

## BOOK ONE

# THE SUMMONS

**M**y name is Nephaniah, the Chronicler. I write of what I myself have seen and heard—and also of those things before my time that Shaddai, the High King, has since told me.

On the very day\* before the Grand Celebration was to commence, the High King summoned me to the Council of the Seven and named me Chronicler. It was that—the timing and not the summons itself—that most surprised me. I had not expected it to come even as the Celebration was getting under way, although I had felt for some time that I would be the one to set down the story of the rebellion.

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\* The word *day* does not actually appear as such in the original here. The word used is an archaic form of the modern Hebrew word for *time*. Chronology in Nephaniah's writings can be difficult both to understand and to convey adequately. Although we cannot reasonably expect our twenty-four-hour day to be the measure of time in his setting, Nephaniah seems to have consciously tried to correlate his chronology with that of Earth—with less than consistent results. For that reason, I have chosen to use terms familiar to us when translating his references to time. The result may not be entirely accurate, but I have done the best I can. At any rate, it is clear from his chronicles that Nephaniah is keenly aware of events taking place on Earth and has Earth's chronology in mind as he writes. The reader may be confident that any discrepancies in time between our world and that of the Chronicles is not a matter for significant concern.—*Translator's Note*.

## THE SUMMONS

So it is that I begin my Chronicle with that long-ago time when the High King first sent for me and had me swear by my allegiance to Himself that I would make a faithful record of all that has happened since Lightbearer, Son of the Morning, went dark.

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Without a word, Uriel handed me an engraved card that morning. He had no need to speak; I knew who had sent him, and I could guess the reason.

Had he been anyone else, I would have told him to go his way and come again at a more convenient time for I was busy. But of course one doesn't speak so to an equerry of the throne. Nor does one ignore a summons from the High King.

Not that Uriel's message displeased me. Truth be known, I welcomed it. We Messengers may not need rest as do mortals with bodies of flesh and blood, but I had been working too long without interruption, preparing for the Celebration, not to relish even a brief respite. The Commander would soon appear, and so much still remained to be done. The pageant that would commemorate His triumph must be flawless.

We Messengers had watched the closing scenes of the Commander's mission with the gravest consternation. Many were weeping; many of us averted our gaze as He submitted to the awful fate before Him. Those who continued to watch did so only because the outcome was so crucial. Would the Commander be able to follow the plan to its final consummation?

How gladly we would have taken His place! How we pled to be allowed to come to His aid, to encourage Him, to strengthen Him with the evidence of our love! But of course, we couldn't do any of those things. We could only watch.

In the Garden, the conflict became so intense, so one-sided, as the Adversary relentlessly pressed his advantages that the Commander

## THE NEPHANIAH CHRONICLES

seemed on the verge of failing. The outcome trembled precariously, and every being in the homeland and throughout the galaxies held their breath. At last the High King permitted Gabriel to minister to him. But only after the Commander had prevailed. Only after He had made His unwavering decision to yield completely to what must be. Then a shaft of dazzling brilliance—so bright we could barely watch—pierced the darkness as Gabriel streaked to the Commander’s side. He assured Him of the High’s King’s love and pointed Him to the glorious results of the victory to come. The agony remained—for the Commander and for us—but now a firm foundation had been laid beneath our fear. A calm serenity replaced the Commander’s discouragement, and a ray of hope broke through our gloom.

We still had to witness the excruciating horrors of the unfolding scene—the mockery, torture, and unjust execution. Silence reigned throughout the homeland during that terrible time. In silent grief and amazement, we watched the lengths to which the Adversary would go in his hatred and the supreme sacrifice the Commander would willingly make because of His love—and because it was a necessary part of the plan.

Oh, but the joy that came when the Commander arose triumphant! Radiant and glorious in victory! No silence then in the homeland! A great cry of ecstatic jubilation arose from every voice, echoing and reechoing as far as the ear could hear. The depth of our grief at the recent scenes we had witnessed could be judged only by the height of the unrestrained joy that followed.

