

A dragonfly is the central focus, positioned diagonally across the frame. Its wings are translucent and show iridescent colors, particularly a bright green and blue. Behind the dragonfly, a vibrant rainbow light trail arcs across the dark background, transitioning from red at the top to purple at the bottom. The background is a dark, textured forest scene with some foliage visible at the top and bottom edges.

GLIMMER

A SHORT STORY FROM
THE SHAMRA CHRONICLES

By Barry Hoffman

Glimmer

“Glimmer” © 2008 by Barry Hoffman

Dara had been chasing the Glimmer for what seemed an eternity, though in fact it had been no more than fifteen minutes. It had been years since a Shamra had caught a Glimmer; over a year since one had even been spotted. Dara had heard stories and tall tales—some so far-fetched they were impossible to believe—but all who spun the tales described the Glimmer in such detail Dara had no doubt she followed one now. No way was Dara going to give up the chase though her legs ached, her mouth was parched and her chest felt ready to explode.

Dara wondered if the Glimmer was mocking her. It didn't fly straight to outdistance her nor attempt to elude her with strategic maneuvers. It kept veering to the left, then would do a loop-de-loop, fly straight for a bit then repeat its swerve to the left and loop-de-loop. While Dara could never quite close the gap between them, the

Glimmer was unable to elude her. Surely, Dara thought, the Glimmer was toying with her. It only hardened Dara's resolve. She would catch the Glimmer, of this she had no doubt.

The Glimmer entered the swamps and Dara followed, without a thought. Her father's words echoed in her mind. *Don't go into the swamps. It's full of peril.* She paid the words no mind. At seven she was no baby. And it seemed the Glimmer was slowing down. *Don't go into the swamps...* She would. She did. *Don't go...*

Dara had first spotted the Glimmer after Pilla, her best friend, had fallen into a feverish sleep. Several days earlier a number of Shamra children had found a nest of what looked like fur balls in the fields of one of the farms. They had looked so cute, Pilla told Dara, as she gingerly picked one up and put it in the palm of her hand. Dara wasn't the least bit interested. She had a spear her father had carved for her before he had died five years earlier. She would toss it at a tree then run to retrieve it. A Shamra female she *should* have been as excited by the adorable fur balls as Pilla, but Dara was no ordinary female. She raced with males her age and often beat them. Her aim was the spear was improving. And she was as good as any male child with a slingshot.

Even at seven Dara knew she was different from other females which made her friendship with Pilla seem so odd to others. Pilla seemed the perfect Shamra female. She didn't argue with males like Dara. She didn't compete against them in athletic contests. She was learning to sew and even cook. She minded her manners and knew her place. Yet she and Dara were inseparable.

Now as Dara went to fetch her spear she heard Pilla and the other children cry out in pain. Pilla and the others were shaking their hands trying to rid themselves of the living fur balls. With her spear Dara plucked the fur ball off each of the four children.

Pilla held out her hand which was already swelling. "It bit me," she told Dara. "Bit me and the others, too."

Pilla's hand began to swell almost immediately. Dara removed the red bandana with black polka-dots she wore around her head. Dara knew of a plant that grew in the fields whose syrup was used to ease pain. She quickly found one, squeezed the juice from the plant onto her bandana and wrapped it around Pilla's hand. She ripped off the sleeves of her shirt and made bandages for the other children.

Though she was in great pain, Pilla smiled weakly as Dara wrapped the bandana around her hand. She had given the bandana to Dara just four days before on her seventh birthday, and knew Dara treasured it above all else.

Until she died Dara's mother had sewed her daughter a new bandana each year and would give it to Dara on her birthday. It was a family tradition, her mother had told her, as no other Shamra wore bandanas. Her mother had died from a fever at the same time as her father, so Dara had few memories of them. But the importance of the bandana, which her mother also wore, remained vivid. After her mother's death, on her next birthday, Pilla had given Dara a bandana she had sewed herself. She had given Dara a new bandana each year, just as Dara's mother had. Pilla had even made one for herself at Dara's urging. She never wore it in public. It would draw disapproving stares. But when alone with Dara she wore her yellow bandana with black polka-dots with pride.

That night the four children had come down with a terrible fever. Pilla's stomach became bloated and resembled that of a Shamra female expecting a baby. She had trouble swallowing and couldn't eat anything. Her vibrant emerald green eyes lost their luster and turned gray. Dara stayed with her friend day and night. She

wiped Pilla's face and forehead with a cool wet cloth. When Pilla was awake Dara read to her. Dara could read as well as any seven year old Shamra, but when she read aloud she stumbled over her words. Sick as she was Pilla laughed as Dara tried to read to her, then groaned as stomach pains wracked her body.

