

CARLTON GARDNER

Miracles of Djamara

First 3 Chapters

Copyright © 2025 by Carlton Gardner

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Carlton Gardner asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

Contents

I The Unraveling

1	Shadow of the Phoenix	3
2	Silent Departure	9
3	A World Astir	15

I

The Unraveling

Shadow of the Phoenix

For over a decade, the people of Djamara had known nothing but war. The Sons of the Phoenix had carved their dominion into the land with blood and fire, leaving no home untouched by grief. Once, the small African nation had been a land of poets and traders, where music drifted through market streets and children played in the shade of ancient olive trees. Now, the streets lay empty, laughter silenced, replaced by the echoes of marching boots and the crackle of gunfire.

Jalil Ayoubi, a respected elder in the village of Ras Dahr, had lived through many hardships, but none as cruel as these past years. His village, once a bustling crossroads of commerce and culture, was now a husk. The marketplace where he had once haggled over spices and silk was now a checkpoint, manned by cruel insurgents.

Each morning, Jalil woke before the sun, his old bones aching, his heart heavy with dread. The silence before dawn was always the worst, amplifying the memories of what had been lost. He would listen for the sounds of trouble, distant shouting, the sudden roar of a truck's engine carrying more Sons of the Phoenix, or the sickening crack of a rifle signaling another execution. He would glance at his tattered rug, its

once vibrant colors faded like his own hopes, whispering a prayer before stepping outside to face whatever new horror the day would bring. But prayers had done little for his people.

He walked the broken streets, past doorways where hollow-eyed mothers rocked hungry infants, their cries a constant reminder of the gnawing hunger that plagued the village. The fields, once fertile, were now often left untended, the men either dead or too afraid to venture out. The fear of ambush or conscription was a constant shadow.

Fatima, his neighbor, crouched by her doorstep, whispering desperate bargains with the heavens. Jalil did not have to ask why. Her son, Hamid, had been taken three months ago, conscripted by the Sons of the Phoenix at just ten years old. He was taken not because they needed a boy so young, but as a cruel insurance policy against Fatima's defiance.

When the militants came for Hamid, she fought, screaming and clawing as the soldiers tore him from her arms, leaving her with nothing but a scrap of his torn shirt and the echo of his cries. The Sons of the Phoenix did not accept refusals. Hamid, her sole focus now, the last vestige of the life she had before the darkness descended.

Fatima had once been a different woman. Before the war, her laughter rang through the village like the cheerful call to prayer. She was known for her sharp wit and for weaving the most intricate rugs in Ras Dahr, their patterns telling stories of their history and dreams. But after her husband was dragged from their home and executed in the town square, the light in her eyes had dimmed, replaced by a haunting sorrow that never seemed to leave.

Omar, a good man, had likely paid the ultimate price for his decency. Whispers among the villagers suggested he had tried to intervene when some of the militants preyed upon one of the village girls. They had beaten him senseless before the final, brutal shot. The image of his lifeless body haunted Fatima's dreams.

Fatima had met her husband, Omar, in that very marketplace when

they were both young. He had been a merchant's son, his hands calloused from years of working with dates and figs, his smile quick and warm. He had courted her with sweet pastries and poems whispered between the stalls, finding excuses to linger near her as she bartered for wool. Their love had blossomed in the golden evenings of Djamara, their laughter mingling with the sounds of bargaining traders and wandering musicians, a symphony of life that now seemed like a distant memory. When Hamid was born, he was their joy, the child of a love that had withstood the trials of time and tradition. Omar had held him high above his head, laughing, proclaiming to the village that his son would grow to be strong and kind. Fatima had watched them together, her heart full, believing that their happiness would last forever.

Then came the Sons of the Phoenix, and their world turned dark. After Omar's brutal death, her friends had gently cleaned his broken body and brought him home. Despite the pervasive fear of the Sons of the Phoenix, friends who had admired Omar's quiet integrity and family members who could momentarily overcome their terror gathered to conduct the Janazah, a Muslim burial. The simple yet solemn ceremony, one of far too many that had become commonplace in their ravaged community, offered a brief respite of shared grief and remembrance. Fatima remembered the hollowness that had consumed her, the inconsolable grief that had threatened to swallow her whole, a pain made sharper by the absence of true justice or peace.

The armed men who invaded the village brought more than just death and destruction; they brought horror. Women were dragged from their homes, their cries drowned by the ruthless laughter of their captors. Daughters were torn from their mothers, wives from their husbands. Those who resisted were beaten, broken, or worse. The village became a prison, its people reduced to objects of cruelty and suffering, their lives dictated by the whims of their oppressors. Fatima knew she had to escape Djamara. The UN refugee centers along the borders were her only

hope, a chance to find safety for herself and for Hamid. Then Hamid was taken.

