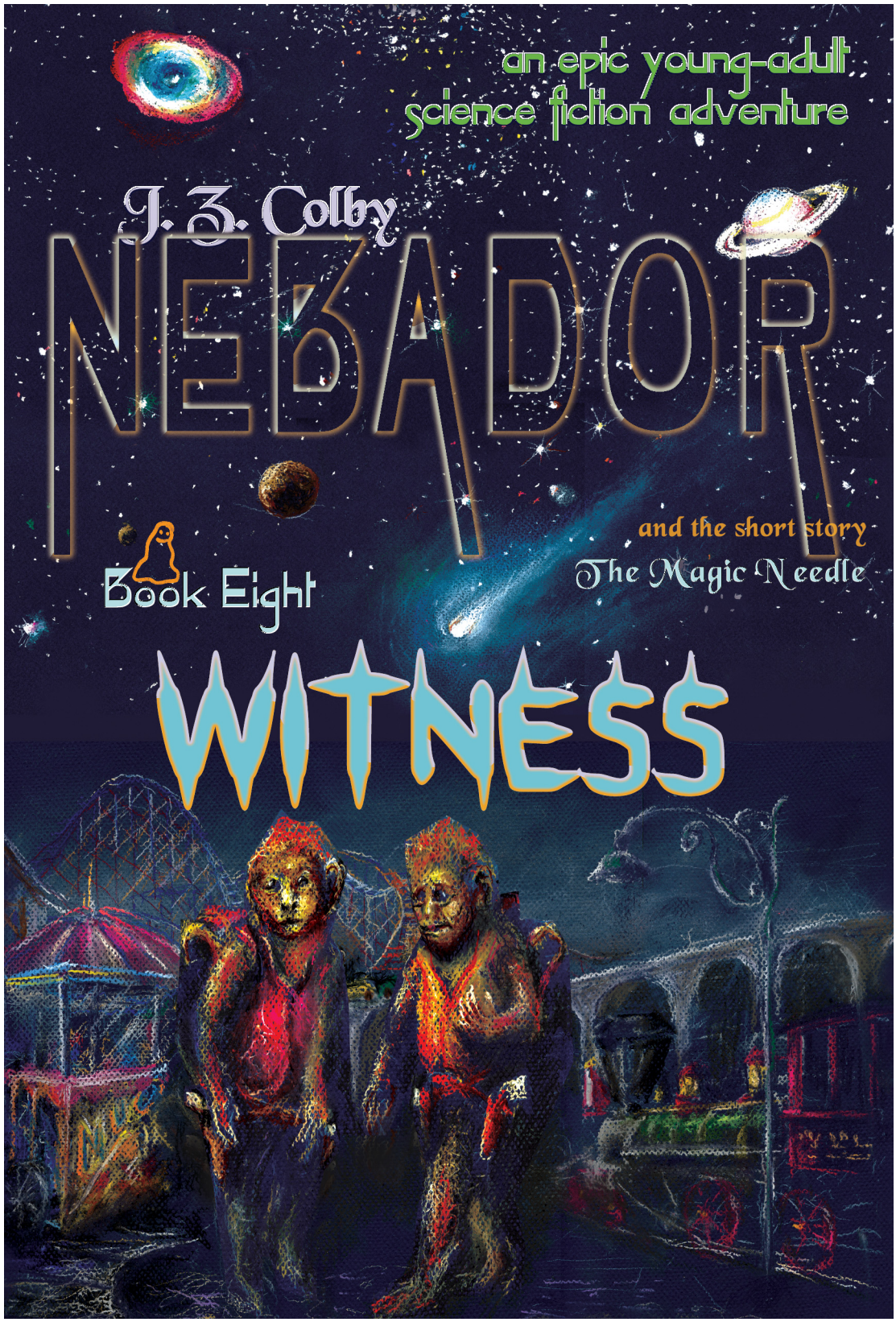
an epic young-adult
science fiction adventure
J. Z. Colby
NEBADOR
and the short story
The Magic Needle
Book Eight
WITNESS

The NEBADOR series:

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Book Two: Journey

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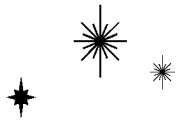


NEBADOR

Book Eight

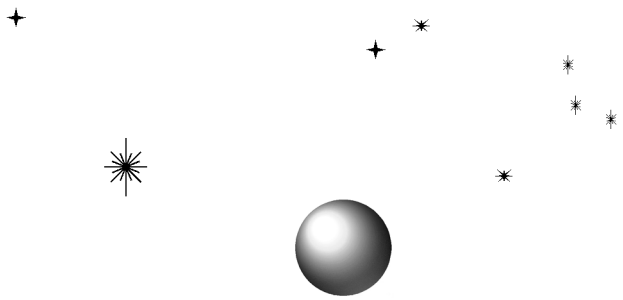
WITNESS

an epic young-adult science fiction adventure

by
J. Z. Colby

and the short story

The Magic Needle
by Kathleen Tully



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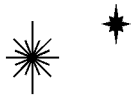
Dedicated to Peter James, the psychic investigator,
and a girl whose name may have been Jackie,
who may have died in the 2nd class swimming pool
on the R.M.S. Queen Mary.
Also dedicated to Gian and Sophia Temperilli,
and Erika Frost,
who carry on Peter's work,
each in their own way.