A doctor had whispered to Pilla's parents after examining her for the third time. He had given her medicine but it hadn't seemed to do any good. Dara had a keen sense of hearing and could make out bits and pieces of what the doctor said. While the adults talked Dara dabbed Pilla's face with a wet cloth and made believe she heard nothing.

"Must get the fever down...tried all the roots and herbs I have...nothing more I can do...she's in the hands of the prophets."



Dara closed one book and picked up another. Pilla slowly shook her head. "You're really...terrible at...reading...aloud," Pilla said with difficulty.

"Am not," Dara said, but she was smiling. "My mind just races past the words."

"I'm not...mocking you," Pilla said. "Your reading...makes me...smile...makes me laugh. When I...laugh—"

"You feel sicker," Dara finished for her. "Okay, no more reading. I'll just keep you company."

Pilla shook her head. "You've been...fussing...over me. You know I love you...for it. I...need...to rest. And...you need to get...some...fresh...air. I know...you...hate being cooped...up...indoors. Makes...you...grouchy." With every word Pilla seemed to be having more difficulty speaking.

"But—" Dara started.

"Does...no...good to...watch me...sleep. Now off...with...you...please."

Dara had left her friend only because arguing with Pilla seemed to take so much out of her. She silently promised herself to return in an hour.

Once outside Dara had seen the Glimmer. It was an insect about the size of her hand when she made a fist, with four wings each twice as long as Dara's fingers. Its wings were the color of rainbows. Dara had never seen anything so beautiful. When it flew the Glimmer's wings seemed to glow like candles making its colors even more vivid. And when the sun passed through the wings it left a path of wondrous colors for Dara to follow.

When the first Shamra had come to this country there had been thousands of Glimmers. There had been far more Glimmers than Shamra so the stories passed down went. Shamra with their long tongues and voracious appetite for insects would snap at a Glimmer and swallow it whole. They were said to be particularly tasty. Soon few remained. Most had been eaten by Shamra. Others, it was thought, had fled the country to where it was safer. In the holy books it said if a Shamra caught one of the few remaining Glimmers he was entitled to one wish. Then the Glimmer had to be freed. It was now forbidden and bad luck to eat a Glimmer.

Dara didn't chase the Glimmer to fulfill any wish. She didn't believe in Shamra superstitions like most children and even many adults. Catch a Glimmer and a wish comes true. Rubbish, Dara thought. To catch a Glimmer, though, meant Dara was the equal of any male. Maybe even better. So Dara chased the Glimmer into the swamps heedless of her father's warnings. Soon, though, the Glimmer flew upward after one final loop-de-loop, then disappeared. Dara stood with her short arms on her hips and stared above.

“It’s not fair,” she cried out aloud in frustration. “You can fly high into the trees. No way I can catch what I can’t reach. Play fair, Glimmer. At least give me a chance.” Still, the Glimmer was nowhere to be seen. Dara shrugged. The chase had been invigorating and Dara had a wonderful tale to tell Pilla. Sighing, Dara turned around and to make her way out of the swamps. With the sun overhead Dara walked north. Soon she came to three forks in the path. She couldn’t recall having seen them before. All three went north, but she didn’t know which would lead her out of the swamps.

Dara reached into her stomach pouch and took out her Bauble Tyler. All Shamra were given a Bauble on their first birthday to use as an ornament or keep as a pet. Baubles were brown worm-like creatures with fifty pair of tiny hands that ran the length of their body. Dara had been surprised when she found her Bauble could talk. Baubles were considered docile but unintelligent creatures. Decorations. Pets. Nothing more. Dara had asked her Bauble what she should name her, not expecting an answer and her Bauble had spoken to her. Her name was Tyler, her Bauble said. All Baubles could talk, Tyler told Dara, but most Shamra never bothered to speak to their Baubles. Tyler was often ornery and most definitely stubborn, but except for Pilla there was no one Dara treasured more. Baubles lived far longer than Shamra. At almost ninety Tyler was a young adult. She had been the pet of two other Shamra before Dara and Dara knew Tyler was wise. She was certain Tyler had been to the swamps and could help lead her out.

“Tyler, I think I may be lost,” Dara told her Bauble, which she held in her palm. “I know I’m heading in the right direction, but which path to follow? That’s the question.”