Fatima, with her beauty and defiant spirit, caught the eye of Zafir al-Malik himself, the ruthless leader of the Sons of the Phoenix. The fact that he noticed her sent a chill deeper than any winter wind. She couldn't shake the feeling that his interest had played a sinister role in Omar's fate, though she had no proof. Unlike his soldiers, who took what they wanted with careless abandon, Zafir was patient in his brutality. He claimed her as his own, shielding her from his men but subjecting her to a torment far worse than what they could inflict. He used Hamid as his weapon, a constant threat hanging over her head, ensuring her unresisting cooperation. His words were honeyed lies, promises of protection in exchange for submission. But behind the soft facade lay a monster, one who delighted in control, who relished in breaking not just the body, but the spirit.

Fatima endured, but at a terrible cost. She was forced to treat him as her husband, never knowing when he would appear in her meager dwelling, his presence a violation of everything she held sacred. Any show of defiance, any flicker of the hatred that burned within her, was met with swift and brutal punishment, a reminder of her powerlessness. Even a lack of passion in her forced affections earned her a beating. Every displeasure, real or imagined, resulted in further brutalization. Each passing day drained the fire from her soul until only the embers of the woman she once was remained. The vibrant colors of her rugs faded into dullness, her sharp wit was replaced by a guarded silence, and the hope in her heart dwindled with each setting sun.

Every night, she prepared his meal, a ritual of dread. She might wait for hours, the food growing cold, unsure if he would even come. The uncertainty was a torment in itself, the constant anticipation of his arrival a weight that pressed down on her chest. But the consequence of not having it ready was a certainty she couldn't risk. Now, she sat outside

her home every day, staring at the road, hoping for a miracle she knew would never come. The other villagers, those whose daughters were the targets of the soldiers' viciousness, sometimes cast envious glances her way. They saw the bruises that sometimes bloomed on her skin, the constant fear in her eyes, but they imagined she had found a twisted sort of safety under Zafir's protection. They felt their own suffering was greater, unaware of the daily, intimate torment she endured and the invisible scars that Zafir inflicted upon her spirit. But Fatima knew she could bear it. She had to. Hamid's safety depended on her.

Tears welled up in Jalil's eyes. He thought of the little girls scurrying about the village, full of mischief and curiosity. He recalled Fatima's mother, her hands moving with a practiced grace as she patiently instructed Fatima on the intricacies of weaving. The loom was a vibrant blur, threads of every color imaginable intertwining to form intricate patterns. Fatima, her brow furrowed in concentration, would mimic her mother's movements, learning to express herself through the art of carpet weaving. Each knot and color held meaning, allowing her to convey emotions, preserve memories, and tell stories without words. This artistic talent became an integral part of her identity, a source of pride and strength.

Jalil knelt beside her. "You should eat something, sister." She did not respond. "Hamid needs to come home to a strong mother. He will return." She turned her hollow eyes to him. "How do you know that?" Jalil had no answer.

Across the village, others bore their own grief. Ahmed, the blacksmith, had lost his left hand for forging weapons for the resistance, a constant reminder of their failed struggle. Leila, who once sold the sweetest dates in the marketplace, now sold her dignity to keep her younger siblings alive, and her laughter was replaced by a haunting emptiness. There was no one untouched by loss, no heart unscarred by the Sons of the Phoenix. And yet, the people endured.

The Sons of the Phoenix had not always ruled Djamara. A decade ago, they had been little more than whispers in the dark, radicals preaching fury, promising vengeance for years of corruption and foreign interference. At first, they had been dismissed as mere fanatics, a violent faction among many. But their leader, the elusive and ruthless Zafir al-Malik, had a vision greater than simple terror. He sought to mold Djamara into a nation reborn from its suffering, forged in the fire of war. It began with assassinations. Government officials, tribal leaders, teachers, anyone who opposed their ideology vanished, their voices silenced forever. Then came the bombings, the destruction of markets and schools, the deliberate spreading of chaos. Fear took root before their soldiers even arrived, poisoning the very air they breathed.

When the central government collapsed under the weight of corruption and war, the Sons of the Phoenix did not seize power outright. They let the people suffer, let despair settle into their bones, crushing their spirits until they were willing to accept any semblance of order. And when Djamara was at its weakest, they arrived, not as conquerors, but as saviors. They promised order, protection, justice. For some, they delivered. But for most, they brought only chains.