Preparations began immediately for the Grand Celebration that would mark the Commander’s triumphant return to the homeland. The Council of the Seven set forth an extensive program of what was to take place. Gabriel was in charge, but as I expected, actually implementing the details of the program fell to me. Now with the Celebration due to begin shortly and so much yet to be done, Uriel had come, handing me a card and a summons I could not ignore.

## THE SUMMONS

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I looked down at the card in my hand. “He knows I am managing the Celebration?” Even in my own ears, the question sounded foolish the moment it left my mouth.

“Of course,” answered Uriel.

“Of course,” I echoed.

From the greatest archangel to the most recently-formed seraph, little besides the Celebration had occupied our attention ever since word had arrived of the Commander’s triumph. And none had been more involved than I. The High King had naturally placed Gabriel in charge of preparing for the return, and just as naturally, most of the actual work had fallen to me.

With the Celebration almost upon us, I had been desperately trying to arrange a thousand last-minute details, but the card in my hand was explicit. Shaddai himself, the High King, had directed me to appear before Him and the Seven without delay. I motioned for another to take over my duties and hurried to make myself ready. Even though I was Administrative Assistant to Gabriel, who was himself First of the Seven, the High King had never summoned me into His personal presence.

At any other time, I would have been excited. Truth be known, I *was* excited, . . . *and a little apprehensive*, I admitted to myself as I exchanged my everyday garment for the one required when on official duty. But lately important events had been happening so rapidly that even a summons from the High King lost something by comparison. Still it was certainly an unusual occurrence, one that couldn’t fail to have a sobering effect. I felt sure I knew why He had called me, but even so, an appearance before Shaddai and the Council of the Seven was nothing to take lightly.

Reaching the central square, I turned toward the temple area and the perpetual glow that radiated from that quarter of the city. Of course I had never actually been there—inside the temple precinct, that is.

## THE NEPHANIAH CHRONICLES

Few of us Messengers had. Not many were assigned to temple duties, and others seldom had any occasion to be called there. I looked at the engraved card in my hand, and my heart beat a little faster.

I soon found myself in unfamiliar streets, yet there was no mistaking the way. At each opportunity, I had only to keep following a general northward direction. The streets grew steeper, bringing me higher and higher with each step. I could look back now and see most of the city below me.\* The glow from the temple grew, not brighter, but more intense. The closer I approached, the more my sense of awe—and apprehension—increased. Then without warning, I came to a great wall. From its base the wall swept upward to a tremendous height, curving gradually inward and then back out in a graceful line, so that its top was almost perpendicular to the base. It was an imposing sight, but even so, it seemed designed more for aesthetics and to define the temple area rather than for keeping out possible intruders. There was a gate in the wall—not large, but it stood out distinctly because of the brightness of the light shining through it. I was drawn to the light as a moth is to a candle, mesmerized by the beauty all around me.

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I had not always been Gabriel's Administrative Assistant, charged with coordinating crucial ceremonies and carrying out the policies of the Seven. When first formed† I had been assigned to Section C of the

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\* A somewhat enigmatic reference by the prophet Isaiah seems to corroborate Nephaniah's description of the temple area being located in the northern quarter of the city and sitting at its highest point. Chapter 14, verse 13 of Isaiah reads: "I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon" (NIV). *Zaphon* is the Hebrew word for *north*. Thus a literal translation of the phrase would be: "the utmost heights of North Mountain." The KJV renders it: "the sides of the north."—*Editor's Note.*

† Nephaniah's reference to being "formed" (as well as similar references occurring elsewhere in his chronicles) suggests that Messengers have been created at different times throughout eternity, much as humans are born individually—except that groups of Messengers seem to be formed simultaneously for a specific purpose or function.—*Translator's Note.*

## THE SUMMONS

Office of Records and Documents, carrying out simple tasks. Later I was transferred to Lightbearer as a very junior scribe—an apprentice, actually—and was merely one of many who thus served him. In those days before the darkness came upon him, Lightbearer, not Gabriel, was First of the Seven.