“And you want me to lead you home,” Tyler said, sounding cranky. “You didn’t heed your father’s warnings, did you and now you’re lost.”

“There was a Glimmer,” Dara said, as if that explained it all.

“You talk so much about being self-sufficient. You don’t need anyone’s help. I’ve heard you say that often,” Tyler said. “Now you have your first encounter with the unknown and you come running to me. You’re just like other Shamra females. Helpless.”

“Am not,” Dara said. “I bet you don’t know how to get out of the swamps, do you?”

“I don’t have to prove myself, child,” Tyler said. “But if you’re afraid—”

“Am not,” Dara said again. “I don’t need your help. I can find the way out without your help.”

“Suit yourself,” Tyler said and remained silent.

Dara put Tyler on her shoulder and took the path that went straight ahead. She’d show Tyler. Show them all.

Soon Dara came to what looked like a creek of mud. Odd, she thought, but didn’t quite know why. Some inner voice warned her not to cross the mud, but looking to her left and right Dara knew she would have to go far out of her way to find dry land. It would add time to her trip. Patience wasn’t one of Dara’s virtues. Pilla had told her that often when she tried to teach Dara how to knit. A blanket or shawl she was knitting would soon begin to unravel when Dara ignored Pilla’s instructions. Dara wanted out of the swamp *now*, so she’d get her feet dirty and cross here. As she moved forward Tyler spoke.

“Why did you stop?” Tyler asked.

“Just thinking of any alternative to sloshing through mud,” Dara said.

“Nothing else?” Tyler asked.

“What are you getting at?” Dara answered Tyler’s question with one of her own. When Tyler didn’t respond Dara shrugged. “I...I sensed danger, but it was just my imagination.”

“You’re sure?” Tyler asked. “Maybe you should learn to trust your instincts.”

“It’s just mud,” Dara said, knowing she didn’t sound very convincing. There *was* something that had stopped her from crossing, but what could it be? Dara looked around and found a long narrow branch that had fallen from one of the trees. Staying clear of the mud she brushed then slapped at the mud almost a foot in front of her. Without warning a mouth emerged from the mud with razor sharp teeth. Dara saw no eyes, no nose. It wasn’t even a head. Just an enormous mouth. It snapped the branch, severing it in half. Just as quickly the mouth disappeared back into the mud taking half the branch with it.

“What was that?” Dara asked.

“Something that would have had you for dinner,” Tyler said smugly.

“You knew,” Dara said. “If I had crossed—”

“But you didn’t, child, did you. Learn to listen to those instincts of yours. They won’t often lead you astray. Oh, and sometimes the shortest route isn’t the best to follow. What do you say to that?”

“That I have a long walk to get around that...that mud creature.”

The detour wasn’t as long as Dara thought. As she crossed dry land and continued north she began to feel a bit anxious. She was frustrated that she couldn’t find her way out of the swamp. Uncomfortable, too. It was hot and sticky and the air was stale. Sweat dripped from her bandana. Her shirt was also wet with perspiration. Still, it was a grand adventure and she had no doubt she’d soon come to the swamp’s edge with fine tales to tell Pilla.

Half an hour after crossing dry land Dara came to a lake that seemed to invite her to enter. She *was* terribly thirsty. And the stink from the swamp and sweat from

her body made a swim enticing. Even if the lake were deep Dara was a good swimmer. And crossing the lake was far more desirable than another detour. Still, she couldn’t see what lay beneath the surface of the shimmering water. Doubts gnawed at her.

“What’s it to be?” Tyler asked, startling Dara. “Cross or go around?”

“You’re saying I shouldn’t cross,” Dara said.

“I’m saying no such thing. Just wondering why you’re hesitating,” Tyler said. “Could it be you sense danger?”

“So I shouldn’t cross,” Dara said.

“Why not. You’re hot and the water looks refreshing. You’re thirsty and it looks delectable,” Tyler said.

“Then it’s safe,” Dara said.

“Did I say that? Don’t put words into my mouth,” Tyler said.

“So what should I do?” Dara asked.

Tyler remained silent.

Grumbling to herself Dara looked around and found a flat stone. She loved to skip stones into lakes that abounded in her country. She was good, too. If a male could make a stone skip five times, with a flip of her wrist Dara could make hers go six. She didn’t always best males, but she beat them often enough they forgot she was a female and eagerly asked her to compete with them. Now she skimmed a stone across the surface of the lake. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine times it grazed the surface of the water refusing to be swallowed. And each time the rock touched the water a whirlpool formed and began spinning furiously. When the stone hit for the ninth time, it’s energy spent, the whirlpool that appeared sucked the rock like her tongue would flick an insect.

