

an epic young-adult
science fiction adventure

J. Z. Colby

NEBADOR

Book One

The Test



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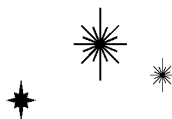
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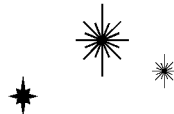
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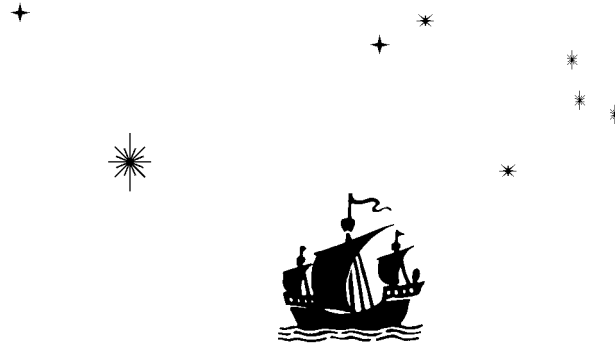


The Test

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by
J. Z. Colby





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Greetings, young people of planet Earth,

Much adult science fiction is based on the assumption that the human race will be in charge, or at least high up on the pecking order, when we venture to the stars. Young adults have a somewhat clearer memory that when they graduated elementary school, they were not immediately movers and shakers of the world, but instead found themselves in middle school.

Young adults also remember well the training wheels on their first small bicycles. Will-power alone could not propel them to their destinations.

Nebador is about little steps the smallest of us can make from the playpen to the university, from the gutter to the stars.

As you know, your world is changing very rapidly. During times of change, those who are stuck in old, rigid ways of thinking and feeling often don't do well. Those who can see far and think clearly are best prepared to survive, prosper in some way, and find happiness.

Stories like these help by letting us walk in the shoes of those who have lived through similar times. They become our heroes, giving us strength when we face challenges, and whispering their inspiration to us when we must solve problems.

Someday, many years from now, your stories may also be told, and you will become heroes to younger people who are struggling to understand the universe. They will take comfort in your courage, and learn from the lessons you have already learned.

Greeting from the *Deep Learning Notes*,

Nebador is much more than just an entertaining story. The particular Muse who inspired the author was obviously concerned about young adults in the early twenty-first century who are about to inherit a very different world than their parents knew. That world will have many fewer "safety nets," and those who have not sharpened their wits and honed their skills may find themselves struggling.

The Nebador stories contain many wit-sharpening and skill-honing lessons and situations, and the author has provided questions and comments for any reader who wants to learn as much as possible from the same Muse. Some may be useful to all readers, and others are best tackled by advanced students familiar with psychology, sociology, and politics. All readers and teachers must pick and choose for themselves.

J. Z. Colby

2010

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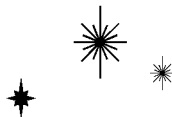
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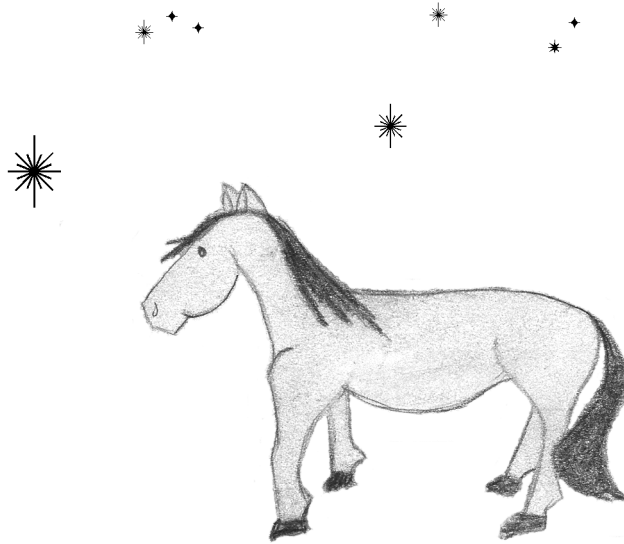
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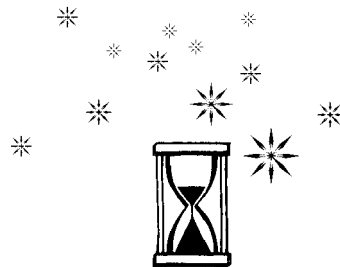
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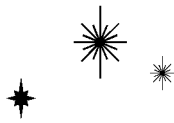