Jalil closed his eyes, the weight of his years pressing down on him. Somewhere, far beyond the hills, beyond the checkpoints, beyond the reaches of war, there had to be a future where Djamara was whole again, where laughter filled the streets and children played without fear. But tonight, there was only suffering.

Silent Departure

For weeks, whispers ran through the ranks of the Sons of the Phoenix. Men who had pledged their lives to the cause, some of the most loyal and brutal enforcers, had begun to disappear without a trace. At first, it was a deserter here and there, soldiers who had perhaps seen enough bloodshed. But then, the disappearances grew stranger. Entire squads vanished in the night, leaving behind undisturbed bunkers, abandoned weapons, and meals still warm on their plates.

At first, Zafir al-Malik dismissed the rumors. There were always cowards, men who broke under the weight of war. But as the numbers climbed and no bodies were found, unease spread through the ranks. Fear took hold, gnawing at the hearts of even the most hardened fighters.

By the final week, paranoia ruled the encampments. Every outpost was on high alert, fighters doubling their patrols. Orders were barked for increased security. The perimeter of Ras Dahr became a web of watchful eyes, desperate to catch a glimpse of whatever force was spiriting men away.

And then, one night, the world changed.

A thick fog rolled in without warning, creeping through the valleys

and swallowing the village whole. It was unnatural, dense, smothering, soundless. The air grew heavy, charged with an unspoken tension.

Those who were awake to witness it, Jalil among them, felt the world itself hold its breath.

Then, silence.

Not just the absence of voices or movement, but a deeper quiet. The ever-present hum of insects, the distant howls of jackals, the rustling of the wind, all of it ceased, as if the earth had paused.

That morning, as the sun rose over the vast plains and rolling hills of Djamara, the people awoke to a reality they had long thought impossible. The gunfire had stopped. The checkpoints manned by grim-faced insurgents were abandoned. The black banners proclaiming the Sons of the Phoenix no longer hung from the town squares. They were all simply... gone.

Not a single fighter remained. No bodies, no footprints in the dampened earth, no signs of struggle, no weapons of war. The village, once a prison under their rule, stood empty of its oppressors.

The morning after they were gone, an unsettling silence hung over Ras Dahr. It was a silence unlike any they had known in years, not the silence of fear, but a heavy, bewildering stillness. For so long, their lives had been punctuated by the sounds of the Sons of the Phoenix: the thud of their boots, the shouts of their orders, the roar of their vehicles. Now, those sounds were absent, leaving an eerie void.

At first, people remained cautiously in their homes, peering through cracks in doors and windows. Suspicion warred with a fragile hope. “Is it a trick?” some whispered, their voices hoarse from disuse. “Are they hiding, waiting to strike?” After years of oppression, trust did not return overnight. Jalil, ever the voice of reason, urged caution, but even he felt a tremor of something akin to hope in his weary heart.

Small groups began to venture out, drawn by a mixture of curiosity and disbelief. They gathered in the marketplace, the space where Omar

had once sold dates and figs, now eerily empty of the Sons of the Phoenix checkpoint. They looked at each other, their faces etched with confusion. Some touched the walls of buildings, as if to reassure themselves that they were still there. Mothers who had hidden their daughters in fear now called them out, their voices trembling with a newfound freedom they barely dared to believe.

Yet, joy was not universal. For some, the absence of the Sons of the Phoenix brought a disorienting sense of loss. Fear, like a twisted vine, had wrapped itself around their hearts, and its sudden removal left them feeling exposed and vulnerable. They had lived under the shadow of violence for so long that they struggled to imagine a different reality.

Fatima, however, felt a different kind of stillness. It wasn't hope, not yet, but a cessation of the constant, gnawing dread of waiting for the arrival of Zafir al-Malik. The silence allowed her to hear the echo of her own thoughts, to feel the full weight of her grief for Omar, and the aching void left by Hamid's absence. The energy she had spent on mere survival now had no place to go.

As the day wore on, and no Sons of the Phoenix returned, the initial caution slowly gave way to a tentative exploration. Children, who had known only fear, tentatively began to play in the streets, their hesitant laughter like a fragile melody in the newfound quiet. People started to clean the dust and grime from their homes, a symbolic act of reclaiming their lives.

But the questions remained, unspoken yet heavy in the air: Where had they gone? Why? And what would fill the void they left behind? The mystery was unsettling, a blank page where their future should be.

As the people tentatively gathered and wondered, they discovered another phenomenon, as startling as it was welcome. Aid workers began to appear, moving through the streets with a quiet purpose. They wore simple uniforms of unbleached linen, devoid of any recognizable insignia

or national affiliation, which only deepened the villagers' confusion.