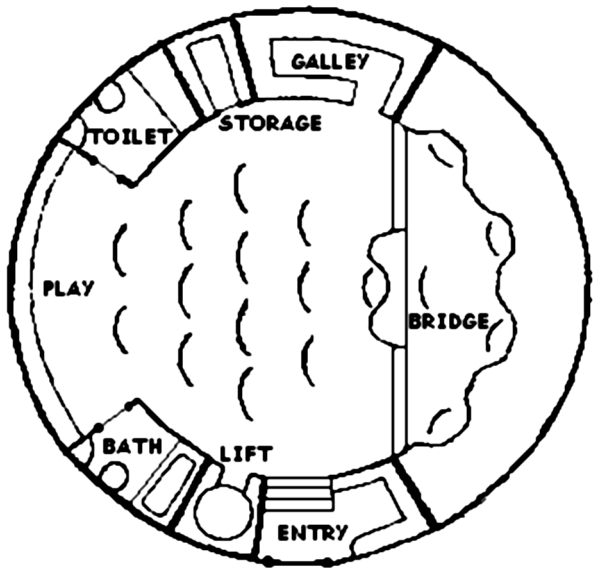


Greetings, young people of planet Earth,

This story is special. I had all the usual help from the Muses, and also some specific nudges and whisperings from a certain little girl (see dedication above). Unfortunately, I cannot share royalties with her, because of her current immortal state, and even her name is not known for sure. She stuck something in my shoe last time I was visiting her "home," and it is now one of my most cherished possessions. I hope it will allow her to find me if she ever needs to, and I will visit her as often as I can.

That same little girl seems to have known where the NEBADOR series was going, for the "darkness" she injected into *Book Eight* was just right to prepare me, and hopefully my readers, for *Book Nine*. Some young people, of course, shy away from "dark" stories, and some parents try to protect their children from such stories. That's okay, as the "darkness" we are moving toward may only allow passage by a few.

J. Z. Colby
2014



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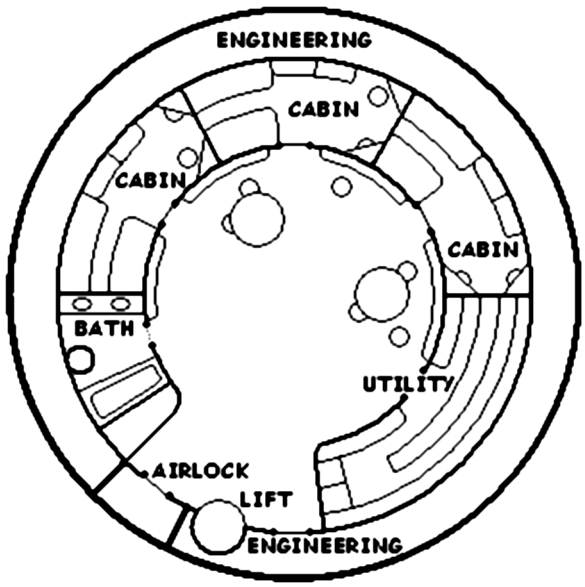

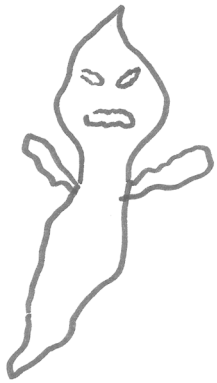

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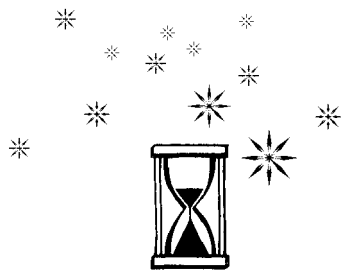
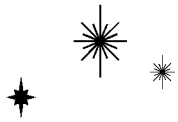
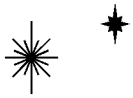




“What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly.”

