

**The
Paladin
Chronicles
Omnibus I (of II)**

Books 1-4

A Sword and Sorcery/ Alternative History/ Epic Fantasy Series

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The Elvish Prophecy

Book 1

The Paladin Chronicles

3rd Ed

Neil Port

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Author's Notes

Warning: War and battle is not glorious, and it is not depicted as such. This book, and those that follow, are not intended as children's books.

Spelling I have tried to convert Greek and Aramaic names into the phonetic equivalent in our ("Roman") alphabet (rather than using their English equivalent).

Hence we have "Aléxandros" ("our defender"), "Philippos" ("lover of horses"), and "Troia."

I also use Australian English and Australian spellings.

I have used the term **Gypsies** for 'poetic' reasons. It has some derogatory connotations in certain parts of our world and I mean no offence by using it. The proper term is Romani which is completely unrelated to 'Romania' which is derived from the Roman influence in that particular region.

I have claimed that **Aryan Hordes** caused the Bronze Age Collapse, which is poetic licence, chosen for simplicity rather than any historical accuracy.

I have described this series as '**sword and sorcery**' though the role of magic is minor in book 1.

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Chapter 1 : Hakeem of the Shantawi

Samit burned with rage when he heard the distant trumpet call and saw Hakeem's small force crest the faraway hill.

It was as if molten lead flowed throughout his body, never in his 60 years had the veteran commander felt such fury! Victory was already theirs. The Troians were beginning to fall back in disarray. Hakeem was ordered to skirmish and harass from a distance, not join the main fight.

The young pup! He had been seen as the most promising of all their legendary Shantawi mercenaries. Samit had given him a full command of 120 of the desert horsemen, despite his young age.

Now good Shantawi men would die so that Hakeem could make a gesture, so that he could join in routing the enemy. The penalty for him would be swift, but it would bring shame on Samit and those under his command.

Samit paused on a small hillock, his eyes sweeping the battleground. Below him was a chaos of men fighting and dying. The Troians had made a surprise attack on the northern defences and broke through to march on Pergamon, the great Aioli fortress-city.

Samit's forces had joined the Aiol King Helios in a desperate dash to stop them here, in this valley. Defeat had seemed inevitable for their smaller Aiol force, but then the Troians attempted to advance with much less cavalry than expected and the Aiols managed to attack their flanks.

The Troians had taken heavy losses and were now attempting the most difficult of all tasks, an orderly withdrawal in the middle of a battle. The Aiol forces had been pressing them back for more than a turn of the glass. The small size of the enemy cavalry was incomprehensible, but it seemed that at last the crafty Troians were caught. The Aiols were pressing their advantage and Samit's main command had joined them in harrying the Troian vanguard.

Samit glanced back at Hakeem's men and felt a surge of blessed relief. Hakeem's small command hadn't turned to join the battle. His trust in the young tribesman had not been misplaced.

But what were they doing?

They were rapidly skirting the main fighting, staying parallel to a distant ridge. Samit smiled in pride as he watched them gallop. Few could ride like the Shantawi! But what could be the cause of their urgent ride?

They seemed to be headed straight for the Aiol royal party on a hillock, well back from the main battle.

A sudden horror gripped Samit as a thought came to him. He glanced at the ridge that ran the length of the battlefield. Could that ridge conceal an enemy detachment, planning to attack the King and flank the main force? Was the Troian retreat a clever trap?

He cursed, where were the missing Troian horse?

It was then he heard something carry across the wind that made his blood freeze, the Berserker chant! It was the most sacred of all the Shantawi battle hymns. It had not been heard in over a hundred years.

Hakeem and his men called on their God.

They didn't offer their lives to this coming battle, they believed them lost. They pledged their very souls that they would give glory to their God. They pledged to fight to the death, but they asked God to give them inhuman strength and, in their rage, no thought for their safety. The Shantawi Berserker Chant was a final prayer by Shantawi warriors approaching certain death.

It meant only one thing.

"Hold this flank!" he yelled to the surprised General, Evagoras.

Spinning round, he screamed in his own tongue. "To me! To me!" as his trumpeters took up the call.