I remember the occasion when my work first came to his personal attention. I had written a report summarizing the results of a research project carried out by Messengers assigned to several galaxies. I gave the assignment my best, and later Lightbearer had come looking for me.

“You show promise,” he said, looking deep into my eyes. “I have special need of those who deliver more than expected.”

That’s all he said. But even then, at this first meeting, I realized the unusual ability he had of binding us to his heart—all of us. Of reaching into the core of our being and drawing out our best efforts. How he awakened in us a longing, a determination, to earn his esteem. I had noticed this charisma at work with others, and I was no more immune than they. I vowed at that moment to be worthy of his trust always.

Not long afterward, I found myself placed in charge of a research group of fifteen Messengers, two or three of whom had been formed long before I and who had been serving Lightbearer much longer. I advanced to greater responsibilities, slowly working my way through the different levels, until eventually I stood by his side as his Administrative Assistant, directing his schedule, overseeing his staff, and making sure he was well briefed for his next appointment. I like to think that he confided in me as he did in few others.

Even then I was a confirmed scribbler. Of course my position as Lightbearer’s assistant required a tremendous amount of record keeping. These went to the archives in time. But beyond my official duties, I maintained a personal journal, or diary, in which I set down the happenings of the day in page after page of notes. I had no motive at the time other than my own satisfaction; later I realized their value and came to believe that the High King had had a role in my urge to write

## THE NEPHANIAH CHRONICLES

and in the turn my life was to take.

*No, I thought as I made my way to the temple complex, the High King's summons is not unexpected. I've long anticipated that He would someday ask me to prepare the official record of the rebellion. After all, who among the Messengers than I have been more closely intertwined from the first with those disturbing thoughts that proved to be such a dark influence on Lightbearer's mind? Who among the Messengers than I have been more drawn into his struggles to overcome the forces pulling him into the terrible abyss?* I awoke from my musings and saw that I was standing before the shining gate in the great wall surrounding the temple.

"I have been summoned to the Council Chamber," I told the gate attendant, surrendering to him the card Uriel had given me a short time earlier. He inspected it closely, handed it back, and motioned for me to place it in a special niche constructed in the lock. As I did so, a soft glow illuminated the card, followed by a click and a humming sound. The gate swung back noiselessly on its hinges. The gate attendant touched his forehead in a sign of respect and gestured for me to pass through. I had taken no more than two or three steps when another figure appeared and attached himself to me.

"This way if you please, Sir," he pointed to the right. "My name is Ajonira. I'll escort you."

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Ajonira did not prove talkative. His answers to my questions were short and volunteered nothing beyond exactly what I asked. To my efforts to make conversation, he made no response at all. It mattered little; we shortly approached the entrance to a modest building attached to a larger, grander edifice that stood in the middle of a manicured lawn. The walkways winding through the grounds were bordered by carefully tended plants of symmetrical shape and height. At regular intervals along these borders, banks of flowers gave off flashes of color

## THE SUMMONS

in a pleasing contrast to the green plants. Graceful trees threw their welcome shade over the green of the lawn.

Ajonira opened the door and stood aside for me to enter. I found myself in a reception area facing a large desk behind which sat a Messenger wearing a uniform I didn't recognize. The desk was completely bare except for the reader screen inserted into its surface.

"He will need to see your card," Ajonira said.

I produced the card Uriel had given me and placed it in the receptionist's outstretched hand. If the situation hadn't been what it was, I would have almost laughed. It seemed faintly ridiculous. I knew they knew who I was and why I was here. They knew I knew. Still we *were* in the temple precinct, and apparently protocol must be strictly followed, necessary or not.

The receptionist placed the card in the reader and stared intently into the screen. I had no idea what he saw there, but he seemed satisfied and smiled as he handed the card back to me.

"Thank you," he said. "Don't lose it; you'll need it again when you leave."