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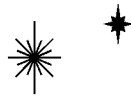
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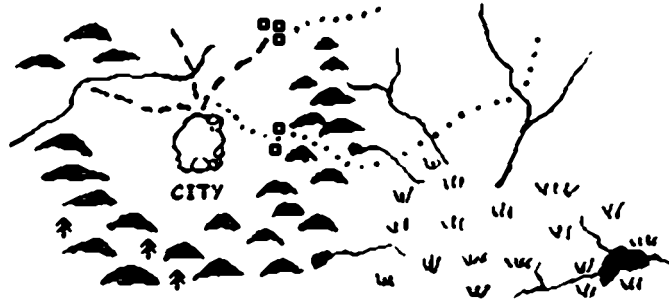




“Personal power is the ability to stand on your own two feet, with a smile on your face, in the middle of a universe that contains a million ways to crush you.”

— Nebador Transport Service saying





Chapter 1: First Contact

The boot, of some strange, shiny material, made a sucking sound as it pulled free of the sticky mud. One step farther along, water spiders skipped away as the boot plunged back into the swamp.

After several more strides through the watery black ooze, the light-haired young man looked ahead. Bushes and willowy trees covered the higher ground, still many steps away. Green eyes sparkling with curiosity, his face revealed about two decades of life, perhaps a little more.

He teetered for a moment, regained his balance, and wiped the sweat from his brow with a sleeve. Glancing back to where his tracks began, he watched as the large bulge in the swamp sank lower and lower. Shivering, he groped for the wide, dark metal bracelet on his left arm. After fingering it thoughtfully for a moment, he relaxed, took a deep breath, and turned back to his path.

Finally, with only one muddy step remaining, he tossed his shoulder bag onto the grassy bank and reached for a small tree. As he pulled himself onto higher ground, the swamp sucked at his boots one last time, inviting him to join the many creatures whose bones rotted in its murky depths.



As soon as the young man stood up, three large four-legged animals grazing nearby raised their heads and made throaty sounds. After a moment of thought, he whispered, “Horse.” They shifted positions and returned to

grazing, all three female, one close to giving birth.

Suddenly a large, dark-brown stallion bolted from behind a bush, called a threatening high-pitched challenge, and began stomping the ground and moving forward.

The young man stood with his back to the swamp as the huge male animal approached and towered over him. The man's right hand moved toward his bracelet, but the stallion thrashed its head violently and sliced the air with powerful hooves.

The young man lowered his hands and focused on breathing evenly.

After more ear-piercing calls, the stallion began to relax, but did not retreat. Snorting, the horse took in the scent of the puny human it could easily butt right into the treacherous swamp.

The young man began to hum a simple melody while keeping his hands at his sides.

The stallion twitched its ears to catch the new sound, then suddenly opened its mouth and gripped the man's shoulder with powerful teeth. For several heartbeats the teeth lingered, threatening to crush muscle and bone while the young man hummed softly.

With a jerk of its head, the stallion released its grip and leapt away, knocking the man off his feet. The three mares bolted. The stallion paused a stone's throw away, looked back, and finally galloped after the mares into the grasslands that spread out northward, toward the snowcapped mountains on the horizon.



The young man swallowed, let out a long shaking sigh, and closed his eyes as he listened to his throbbing heart.

A minute later, he slowly stood up, and gradually a look of contentment appeared as he scanned his environment. The land everywhere was full of light green shoots and new leaves. From overhead came the cries of winged creatures. Looking up, he saw them circle, dark feathers stretched out to catch the rising air. With few clouds in a blue sky, the new spring day promised sunshine and gentle warmth.

The young man's eyes and ears told him he was otherwise alone. Touching and moving his shoulder carefully, he found it merely bruised and tender. He

stood in silence for another moment, just looking around at the plants and listening to the birds and insects. Finally, after taking up his shoulder bag, he put one foot in front of the other toward the grassy hills in the west.



He had only been walking through the damp grass a few minutes when a path offered itself, and he gladly accepted its guidance. A little farther along, the trail skirted a small lake where he paused to rinse the mud from his boots.

