he stared at her with the strangest expression, and why was he always so serious? She turned to Myrna and shrugged merrily.

“But what are clothes for if not to be danced in?” she asked. She laughed again, and Oliver released his gentle hold on her arm.

She smiled her thanks at him. He nodded to her once, but he did not return her merriment.

Amber turned away without another thought. Oliver K’Luren and his sour face were not her problem.

She felt lighter than she had in months. Perhaps it was the excitement in the air. The entire town anticipated the formation of the expedition. Setting off to explore TerraQuadro!

Each province was providing one scientist, one political representative, and one servant to aid the explorers. From Nullaboro, Amethyst was to be the servant, and a man named Hannigan Clem would be their scientist—he was a local expert on reading the stars. Amber had not yet heard who the political representative would be.

Amber longed to go. See their lands. Find adventure. But she must stay.

A familiar ache throbbed in her chest, and as usual, she shoved it deep down inside. She reached for her bracelet, her usual source of comfort.

Her fingers met bare wrist.

In all the excitement of the festival, she’d forgotten

it.

"I'm thirsty," Gavin said. He held out his hand to her.

"I forgot my bracelet." She stepped away from him. "I'm going to run home and get it. I'll be back in a few minutes." She pushed through the small crowd, sliding between villagers.

"I can come with you!" Gavin called.

But she held up a hand and waved, letting him know she was fine. Let him stay and dance with the other girls. He needed to find a wife anyway. He hated hearing it, but his father loved saying it. The thought brought a small smile to her lips, lightening her oddly heavy heart.

She quickly reached Madame's house. Her bracelet would be on her chest-of-drawers downstairs in the bedroom she shared with Amethyst. As she neared the front door, she frowned. It was slightly ajar.

Maybe Madame had been carrying a load when she left for the festival and hadn't managed to close it completely.

Amber stepped inside.

Angry voices reached her ear from behind the stairwell, voices she did not recognize. They came from Madame's office.

Amber's fingers encircled her naked wrist. She froze and gritted her teeth. She needed her bracelet.

Heart pounding, Amber glanced out the door. There was no one nearby to call for help. She had nothing with which to defend herself.

Something crashed from inside the office, and

Amber flinched.

“Be quiet, you imbecile!” a woman warned.

“It’s not in here.” That had been a man.

“It has to be here somewhere. We’ll check every room in the house,” the woman said.

Amber had to decide what to do, and now. She darted up the stairs as lithely and quickly as she could. A second set of stairs led down to her bedroom. Once inside her room, she snatched her bracelet. There was no time to put it on. She would run back to the festival and call for help.

Amber moved back to the upper-level stairs. She had only been a few seconds, but already the man and woman stood at the bottom, staring right at her.

The man growled and moved toward her.

Amber didn’t wait for his approach. She raced through the upper hallway, returning to the back of the house. Her feet hit the narrow second set of stairs and she bolted down. She stumbled slightly but managed to keep going.

The man wasn’t far behind. His footsteps pounded in her ears.

Amber reached the bottom of the stairs and emerged in the kitchen. The woman entered just as she hit the back door, but Amber slipped through.

Her breaths came in short bursts, and her lungs burned. It would take only a moment to make it to the festival. She only had to outrun them for a moment. Her feet pounded the barren ground. At last, the festival came into view.

Gavin spotted her first. His relaxed face immedi-