Treachery! Evagoras thought, but knew it was impossible. Honour was very literally a religion amongst these tribesmen.

In the confusion, the flank began to fall apart but Samit didn't care. If he was wrong, he was a dead man.

He spurred his horse, not waiting for his men, who were raggedly disengaging and galloping like the wind to catch their leader. Careless of his horse, at full gallop over the uneven ground, he was only halfway to the distant Aiol royal standard when the enemy boiled over the ridge like ants from a nest that had been kicked.

He was too late.

Evagoras had fallen for a clever trap. His main army had been drawn further and further away, leaving the royal party isolated at the rear. The enemy cavalry would take the Aiol King and would fall on the Aiol army from behind. A fresh cavalry outflanking a battle-weary centre who'd just lost their king. Few would survive this day.

The King led a score of heavily armoured lancers in his guard. Formidable in combat, their heavy armour made flight impossible. The rest of the King's personal guard was composed of eighty Latin mercenaries, heavy armoured too but they were infantry. They quickly formed a square around the King and his mounted escort. Their large rectangular shields formed a solid wall, but they were handicapped against cavalry by their short swords.

Each carried two heavy pila (javelins) on the underside of their shields, but the tight formation protecting the King, and the speed of the cavalry, prevented them from using them.

Samit watched as the infantry met a cavalry charge of superior numbers as best they could. Just as the enemy threatened to overwhelm the royal party, Hakeem's charge hit the enemy van and, incredibly, it swept it away.

* * *

In the short pause afforded them, Hakeem nudged his horse up to the King and his loud voice rang out. "Great King of Aiolfía, it is thus that we of the Shantawi come to fulfil our oath to you!

"If we fail, we will gladly die at your feet. But should that prove to be our fate, we will build such a burial mound from the bodies of your enemies, that you need feel no shame amongst the greatest of your ancestors, or the mightiest Warrior Kings of old."

With these grim words the small knot of remaining defenders cheered and bashed sword against shield. They were eager for the fight.

The young King Helios nodded gravely, and then gave a great shout. "It is here, that we will stand!" He grabbed his standard himself and thrust it into the soil with a great blow.

Hakeem ordered his men to form up on either side of the infantry and they turned to face the second wave of Troians that were galloping towards them.

The Latins held the centre and the Shantawi in the wings were ready to encircle the Troians as their enemies attacked. What a cavalry they were! They were heavily outnumbered and yet the Troians had no chance against them.

* * *

As he rode, Samit laughed. His heart was bursting with pride and joy. This was the essence of the Shantawi warrior. If any survived, what songs would be sung? If they died, who could not wish for such an ending as they would make?

Behind him the desert mercenaries sang their own battle songs as they rode. Horns sounded as they thundered on. In the front was the growing clamour of fighting.

A desperate plan had come to him, but it would require the King and Hakeem to hold out longer than anyone had a right to ask of them.

* * *

Just then, Hakeem saw a frightening sight that foreshadowed the end.

The Troian advance guard were swift and lightly armoured like Hakeem's men, but they seemed to be falling back. Behind them, he could see a large company of lancers gathering for a charge. The Troians had three or more of these companies and they formed a formidable force.

Heavily armoured, they carried heavy wooden lances tipped with iron. Their shields were broad and half the height of a man. Their helmets had feathery plumes that bobbed as they arranged themselves in formation.

Their horses were heavy and strong. They lacked the speed and stamina of the desert-bred horses, but they could ram their enemies with brute strength. Their saddles had a wooden brace, like a chair, at the back of the rider, to steady their rider from the impact of his lance and their horses were also armoured with leather.

The lancers would charge in formation, as a unit, where each man supported the man on either side of him. From the front, in formation and crouched behind their heavy shields, they were almost invulnerable.

The desert fighters were the finest mounted skirmishers in the known world. They would gallop up to their enemies and shoot their wickedly accurate horse-bows and then ride away before they could be engaged in a stand-up fight. Guiding their small wiry horses with their knees, they could fire at full gallop and even fire backwards when galloping away. Any unprotected infantry that came against them in the open would be rapidly diminished without much loss to the horsemen.