Dara looked at Tyler. “It could have sucked us under,” she said.

“Odd, how something so beautiful can be so dangerous,” Tyler said.

“Hmmm,” Dara said. “How come I feel I’m at school and you’re my teacher?”

Tyler said nothing. Dara made her way around the lake.

Still later Dara came upon a tree with huge berries the size of her fist. She realized she hadn’t eaten since breakfast and she was starving. She reached out for a berry then quickly withdrew her hand.

“It’s poisonous, right?” she asked Tyler. “Something that looks so good *must* pose a threat.”

“Possibly,” Tyler said. “Or it just might be nourishment we could both use.”

“But how am I to know?” Dara asked.

“How indeed,” Tyler said, offering no advice, Dara noticed.

“You really can be a pain, Tyler,” Dara said. “I’m to figure this one out for myself.” When Tyler said nothing Dara mumbled under her breath, sat beneath a tree and considered the problem. “Fine,” she finally said to Tyler. “I’ll just sit here and wait for another creature to come along. If it ignores the fruit, it must be poisonous. If it feasts on it, so shall we.”

Instead of a response she heard Tyler snoring. “I do all the work and you sleep,” she said, shaking her head, but she was proud of herself. She had found a solution. Now the hard part. Patience.

Dara must have dozed. She was startled awake by a slurping sound. There chomping—not nibbling, but taking mammoth bites—was a spidery insect with twelve long spindly legs and a small head. It’s chubby body was all out of proportion to its head. It stretched its mouth and swallowed an entire berry that was as big as its whole body. The slurping noise she had heard was the creature chewing the berry.

“It’s not poisonous!” Dara cried out, greedily grabbing half-a-dozen berries. “You had me—”

“Be cautious,” Tyler interrupted her. “Nothing could live in the swamps if everything was deadly.” She seemed about to go on, but Dara tore a berry in half and gave it to her Bauble. When she had finished it he resumed talking. “The key for someone who does so much without first thinking is to be wary.”

“Look before you leap,” Dara said, repeating a warning of Pilla’s father.

“Maybe there’s hope for you yet,” Tyler said, and as a reward was given another portion of a berry.

Her stomach full Dara began walking with new resolve. A bit of fear gnawed at her though she’d sooner jump into the lake with the whirlpools that admit it to Tyler. She *knew* she was headed in the right direction, but she should have emerged from the swamp long ago. She had no idea where she had failed and was not yet desperate enough to plead for Tyler’s help. Her resolve crumbled when forty-five minutes later she passed by the very same bush of berries she had feasted upon earlier. Hungry and thirsty she angrily grabbed another handful of berries, then sat under the tree she had earlier.

“I don’t understand,” she said, feeling dejected. “I traveled north, but went in a circle. It’ll be dark soon...” she said, hoping Tyler, who was eating a berry, would offer a suggestion.

“Giving up?” Tyler finally asked when she had finished. “Swamp’s got you baffled.”

“Who says I’m giving up?” Dara asked, not knowing why she refused to admit her misgivings to Tyler.

“Stubborn child,” Tyler said. “There’s nothing wrong asking for help.”

“Who says—”

“Never mind,” Tyler interrupted. “I’m sure you’ll work it out by yourself. Me, I’ll nap.”

“No I won’t,” Dara said, scarcely above a whisper. “At least not before dark. I don’t mind spending the night here,” Dara quickly added, “but Pilla’s parents will be worried.” Since her parents had died Pilla’s family had taken her in. “And Pilla will wonder why I didn’t return. She can’t be worrying about me, sick as she is. So, wise one, tell me how to get out of this wretched place.”

“That I won’t do,” Tyler said.

“You’re maddening,” Dara yelled at her. “You get me to ask for your help then refuse it.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” Tyler said. “You with your quick tongue. I won’t lead you out of the swamps, though I could easily. What I *will* do is teach you to fend for yourself.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you, Tyler,” Dara said. Tyler remained silent and Dara laughed. “I’d hate you if I didn’t love you so much. So, what am I to do?”

For the next twenty minutes Tyler explained. Each time Dara protested or asked a question Tyler grumpily warned her to do as she was told or find her own way out of the swamps. Dara was finally too tired to argue and followed Tyler’s instructions.

Dara was to close her eyes and listen to the sounds around her, saying each out loud for Tyler. At first Dara had no trouble. The swamp was filled with sounds. Soon, though she thought she’d gotten them all.

