

LEVELED BOOK • Z²

Alien Collective II: The Link

MULTI
LEVEL
Z•Z¹•Z²

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Focus Question

Who should Charlotte trust, Artie or the Resistance? Why do you think that?

Words to Know

abductees
Arbor Day
biome
breakthroughs
bucolic
clinic
consumption
deluge
demise
diminutive
distraught
habitable

incredulous
indigenous
intergalactic
nursery
perspective
primal
propaganda
ravenous
saplings
spartan
technology
transitions

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Level Z2 Leveled Book
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Correlation

LEVEL Z2	
Fountas & Pinnell	Y-Z
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	70+

Charlotte wasn't certain how long she had been in the room. It lacked any windows and had only two doors, which made it difficult to gauge the passage of time accurately. Some time ago, she found that she could get out of bed and walk around when Artie wasn't there. Despite her best efforts, though, she was unable to budge the door that led outside.

The other door led to a **spartan** bathroom outfitted with a sink, toilet, and shower. She slept frequently, and when she woke, food would be waiting on a small shelf in the corner—salad, fruits, and vegetables for every meal. Sometimes she woke to find herself restrained and unable to move, which meant Artie was present for one of their conversations.

I remember everything now, Charlotte thought, focusing on Artie. It was the first time she had attempted to communicate through the Collective Link, and she didn't know if she was doing it correctly. Her head still ached and her brain felt scrambled, but the pain had receded enough to think more clearly over the last few . . . days?

Do you now? Artie's voice appeared in her mind, sounding **incredulous**.

Where are you? Charlotte asked, pacing around her room.

Not far. Would you like to come out of your room and chat?

Charlotte could not prevent her excitement from welling up at the prospect of getting out of the room—perhaps she could find a way to escape.

Something that sounded like a chuckle echoed in her mind.

When you exit your room, Artie said, head down the corridor to your right. You'll find me in the observation room at the end.

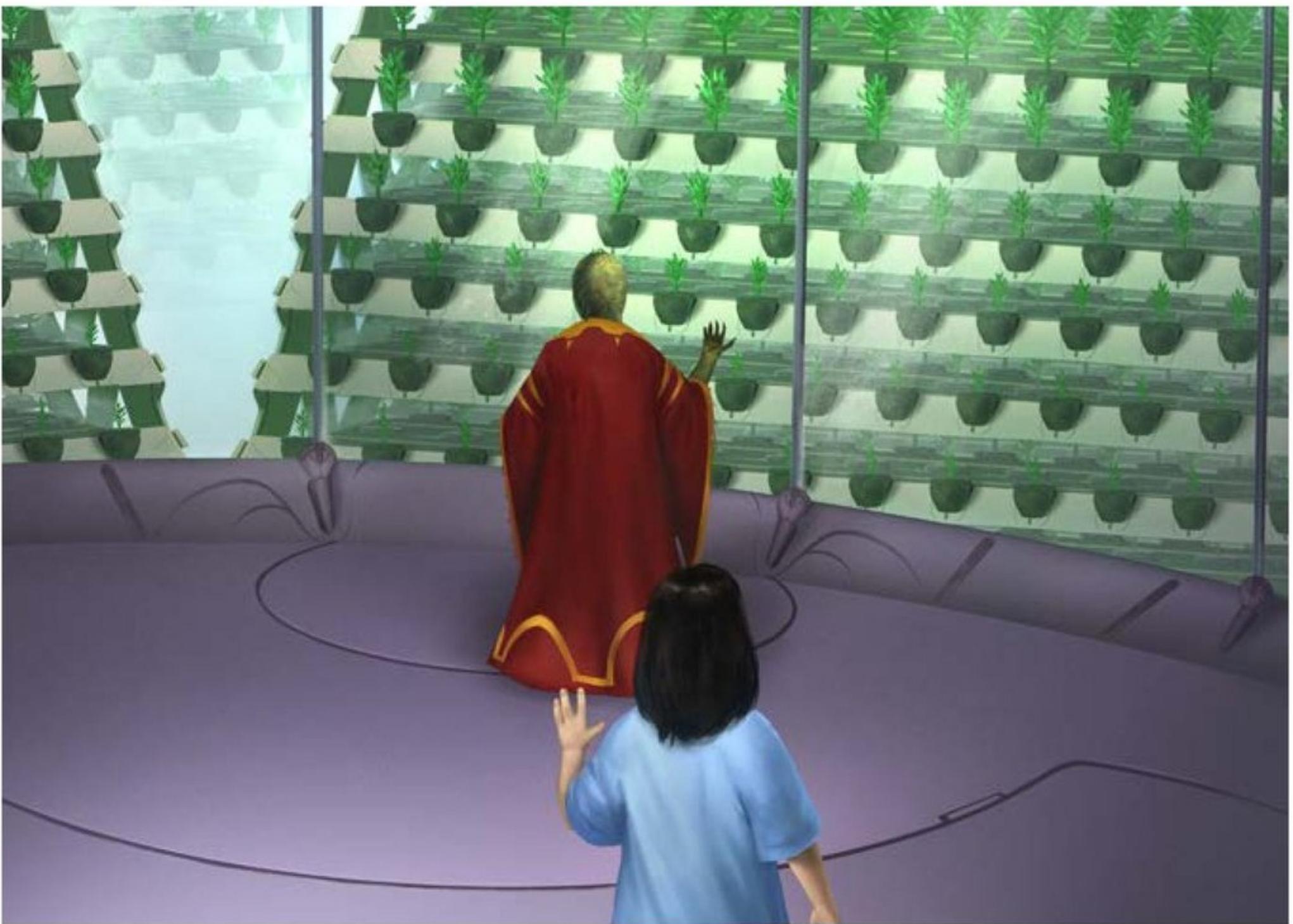
The door, a nondescript white panel with rounded edges, silently slid open as she approached. She squinted as she was suddenly exposed to the intense sunlight that poured in from the wall of windows on the opposite side of the hallway. Beyond the windows, she could see rolling, grass-covered hills sparsely forested and a small city rising up in the distance. It took her a moment to realize that she must be inside the same tower the Resistance had attacked. If only she could find a way to get out, she would be able to make her way back to the compound in less than a day.