— Richard Bach



Chapter 1: The Education Service

The monkey-mammal girl stood alone in the waiting room of response-ship dock D-Twelve on Satamia Star Station. She could see the spherical ship Manessa Kwi, through the clear walls, as it carefully entered the blue and purple docking fingers. A moment later, the boarding tunnel began moving toward the ship.

Ashley was excited about having lunch with her friends, and felt no need to hide her facial scars, as the crew of the Manessa Kwi knew all about the events, back at Lyceum on her home planet, that had caused those scars.

But she frowned when suddenly, just as the boarding tunnel made contact with the golden ship, several people from the medical center came striding into the waiting room, some with floating stretchers. She quickly stepped to the side, out of the way.

She was still having a little trouble thinking of birds and reptiles as "people," but it was getting easier, especially because most of them were smarter than her, and nearly all of them far more experienced. She loved her new home so much that she was determined to succeed. Anyway, she had always had a hunch that people — that is, human beings — weren't quite as important in the universe as they liked to think. Now that she was here, she knew her hunch had been quite correct.

The huge spider, last to enter the waiting room, caused Ashley to swallow, but she quickly noticed that it was in charge of the medical team, and even Dakalio, the only human healer on Satamia Star Station, was listening

carefully to the spider's instructions.

As soon as the ship's hatch opened, stretchers floated in, and soon came out with bandaged ursines and avians. A reptile who walked upright came next, supported by Healer Dakalio, its arm in a sling and a bandage on its head.

The spider quickly examined each person with the help of a hand-held instrument, then waved them along.

Finally, when all the healers had departed with the wounded, the crew of the Manessa Kwi emerged. None were injured, but they looked like they hadn't slept, eaten, or washed in days. They hardly noticed Ashley and flopped onto couches or the soft floor itself, sighing or moaning with relief.

Ashley was suddenly very glad she had chosen the Education Service instead of the Transport Service.

✷

A few minutes later, a large beetle arrived with a tray of nutrition drinks. "I've marked Manessa out-of-service for a day," he said.

"Thanks," Kibi said from the floor. "The ship needs *everything*."

"We do too," Sata said from a couch, reaching for a cup. "Hi, Ashley."

Seeing that the crew had no other immediate needs, the beetle departed.

Ashley noticed there were seven drinks, wondered how Nebador . . . um, people . . . always knew these things, and grabbed one. "Looks like you guys had a tough mission."

"It wasn't *supposed* to be," Ilika said from a couch, his head nestled in a pillow.

Boro, still on his back on the floor, sighed. "At least no one *died*."

Rini chuckled. "I think they came close a couple of times."

"Too close," Mati declared before taking a long pull from her drink. "You're pilot, next hard mission, Boro."

He swallowed. "Um . . . that's fair, I guess."

Rini laughed again. "Yeah, next time we get another Education Service mission, we'll know to stock extra medical supplies!"

Ashley's eyes snapped open wide.

✷

After a Satamia day of rest, the crew was busy cleaning and re-stocking

their ship, chatting about tense moments during the previous mission as they worked, when Arantiloria appeared and swirled into her purple-haired human form.

"In a few days, you have another Education Service mission . . ."

Boro moaned from the floor as he guided a hovering machine over the blood-stained carpet.

". . . but this one should be without any dangers or injuries."

"Whew!" Kibi breathed from where she sat on the galley counter, unloading boxes of food packets.

Ilika poked his head out of the toilet room, long-handled brush in hand. "That'll be a nice change."

"But there is some training I want you to complete," the spirit continued, "before you get that easy mission, training that will — what's that saying from Sonmatia Three? Oh, yes — curl your toes."

Sata slid out from under the navigator's console. "I *knew* it was too good to be true!"

✷ ✷ ✷

Chapter 2: Advanced Training

Mati plopped down on the top step of the entryway, tears streaming down her face. A moment later, Rini appeared at her side and wrapped his arms around her.

At the engineering station, Boro sighed and shut down his engines. As soon as he rose from his chair, Sata stood near, eyes glistening, almost a pout on her face. They shared a tender embrace, then walked hand in hand to the large oval table in the passenger area.

Kibi, still in the command chair, kept her face hidden in her hands for another minute, then slowly collected herself and stood up, shoulders slumped, feet heavy as lead. Seeing that she was now alone on the bridge, she dragged herself up to the table.

Ilika silently set a plate of finger food and cartons of juice on the table, then calmly took a seat.

After a few more minutes of awkward silence, Mati and Rini joined the others at the table.

Kibi took a deep breath. "What'd we do wrong, Ilika?"

A half-smile crept onto the captain's face. "How do you know you did *anything* wrong?"

Several of the crew members looked at each other.