“There are far more, silly child,” Tyler said. “Listen. *Really* listen.”

Dara was surprised there *were* sounds she had ignored. Each time she thought there were no more she heard another. She was so excited at her discovery she almost forgot she was lost. She had never *really* listened to all around her. Before she finished Tyler stopped her.

“Okay, now you have to rid yourself of all of these sounds until you hear one you recognize as coming from a farm or village outside the swamp,” Tyler told her. “It’s there, beneath all the sounds you’re now hearing. Imagine using your tongue and swallowing up each of the sounds like it was an insect.”

Dara said each sound aloud and actually flicked out her tongue to snare the sound so she could hear others. She had rid herself of more than two dozen when she heard something she recognized far from the swamps.

“I hear a farmer hammering on a fence,” Dara said, excitedly, opening her eyes and looking at Tyler.

“Took you long enough,” Tyler said.

“Grouch,” Dara answered. She got up walked in towards the direction of the sound that now sounded so clear with the others tucked within her. In no more than ten minutes she was out of the swamps.

“What an adventure,” Dara said, looking upon a farm she recognized as being a mile or so from where Pilla lived. Standing with her back to the mouth of the swamp Dara heard a buzzing sound and was astonished to see the Glimmer pass over her head, do a loop-de-loop then drop to the ground. It looked at Dara with big sad eyes. It was breathing heavily.

“What’s wrong with you?” Dara asked aloud and gently lifted the Glimmer and put it in the palm of her hand. Unlike Tyler the Glimmer didn’t answer. She did flap one of her wings and Dara saw what was amiss. There was a gooey tar-like substance on the wing. “So that’s your problem,” Dara said to the Glimmer. “You *can’t* fly straight. It must be difficult just to fly.” With her stubby fingers Dara plucked off the sticky mess. Then with her nails she gently removed what remained. She lifted her palm and the Glimmer flew off, purposely doing one last loop-de-loop, as if thanking Dara, then flew away. Dara no longer had a desire to catch it. She’d had enough adventures for the day.

“What did you wish for?” Tyler asked.

“I didn’t,” Dara said.

“Silly child. You catch a Glimmer, you make a wish,” Tyler said.

“Not that it would come true,” Dara said. “Glimmers are beautiful creatures, but they’re not magical. Even if that nonsense were true I didn’t merit a wish.”

“You caught the Glimmer,” Tyler said.

“I did no such thing. It was injured. It fell at my feet. A wish if it were possible must be earned.”

“Hmmm,” Tyler said. “Not so silly after all. But, *if* you could have made a wish what would it have been?”

“Simple,” Dara said, without hesitation. “That Pilla...Pilla *and* the others recover.”

“A shame you didn’t make *that* wish,” Tyler said.

“Hush now,” Dara said, but she gently stroked Tyler’s flat head, something she knew gave her Bauble much pleasure.

Dara arrived at Pilla’s just before sunset. She was surprised to see Pilla sitting up in bed sipping soup from a bowl. Her stomach was no longer bloated. Her eyes were once again vibrant.

“Did I walk into the wrong room?” Dara asked. Before Pilla could answer Dara rushed to her friend and gave Pilla a hug. She was rewarded with a radiant smile, something that set Pilla apart from all other Shamra children.

“Watch the soup,” Pilla said. “I’m famished.”

“When? How?” Dara stammered.

Pilla shrugged. “About an hour ago,” she said. “How? I have no idea. After I napped I awoke still feeling miserable. Then just like that I was hungry. My stomach wasn’t bulging. The headache was gone. It was like I hadn’t been sick at all. It must have been the herbs. It just took longer to work than the doctor thought.” She began eating again. “I never knew food could taste so good,” she said between spoonfuls.”

“And the others?” Dara asked.

“They’ve recovered, too. The doctor was by just before you came. He was actually at Nella’s house when he began to feel better. So, what did you do while I was napping?” Pilla asked.

Dara was about to tell her when something at the window caught her eye. A Glimmer. Was it *her* Glimmer, she wondered? It had been hovering in the air outside Pilla’s window. When it saw Dara it turned, did a loop-de-loop and flew away. Dara smiled. *Her* Glimmer.

“So, tell me what you did?” Pilla asked again.

“Practiced reading aloud,” Dara answered, and the two of them laughed. Watching the Glimmer disappear into the sunset Dara didn’t know why, but she decided to keep this one adventure from her best friend.

The End