I turned, and Ajonira had disappeared. But another had taken his place and led me down the hall and through a connecting passage into the larger building next door. This I guessed was the building housing the Council of the Seven—a guess that proved correct a moment later when my guide opened one of a pair of ornate double doors and ushered me into the Council Chamber itself.

There was no one in the chamber when we entered. It was not a large room, but the ceiling was high enough to be almost lost in the low light that came from a series of small windows set high in the walls—three on each side and a slightly larger one centered on the wall opposite the double doors. In the middle of the room stood a circular table around which were assembled seven chairs. My guide motioned for me to take a seat on a bench running the length of one wall. I did so.

"The council will convene shortly," he told me and left, shutting the door quietly behind him.



## THE NEPHANIAH CHRONICLES

I sat in the silence with only my thoughts to keep me company. *No doubt, there is some meaning in the fact that the Council Chamber of the Seven is illuminated by exactly seven windows*, I reflected. Looking about, I saw no other furniture in the room except the table surrounded by its chairs. The silence began to feel oppressive; I sat on my fingers to keep them from fidgeting. The members of the Council of the Seven were familiar to me. They weren't the reason I was nervous. Gabriel of course I knew very well since, as his Administrative Assistant, I worked with him closely on a daily basis. I wouldn't say we were close friends—the relationship was nothing like the one I had had with Lightbearer—but we worked well together and liked one another. He seemed satisfied with the way I carried out my duties; from time to time, he even complimented me for something I had accomplished. I came in contact with the other six less frequently—some more, some less—but none were strangers to me.

At last the double doors opened, and the Seven entered. Gabriel greeted me as did the others before taking their places around the table. As First of the Seven, Gabriel would preside at the council. On his right sat Avishai, next was Zedemiah, then Eshkol, Yehoash, Meiron, and last of all Asphinah, seated on Gabriel's left.

Gabriel opened the proceedings by asking me to join them at the table. A chair was brought in, and room was made for it between Gabriel and Avishai. This was unexpected. I had never been present at a meeting of the Council of the Seven and had no inkling of the protocol on such occasions, but I felt fairly sure that this was an unusual mark of respect that did not take place often.

"I know this is a busy time for you, Nephaniah," Gabriel began. "For each of you, actually," he added, looking around the circle. "So I will try to be brief. With the Commander's magnificent victory, the crucial phase of His mission is complete, and we will commemorate that victory with a Grand Celebration, as is only right. But the rebellion continues. In fact, I have reason to believe that it will continue for much

## THE SUMMONS

longer than many of us have anticipated. Therefore the High King has decided that before the rebellion goes further, an official record must be made, starting at the very beginning. The record must be thorough and accurate as regards the past, and it must then be maintained on a continuous basis for as long as necessary—until every trace of the Adversary’s insurrection has been extinguished.

“To get to the point,” Gabriel continued, “that is why you are here, Nephaniah. You will prepare this record. Some of your usual duties will be given to others so that you may have the necessary time. It’s well known that you were keeping detailed personal journals even before Lightbearer went dark. You can draw on these. But you will be given access to the archives as well; nothing will be withheld—nothing within reasonable limits.”

At this revelation, I noticed consternation on faces around the table. I knew they were remembering certain things that had taken place back at the time the rebellion had unfolded. Even Meiron and Asphinah were aware of these things although they had not been members of the council at that time. But if there was concern on the part of the council members, it was more than matched by the apprehension that welled up suddenly in my own mind. I had been expecting to be assigned this task for a long time, and for the most part, I had managed to push down my misgivings. But now all the memories came rushing back, threatening to overwhelm me. Could I do this? I knew I had the expertise; that wasn’t the issue. I could do the research and the writing. But could I be impartial? Could I face my own role in what had happened back then, so long ago? Why did I still think of him by the old name, *Lightbearer*? Why was it still so difficult for me to call him *Adversary*?

A silence penetrated the fog that had filled my mind. Gabriel had stopped talking. No one was talking. Everything seemed to have simply come to a halt. But no one was looking at me; I sensed that everyone was waiting for something. The silence became almost painful.