As he sat on the grass at the edge of the still water, he noticed shy, careful movement among the rocks and plants nearby. He remained silent and waited, and soon a small furry creature came into view with hops of its hind legs between nibbles of greenery.

“Hello, little . . . rabbit,” the young man said softly and haltingly in a language clearly not his own.

The rabbit twitched its nose and kept one bright eye on the newcomer, but continued eating.

“My name is Ilika, and I just arrived in your beautiful land from a place called Satamia, in the greater region of Nebador.”

The little creature’s long ears turned to the sound as it continued to demonstrate which plants were delicious, and which were not.

“You are my first contact in this land.”

The rabbit raised its head for a moment, then went back to eating.

“Well . . . I did meet someone earlier, but the situation was a bit emotional . . . and we didn’t get a chance to talk.”

Suddenly the piercing cry of a bird of prey filled the sky, and the rabbit vanished into the rocks with one leap.

“Be well, little one. I must continue my journey.”



Half an hour later, with deep breaths of the crisp air, the young man strode to the top of the highest hill. Standing tall, he looked west. In the small valley below nestled simple farms, little thatched cottages, and people beginning their work in gardens, fields, and animal pens.

Beyond the farms, on a gentle rise of open grass, stood the medieval walled city, its gray stonework glowing in the morning light.



Deep Learning Notes

Although they are not talked about until chapter 35, the map uses very common symbols. Can you see where the first chapter takes place? Hint: the small lake where Ilika rinsed his boots is almost exactly in the center of the map.

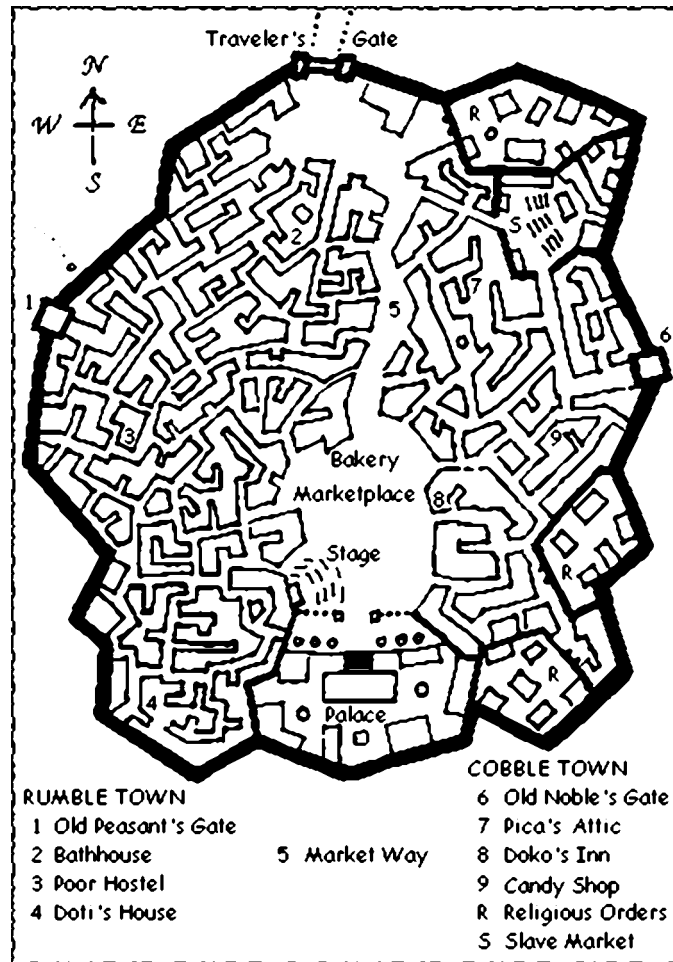
There are many hints in the first chapter that Ilika is from somewhere far away, and has never been in this place before. How many can you find?

Ilika's way of dealing with the angry stallion is unusual. How would most people react? How would YOU react? What does Ilika's response tell us about him?

What is Ilika's "state of mind" soon after the stallion leaves? How long would it take most people to get to that state of mind?

What assumptions does Ilika NOT make when talking to the rabbit, assumptions that most people would make?