They did not fight in tight formation, instead relying on speed, agility and individual prowess. If they could employ their greater speed and agility, they could likely defeat a heavy cavalry unit, but it would take time. It would be a deadly cat and mouse game, and against so many they would need a great deal of room.

They were not going to get it. They had to defend the King.

The heavy lancers would be front on, in proper formation, and with time to build up the speed of their charge. If Hakeem's men got in their way, they would simply roll over them.

Samit's force was swelling in numbers, but he was separated from Hakeem by the Troians. Whatever Hakeem did, he would have to do it on his own.

There was only one chance for Hakeem's small force, but it would require a great deal of luck. If Hakeem's men could break up the lancer's formation somehow, they could attack from the vulnerable sides or perhaps get close enough to render their lances useless, but this required the lancers being diverted from their charge at the Aiol King.

If he could hit them hard from the sides early in their charge, they might be induced to pause and try to mop up Hakeem's men first.

He only had a short space to try this. Once they got too close to the King, the Shantawi would need to face them; the Latin infantry could not be expected to meet a charge of heavy lancers unaided.

So to do this, Hakeem would have to ride well out to meet them. At the very best, it would be at great cost. Only a madman would try this knowing he had such a short distance, was hindered by the need to defend the King, and he and his men were outnumbered two to one.

Madman or desperate, he would take as many of the Troians with him as possible, before he and his men were cut down. It was better than waiting.

Hakeem nudged his horse close to the King and nodded to the disaster they faced. Conversationally, as if remarking on the weather, he said "I'm intending to ride down and meet them. It will likely not go well for us."

Then Helios, the young King of the Aiol, nodded solemnly. "And so the time for all of us now comes." He reached forward and clasped the large mercenary's hand. King to mercenary, they farewelled like equals, like brothers.

Leaving his wounded and sixteen mounted bowmen with the King, Hakeem took less than 80 men down to meet the charge of twice that number.

* * *

Samit pulled his horse to a sudden halt. He would not try to reach Hakeem and the King. Such an attempt would only lead to defeat. He glanced back. The main battle seemed to be turning against them, so he'd get no help from their army.

He needed to do something fast with the small force at his disposal.

If Samit could avoid a direct engagement, there may be a chance. He hoped the Troians would remain focused on Hakeem and the King. It meant, in a way, using them as bait. If things went wrong, which was likely, Samit would not live to face the aftermath. To leave the King at peril would be seen as cowardice. The tribesmen's reputation for honour would be gone forever.

Samit used the same concealing ridge to gather his force just across from and behind where the enemy were pouring out. On his order, over 600 arrows struck the enemy's unprotected rear.

Chaos broke out.

Some Troians galloped forward, whether to commence the charge or escape this new threat was unclear. A few galloped back towards Samit's men but when they realised they were doing it alone, they tried to turn back. Many milled around, unsure of what to do.

Whoever was left in charge on the enemy side seemed to continue to try to get his men to form up for a charge at the King, but they were being decimated from a vulnerable rear, making it impossible to organise.

At the same time, Hakeem's small force used their bows to harry from the front. The Troians seemed frozen in horror and indecision, and then it was too late for them.

Samit's forces sent wave after wave of arrows into the enemy. Dead and dying men and horses obstructed the Troians from going forward and the crush of men coming behind prevented them from retreating. The walls of the gully prevented them from escaping to the side.

Samit began to work back along the ridge to mercilessly rain death down on the trapped Troian reinforcements. Troian wounded and their deserters fleeing from the battle claimed that daimôns had joined the Aiol side in attacking them.

The King led his knights against the few lancers who managed to come forward as a unit, taking them from the side.

It was just then that Hakeem heard a gurgling scream. It was his dearest friend, the elf-scout Elwan, struggling in vain to keep mounted with a great lance embedded in his chest.

Anguish and rage hit Hakeem like the exploding of a volcano. To this day, Hakeem can't recall what happened next. He came back to himself, hearing the King's voice, as if from a distance, "Hakeem! Steady man! It's over."