They moved with an almost uncanny efficiency. Where there was a wounded child, one would kneel to clean and bandage the injury with gentle hands. Where a family huddled in hunger, another would appear with baskets of fresh fruit and bread. They offered clean water and listened with infinite patience to stories of loss and pain.

Their presence was indeed mysterious. They seemed to materialize from nowhere, appearing at the precise moment they were needed. Some villagers whispered that they had seen them emerge from the shadows at the edge of the village, while others swore they had simply been there all along. They came from a variety of backgrounds, with features reflecting different corners of the world, yet they all spoke the local dialect fluently, their words carrying the familiar rhythms and inflections of home.

This, perhaps, was the most unsettling and comforting aspect of their arrival. After years of being subjected to the harsh commands of outsiders, the villagers were met with kindness in their own tongue. They bore no weapons, carried no signs of aggression, and asked for nothing in return. No forced labor, no requisitioned supplies, no demands for gratitude. They simply helped, their actions speaking louder than any explanation.

Yet, the questions bubbled beneath the surface of gratitude. Who were these people? Where did they come from? What did they want? The villagers, long accustomed to suspicion, struggled to reconcile this selfless assistance with their experience of the world. Some, hardened by years of war, eyed them with distrust, searching for the hidden motive. Others, desperate for relief, dared to hope that this was a genuine act of compassion.

Jalil, ever the pragmatist, voiced the collective uncertainty. "We are grateful," he said to one of the workers, a woman with kind eyes and steady hands. "But we do not understand. Who are you?" He paused, and a ripple of anxiety passed through the small crowd that had gathered

nearby. “Will the Sons of the Phoenix return?”

The woman smiled gently, her gaze steady and reassuring. “We are here to help,” she answered, her voice calm and firm. “They will cause you no more harm.”

Her tone left little room for further inquiry, as if the matter was settled. Yet, while the villagers clung to the promise in her words, the mystery of it all deepened.

The aid workers continued their work, their presence a balm to the wounded village, even as their origins remained an enigma. Ras Dahr was caught between relief and bewilderment, between the desperate need for aid and the nagging desire for answers.

For many, the fragile peace was a bittersweet gift, intertwined with a fresh wave of anguish. The joy at the Sons of the Phoenix’s departure was tempered by a gnawing fear, a heavy uncertainty that settled like a shroud over the village. It gripped the hearts of those whose husbands, fathers, and sons had been conscripted into or forced to join the ranks of the militants. These were not the enemy, but their own. Now, they too were gone, vanished along with their captors, leaving behind a gaping hole in the community.

The questions that haunted the silence were relentless. Where were they? Had they been spared the violence, or had they suffered a fate as mysterious and unsettling as the disappearance of the Sons of the Phoenix themselves? Were they still alive, held somewhere, or had they perished unseen? The ambiguity was a torment, a constant seesaw between hope and despair.

Mothers wept at their doorsteps, their eyes fixed on the empty roads, clinging to the faint hope of their children’s return. Each passing day stretched into an eternity of waiting. Wives clutched worn pieces of clothing, a familiar scent clinging faintly to the fabric, the last tangible reminders of their missing loved ones. They would trace the rough stitching, remembering calloused hands and warm embraces, now lost

to the unknown. Children, too young to fully grasp the complexities of war, wandered with bewildered expressions, calling out for fathers who did not answer. The silence that had once been filled with the sounds of oppression was now filled with the keening of grief and the desperate whispers of unanswered prayers.

The village was caught in a painful paradox: liberated from tyranny, yet bound by the chains of uncertainty. They yearned to celebrate their freedom, yet their hearts were heavy with the absence of those they loved. The aid workers offered practical assistance, but they could not fill the emptiness left by the missing, nor could they answer the agonizing questions that lingered in the air.

Jalil watched as Fatima stood motionless in the town square, her eyes searching the empty roads for Hamid. Hope battled with despair in her face, but no answers came. The people of Ras Dahr had been granted freedom, but at what cost? Until they knew the fate of their stolen kin, the wounds of the past would never truly heal.

3

A World Astir

At first, the world reacted with silence. Governments, intelligence agencies, and military strategists across the globe struggled to process the reports trickling out of Djamara. The Sons of the Phoenix, one of the most brutal militant organizations in modern history, had disappeared overnight, leaving behind no bodies, no escape routes, not even whispers of defection.

Satellite images confirmed the impossible. Surveillance drones found no signs of mass executions, no convoys of fleeing soldiers, no evidence of a coup. It was as if the fighters had been plucked from existence. Intelligence operatives sifted through intercepted communications, seeking any clue of an organized withdrawal or external interference, but the result was always the same: nothing.