"Because . . ." Boro began after swallowing the gotaka nuts he was chewing, "we *crushed* eight of the furry creatures we were *supposed* to rescue, *scared* the pee out of the rest, and managed to save exactly *five*, out of three

or four *hundred!*"

"And those five were all *males*, so they'd go *extinct* in a few years!" Sata added, nearly gasping for breath.

As the pilot who had caused the death of several of the little creatures, Mati was about to open her mouth and express her frustration when she noticed the moisture in Ilika's eyes. She swallowed her thought and took several slow breaths before she spoke. "You've had to do this kind of simulation before, haven't you?"

Ilika nodded. "And even though we get better at it, it's never easy."

Rini squeezed Mati's hand. "So . . . please tell us how we can do better."

Kibi nodded. "Part of me wants to run to the nearest knowledge processor and ask to be a dishwasher or tree trimmer or something. But . . ." She paused and took another slow breath. "But, I know it's just how I feel right now, and after you teach us some new things, we'll be able to do it."

"We've always wanted to rescue people and animals," Mati said. "Remember what we wanted to do back at Cattle Town?"

Ilika smiled at the memory of Buna asking to borrow his bracelet to put all the slave traders to sleep.

"We just never realized how *complicated* it could be," Mati concluded.

"I think we started to see that a little bit after taking Timod Gor home," Boro suggested, "but we obviously need to learn more."

Ilika let a few moments pass to see if anyone else wanted to speak. The silence lengthened, so he collected his thoughts. "The most important lesson you must learn is that there is NO perfect solution to any problem that involves a desperate situation, emotions running wild, and the free will of other creatures . . ."

"A sun exploding," Sata began, "with eight minutes to rescue an *entire* sapient race, is about as *desperate* as it comes!"

Ilika nodded.

✴ ✴ ✴

Chapter 3: Another Try

"Seventeen," Ilika reported, fulfilling his duties as acting steward, but leaving Kibi in command. "About three-quarters male, half old, half middle-aged, except for that one infant."

As he spoke, the seventeen fluffy white mammals with long pink ears, sitting on the floor in the passenger area, all changed back into fuzzy blue balls of light, then disappeared.

Mati finished with her console and spun around. "That's a *little* better. At least they wouldn't go *completely* extinct. You were right, Rini. The minute of rescue time we lost, by moving away from their main plaza, was worth it. We only crushed one."

"I'm lowering the table," Ilika announced, then stepped into the galley. The others came up from the bridge.

Sata slid into a chair. "We really have to find ways to avoid hurting *any*. The moment one screams, most of them run away scared."

Ilika remained silent as he placed snacks on the table. Boro grabbed a chair beside Sata.

Kibi chuckled dryly. "It feels funny for *me* to be saying this, but the name of the game, to rescue these beautiful little creatures, is to avoid *any* emotional reactions."

Ilika flashed her a smile.

Rini's face suddenly twisted with thought. Everyone noticed and looked at him.

"Manessa," he began, looking at the ceiling, "can you stretch your hull in a

couple of places to look like bunny ears?"

"Yes."

"Can you make the ears pink, and the rest of your hull white?"

"Yes."

Ilika raised his eyebrows. "I don't think *that's* been done before. It's worth a try!"

✳

As Manessa knew she should, she waited for an awkward moment to begin the next simulation. Rini had three items on the stove in the galley, Kibi was taking a bath, and Boro and Sata were sharing a deep kiss in the engineering ring on the lower deck.

"Emergency mission, supernova detected, one sapient race vulnerable, transit time fourteen minutes, complete planetary incineration in twenty-four minutes. Prepare for star transit."

The crew had that much memorized. They all got comfortable where they were and cleared their minds. Rini had the biggest challenge, first touching the stove's shut-down symbol, next tossing his knife into the sink, and finally plopping onto the floor to enter the meditative state that would protect him from insanity during the timeless and spaceless experience of star transit.

What seemed like a second, but might have been a year later, they popped back into space and time as close to the doomed planet as possible. Mati was quickly at her station, yelling for engines with voice commands to the ship. Boro arrived a moment later and took over the process, adjusting power levels he knew his pilot would want, and preparing alternate fuels just in case.

The star had already exploded, the daytime side of the planet was nothing but molten rock, and the nighttime side was rapidly changing to ash and cinders as the planet continued to turn on its axis.

Even though she had already done the simulation twice before, Sata's entire body was covered with sweat as she focused her mind on finding the right planetary chart and marking their destination, a cave and tunnel system where about four hundred sapient mammals lived, the last such cave, out of thousands, that would rotate onto the daytime side of the planet and be instantly burned to a crisp.

The pilot breathed a little easier when the chart flashed onto her screen.