He found himself on foot with blood, not his own, splashed all over his clothes and body. His friends were giving him a very wide space, as he looked wildly around. His sword was ruined. He looked around for a replacement.

As Hakeem tried to clear his confusion and chase down a horse, a message from Samit requested the King to join him to lead the attack. A victory owed to the desert tribesmen would be resented. It had to be an Aiol victory.

The King led the tribesmen into the exposed flank of the enemy. "Aiolía! ... Aiolía!" they chanted as they rode. The Troians broke. Not a careful retreat, but a rout.

Soldiers who turn their back and flee throw down their heavy shield and tall spear so they can run faster. They become an easy target, especially for horsemen.

The main Troian force was decimated that day. A great legend of the Aiol King and his mercenaries was formed, and grew in the telling.

* * *

Hakeem never found out what really happened before he came to his senses. He heard exaggerated tales by awestruck Aiol soldiers of his fighting with superhuman strength. His own men refused to correct these. In fact, one gave an oath that the whole force withdrew and simply let Hakeem fight the Troians alone.

If he seemed frustrated by their teasing, they would pull away in mock alarm saying, "Careful, don't make him angry!" Sometimes he would seem to catch them whispering to one another 'Berserker' just loud enough to be sure he could hear.

Other men would have felt exalted by the hero worship growing around him. Hakeem didn't like it. That he seemed embarrassed earned him greater respect, but it encouraged the teasing.

He understood the need of his men to take pleasure in victory, and enjoyed their good mood. He knew it was good natured, and often could not resist smiling or playing along, but underneath it all he felt sad and lonely without his friend.

That he was seen as a hero was just another barrier between him and the rest of the men.

Samit and King Helios began befriending him and the friendship of the older men helped.

Chapter 2: Mules, a Runaway, and Pergamon

Hakeem had been orphaned soon after birth. Having no close relative, he was raised by others of the Shantawi Badawiyyūn (Bedouins) before being accepted at age five into the abbey in the desert city of Karsh.

Only the Grand Abbot knew why he accepted a boy at such an unusually young age. Hakeem never betrayed that trust.

Hakeem could recall little of his life before the abbey and never asked about it. The only family he ever had was his teachers and mentors, yet about all other things he was endlessly curious. The next youngest child at the abbey was twice his age, but Hakeem showed great promise and by seven he could join the classes designed for the older boys.

The monks at the Abbey were followers of the mystic religion called Shayvism. It taught love of others and a cycle of reincarnation to reach enlightenment.

Karma (fate), for the Shayvists, was not a reward or punishment for good or bad deeds done in a previous life, it was 'chosen' by the lessons one needed to learn in this one. The poor and humble were not seen as inferior compared to the rich and powerful.

Mediation and extensive training in the martial arts was used by the Shayvist monks to discipline their minds and bodies. Hakeem excelled at almost everything he was taught, which included armed and unarmed combat, military tactics and horsemanship, but his greatest love was the religious texts. His only desire was to become a religious monk and study the mysteries of their sect.

He didn't feel part of the group of older boys and was too much in advance of those his own age. So, he was always solitary, quiet, serious and hardworking, but shy and naïve.

None could doubt that he had a good heart. If an animal or a boy needed help, he always seemed to be at hand. He was always polite to his superiors and a good-natured teacher of the younger boys. He was the favourite of the monks and the younger novices alike.

On the day of his coming of age (18), Hakeem made an appointment with the Grand Abbot to formally ask to become a monk. The memory of that meeting is forever burnt into his mind.

He gave a respectful bow and looked at the kindly old man, Gavri'el (Gabriel). He was the closest thing to a parent he had ever had.

"Father Gavri'el, today is my coming of age."

"So soon? Truly?" Gavri'el looked unsettled. "I was meaning to talk to you before this, but the time has slipped away."

"Father, as I am now of age, I wish to apply to be a monk."

Gavri'el smiled at him with gentle fondness. "You will have to forgive an old man, Hakeem. I really meant to talk to you before this."

It felt as if a large rock of ice had settled into Hakeem's chest, his breath caught in his throat. Hakeem had never even a moment of doubt, why the need for a talk?