For world leaders, the event was not just a mystery, it was a problem. Djamara had long been considered a volatile region, a chessboard where powerful nations exerted influence through proxies and secret deals. But now, the board had been overturned, and no one knew who, or what, was holding the pieces.

In the ensuing weeks, the unexplained disappearances in Djamara became a global news phenomenon. News outlets worldwide broke into

scheduled programming to report on the unexplained vanishing of the Sons of the Phoenix. A swarm of reporters and camera crews descended on the region, eager to capture firsthand accounts. Eyewitness testimonies, chronicling the bewildering events from every hamlet and village across Djamara, dominated news cycles. Yet, amidst the cacophony of voices, the mysterious aid workers remained conspicuously silent. Attempts to engage them were met with practiced deflection and studied ambiguity. They operated on the periphery, a quiet, almost spectral presence, moving among the people of Djamara, offering aid without explanation.

The US State Department, in a hastily arranged press briefing, expressed deep concern over the ‘unprecedented’ events in Djamara. Spokespersons admitted they were ‘baffled’ by the sudden disappearance of the Sons of the Phoenix, and equally perplexed by the arrival of unidentified aid workers. Emphasizing the safety of the Djamaran people, the Department issued a stern warning to neighboring nations, cautioning against any attempts to exploit the power vacuum left by the vanished militant group. They pledged to work with regional partners to assess the situation and explore humanitarian aid options, while acknowledging that the unfolding events raised more questions than answers.

The United Nations Department of Global Communications, in a public statement, acknowledged the ‘unprecedented’ nature of the situation, admitting they lacked information about the militants’ whereabouts or the aid workers’ origins. They urged regional stability and cautioned against external interference, highlighting the potential for exploitation in the resulting power vacuum. The global community now grapples with the perplexing questions: where did the Sons of the Phoenix vanish, and what role are these enigmatic aid workers playing in the fragile peace of Djamara?

Superpowers mobilized. Military analysts reviewed every frame of

available footage. Scientists examined the possibility of an undiscovered natural phenomenon. Cryptographers scoured satellite transmissions, searching for encrypted communications that might explain the event. Each effort ended in failure.

And then came the opportunists.

General Adisa, a warlord driven by long-held ambition, saw Djamara as his for the taking – a land ripe with untapped potential. The confirmed absence of the Sons of the Phoenix and the ensuing power vacuum only solidified his resolve. He amassed his war machine: three thousand battle-hardened soldiers, supported by armored vehicles and heavy artillery, a display of force meant to brook no opposition on his path to absolute rule. With a singular focus, his forces moved swiftly towards the undefended border.

Scouts returned with reports that no defensive emplacements stood in their path. The roads were clear. There were no barricades, no armed patrols. It was as if Djamara were inviting them in.

Then, the fog came.

Thick and impenetrable, it rolled across the valley like a living thing, swallowing the land in a cold, clammy embrace. Adisa's vanguard hesitated but pressed on. They had numbers, firepower, and momentum on their side. A mere weather anomaly would not stop them.

Hours into their march, they encountered resistance. Armed silhouettes moved within the mist, an opposing force, holding the line. Adisa's men could not see how many stood before them, nor make out their weapons or uniforms, but the enemy did not retreat. Seeing no alternative, the warlord gave the order to attack.

Gunfire shattered the silence. The battle erupted in chaotic flashes of muzzle fire and panicked shouts. Rockets screeched through the fog, detonating unseen targets. Adisa's soldiers charged, slamming into what they believed to be an entrenched defensive line. But then reports began to flood in.

His rear guard was also under attack. Adisa, miles from the supposed ambush on his rear, was bewildered. His scouts had confirmed no forces behind them. Had his enemies encircled them in the fog? How had they maneuvered so quickly? He barked orders to reform ranks and counter the rear assault, but the chaos deepened.

As the dawn arrived amid the confusion, the truth became clear: They were fighting themselves. The thick mist, the disorienting darkness, the noise, somehow, the forward elements of Adisa's army had looped back on their own rear echelon. In the chaos of battle, each side had mistaken the other for an enemy, cutting one another down in a frenzy of fear and bloodshed.

By the time the sun was fully up, Adisa was dead. His army lay in ruins, the survivors too broken to make sense of what had happened. Those who fled carried only horror in their eyes. The few who spoke of the battle whispered of a curse, that Djamara was protected by an unseen force, one that could bend the minds of men and turn their weapons against themselves.

Word spread quickly. The neighboring warlords who had once eyed Djamara for conquest now regarded its borders with fear. Djamara had become untouchable.