This chapter clearly shows that the story is going outside the usual boundaries of human behavior. A "normal" person, in the medieval culture portrayed, or ours, would experience great fear in Ilika's situation with the stallion, flight or aggression to solve the problem, and then face-saving behaviors. Later, with the rabbit, most people would display some form of disrespect, perhaps capturing or killing the rabbit, or at least talking down to it. Ilika's non-typical reactions set the stage for his unusual origin.



Chapter 2: The Capital City

At the first light of dawn, several hours before the newcomer stepped out of the swamp, the city guards changed duty shifts at the Traveler's Gate and the watchtowers. News and jests were exchanged, and a loaf of bread from the previous day, somewhat stale, was torn and shared.

By that time the bakers, cooks, and innkeepers of the city were already up, prodding children and apprentices who would rather be snug in their beds. With a slice of bread in hand, the young ones blinked and stumbled to their duties.

As morning began to glow on the eastern horizon, wagons approached the city gate, the first few laden with sacks of flour from the mills. Next, carts groaned up the hill, filled with farm produce and craft-wares, bound for the

marketplace to sell to those who had coins in their pouches.

Many unskilled laborers, after a quick bowl of mush because they couldn't afford bread, hoisted sacks and crates to their shoulders in the morning light. Strong men unloaded an entire wagon at the large bakery on the edge of the marketplace.



The baker's son shuffled loaves in and out of the oven, turning them when necessary, but part of his mind was elsewhere. As an apprentice scribe, he spent long hours working without pay to pursue his dream of someday living the upper-class life of Cobble Town.

The smell of burning bread brought him fully back to the present, and he found the neglected loaf in the back of the oven. He grinned sheepishly at his father and tossed the loaf into a box for the poorest of the people.



In a small stable near the bakery, a shaggy gray donkey squealed her complaint, but the stupid man was obviously not going to quit kicking her and calling her "Ka" until she got up. She had tried to tell him her real name, but like most people, he didn't understand. With noises of protest, she got to her feet and allowed him to strap on the harness.

Soon her baskets were brimming with fresh loaves straight from the oven, and she began to follow her owner through the streets of Cobble Town. The hard surface quickly made her legs sore, but she ignored the pain and drifted into a daydream, imagining an owner who would speak kindly to her, learn her real name, and let her walk on the soft earth.



Soon after the sun rose, others made way for a noble-born woman who stepped up to the bakery. Her slave girl carried a big basket, soon filled with several loaves of the best bread and a large pie. The girl could smell the delicious pie as she followed her matron around the marketplace.

The noblewoman had plenty of money to spend, but managing her large household took constant attention all day long. Sometimes she glimpsed her two young slaves, late in the evening, when they had finished their duties and retired to their sleeping niche in the back of the kitchen. Laughing and joking, they made games and toys with bits of firewood and pebbles. She would slip

away, not letting them see her smile of longing.



At the Traveler's Gate, a guard carefully wrote a few words on a piece of rough paper. He gestured to a young boy who stood nearby.

The boy instantly stood before the guard. Other boys watched, ready and willing if the one chosen was too slow or clumsy.

The guard handed him the note and three copper pieces, then looked him sternly in the eyes.

The boy swallowed and glanced at some slaves carrying heavy burdens through the gate, then nodded that he understood the price of failure.

A few minutes later, after dashing up Market Way, the boy handed the note and two of the copper pieces to the baker. He received a wooden shingle bearing six freshly-baked fruit tarts.

To get back to the city gate, the boy selected muddy streets and narrow alleyways of Rumble Town, his home turf, that were not too crowded, and not the regular haunts of thieves and rascals.



The high priest had been boring the king with a speech ever since breakfast. It had something to do with priests and monks being exempt from port taxes. Now the king had his chin in his hands, but alas, the speech continued.

At the first pause in the high priest's words, one of the king's advisors interrupted. "If your god is so all-powerful, why do you need special favors from the Court? Other people, even those without an all-powerful god, pay their taxes."

The king lifted his chin. "Good point. I cannot exempt the religious orders from all material contributions to the realm. If the port taxes are becoming a burden, as you say, perhaps it is because your people are traveling too much."

At that moment, a servant entered from the marketplace balancing a large platter of tarts, muffins, and a crock of fresh butter.

"Ahh!" the king breathed. "It is time for the Court to refresh itself."

The high priest bowed low and left the audience hall, an appeasing smile on his face. Once he was outside the palace, the smile changed to a cold frown.

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