"Talk about what, master?" He managed, his mouth was dry, his heart pumping. "All I have ever wanted is to be a monk and remain here like you and all the others."

The abbot shifted awkwardly in his seat. "It was what I had meant to talk to you about. It is not your path. You will join the company of Shantawi mercenaries led by Samit in Aiolfía. There are some monks leaving for there in ten days, I want you to travel with them. You are to train as a paladin."

Hakeem never considered he would be refused. It was all he ever wanted. He had thought he was their best student. He had always worked so hard.

How had this happened? It was as if his world had dropped out from under him.

He knew little about the paladins. There had only been four in all the history of Shayvism and that was so long ago now. What he did know was that to be a paladin was to become a warrior, not a monk. Monks can defend themselves and assist with local security but the 'life path' of a warrior was very different. The spiritual dangers of being a soldier or mercenary are many and obvious.

While the Shayvists officially teach that all life paths are equal, most have greatest respect for scholars, and most think that becoming a monk is the highest calling of all.

They seemed to accept other monks so easily. Why not him?

He burned with shame.

The abbot was recreating an archaic tradition, just for him. It was offered out of pity, for a fault he could not see. With tears falling down his cheeks and sobs wracking his body, he begged, "Please. Please... this is my home to be a monk ... it's all I've ever wanted "

The Grand Abbot waited patiently, until his tears ceased. It took a long time no matter how he struggled to control them.

"We are proud of you, but it is not your path."

"But what am I to do?" Hakeem asked in despair.

"Go to Aeolia. Have faith. Come to me tomorrow and we will talk on this."

There was no use arguing. Hakeem gathered himself to bow respectfully. "Thank you, father, I will go now and meditate on why I am not to become a monk."

The abbot opened his mouth to say something more, but Hakeem was already walking away.

Wise old men, they say, can see the blindness of the young, but old and powerful men can sometimes forget what it is like to be young. The abbot was so sure that he was right that it caused his wisdom to fail. He had put off what would be an awkward and difficult discussion with his favourite novice. He was not given another chance.

Hakeem gathered his few possessions and the little money he had and left within the hour. The only weapons he took were a belt knife and one of the heavy wooden staves the monks used when walking.

He did not take provisions, not wanting to feel he owed the monastery anything. He didn't know what else to do, so he would go to Aeolia and become a mercenary, but they couldn't expect him to face his shame by staying in the monastery till then!

He said goodbye to no one. He was challenged by the old monk guarding the gate. When he said he was leaving the elderly monk hesitated, "but that's impossible," before allowing Hakeem to pass, as was his right.

Hakeem closed his mind to avoid dwelling on the pain. He slipped through the dark back streets of the city and searched out the cheap boarding houses and taverns for a caravan owner headed for Anatolē. It was not too late and in the third tavern he visited, he had a stroke of luck.

The man serving was blind in one eye and limped badly.

Hakeem approached him diffidently. "Sir, I take you for a veteran."

The old man smiled at him, seeming amused. "Well, you would be right, lad, and I take you as a young lad looking for a favour."

Hakeem laughed and nodded. "I wish to make for Aeolia, on the West coast of Anatolē and wish to work my passage."

"I know where Aeolia is, young pup!" scolded the old man, but he smiled in a friendly enough way. "You choose a long journey for yourself, so I wish you luck. That man against the wall over there, his name is Gennadios. The other man he is sitting with is his brother, Agapetos. They are going to Ikónion. Being a boy, Gennadios wouldn't pay you much but he just lost a man to the grippe, so it won't hurt to ask."

Several lamps cast their dim light through the room and shadows moved as people opened and closed the door. Hakeem thanked the old man and moved past several tables of men drinking to reach the rough-cut table where the two big teamsters sat half in gloom, drinking from double-handled mugs and talking quietly.

Hakeem gave a short bow, palms held together in front, as was his habit. "Gennadios, sir, my name is Hakeem. I wish to work my passage to Ikónion."

Gennadios's brother grunted. "You're too young. Go away, boy."

Hakeem didn't move. "I am strong, I am good with animals and I can fight."

Agapetos snorted and looked him up and down. "Perhaps you would like to prove that against me."

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