“Well I don’t mind saying what the rest of you are thinking,”

## THE NEPHANIAH CHRONICLES

Zedemiah cleared his throat at last and looked around the circle, locking eyes with each of the six others in turn, though he didn't look at me, and I noticed he dropped his gaze a bit when it came to Gabriel.

"Nephaniah may have all the qualifications to be Chronicler," Zedemiah continued. "I don't question that. But this decision troubles me. It troubles me a great deal." He paused and then addressed himself to me in a slightly softer voice. "We all know how close you and Lightbearer were. We all remember what a near thing it was when the crisis came—whether you would follow Lightbearer or remain loyal to the High King. You can't deny it."

They were all looking at me now.

"I can't deny it," I admitted. "I don't deny it."

"But that's just it," Zedemiah replied. "How can we have you writing the official record when you and Lightbearer were inseparable? You loved him then, and I believe you love him still!"

Before I could respond, every eye in the Council Chamber became fixed by a muted glow that flowed from a spot at the end of the room behind Gabriel's right shoulder. Those whose position at the table prevented them from having a clear view, moved in their seats so they could see. The glow grew brighter and brighter, although it remained localized to the same spot.

"You are right, Zedemiah," came the voice of the High King. "Nephaniah loved Lightbearer then, and he still does so today. I, too, loved Lightbearer then, and I still do. I love him. That's one reason, perhaps the main reason, I have determined that Nephaniah shall be the Chronicler. Only one who has felt Lightbearer's pull on the heart the way Nephaniah has felt it is truly qualified to bear witness to the rebellion in all its aspects. He chose to be faithful to what is true and right and good although it meant giving up his dearest friend. That means that he can understand something of how Lightbearer's rebellion has affected all My creation—of how it has affected Me.

"Come closer, Nephaniah. Don't be afraid."

## THE SUMMONS

I rose and moved toward the glowing circle. Strangely enough I *wasn't* afraid. I was in awe. I felt very small and somewhat unsteady on my feet, but I wasn't afraid. There was the look of fire in the light, but it was a fire that spoke of warmth, not burning. It invited rather than repelled. All the same, I knew without being told that I should not approach too close, and I stopped several steps outside the fiery circle. Up close I could see that it was composed of glittering, dancing particles that kept swirling about in a random motion. The shifting glow was brightest at its center, and when I looked slightly to one side, I almost thought I could make out the shadow of a figure—the way you can sometimes see something better in dim light by looking at it a bit indirectly. But the very act of glimpsing it caused it to vanish so that I was never really sure I had seen anything at all.

“Nephaniah, do you accept My assignment to be the chronicler of the rebellion? Will you swear by your allegiance to Myself that you will make a faithful account of all that has happened since Lightbearer, Son of the Morning, went dark?”

I nodded, too overcome to speak.

“Say the words,” Shaddai insisted. “I need to hear you say the words.”

Dropping to my knees, I repeated, “I swear by my allegiance to You, my High King, that I will make a faithful account of all that has happened since Lightbearer, Son of the Morning, went dark.”

“Then I name you, Chronicler,” announced the High King. “Let it be so recorded Gabriel, in the minutes of the Council of the Seven. Nephaniah shall write the official record of the rebellion.”

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I don't recall retracing my steps from the Council Chamber and the temple precincts, but somehow I must have found my way back through the gate and down the streets to more familiar parts of the city. When I was once more in my own dwelling, I realized I no longer had the golden

## THE NEPHANIAH CHRONICLES

card Uriel had given me. The gate attendant must have retained it after I passed through. The fact that I no longer had the card confirmed for me that it had all really happened; it hadn't just been my imagination.

Many details of my appearance before the High King and the Council of the Seven have since become dim in my mind. But one thing I remember distinctly, and I will never forget it. As I turned to go from the High King's presence, He said something clearly meant for my ears alone, for he spoke much too quietly for the Seven to hear.

"Yes, Nephaniah," He said. "Lightbearer, Son of the Morning, went dark. But oh, how we loved him, you and I! Oh, how we loved him!"