In the empty hallway, she turned left—not right as Artie had instructed—and moved quickly toward the doorway at the end. As she approached, the large door slid open, but out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a flash of blue light shimmering across the opening. When she pressed her hand against it, she felt an all-too-familiar electric tingling feeling. It was as solid as steel; she wouldn't be escaping that way.

She reversed direction, made her way past her room again, and continued down the hallway. As she passed several other small doors that remained firmly closed, Charlotte wondered if the aliens had other **abductees** they subjected to these awful experiments—or whatever they were.

At the end of the hall, she came upon another large door that quietly opened. She cautiously reached out to make sure she didn't run into another shield, but her hand met no resistance and she walked through quietly.

The windows continued past the doorway and around the room. To her left, she could see the same **bucolic** scene of hills and grass. Artie was standing with his back to her, still wearing the same red robes. The alien remained motionless when she entered, keeping his gaze focused on the bright white room beyond the windows.



As Charlotte drew closer, she noticed tier after tier of small black pots filled with dark, healthy-looking soil. Those at the bottom had **diminutive** green shoots sticking up, and the plants grew larger in each higher row.

What do you think of our little nursery? Artie asked.

Charlotte didn't respond.

*This area used to be covered with trees like these—well, not exactly like these. The species is **indigenous** to this part of the country, but we made a few modifications to increase the trees' growth rate and longevity while also allowing them to take in more carbon dioxide and release more oxygen.*

Artie smiled proudly at Charlotte. “I’m sure the next **Arbor Day** celebration will be a real blast, thanks to you,” she said. For some reason, speaking out loud seemed like a form of defiance.

With a grunt, Artie turned and walked to the right side of the room. Charlotte looked out at the rolling hills, but on this side the grass ended abruptly at a line of burnt trees where the blue shield must have stood. The ground beyond it was scorched, and large craters surrounded by debris dotted the hillside.

Nearly fifty humans perished in the Resistance attack on this facility, Artie said somberly. The casualties were much worse in some other places around the world.

“How many were Resistance?” Charlotte asked.

What difference does it make? You’re all humans, all members of the same species.

“The people working with you are collaborators—traitors to the human race. While it’s unfortunate that they died, sacrifices have to be made to ensure our freedoms.”

You recite your father’s propaganda well, Charlotte, but I wonder if you truly believe it.

“Of course I do,” she said without hesitation.
“Remember, I’ve seen what you’ve done.
Thousands upon thousands of worlds destroyed
in so many ways. It’s terrible, and you’re not going
to do that to Earth.”

Artie flashed his awkward smile. *Search those experiences carefully, and you’ll see the Collective’s involvement.*

A multitude of images of destroyed civilizations again flashing through Charlotte’s mind, yet she somehow experienced them simultaneously. They were jumbled and overwhelming, which made it difficult to focus. She tried again and again, but she couldn’t point to any specific evidence indicating that the Collective had actually caused any of the destruction she was witnessing. That didn’t prove anything, however.

Habitable planets are rare, but the universe is so massive that it contains unimaginable numbers of them. This galaxy alone is home to more than one hundred billion planets similar to your own, but it’s only now that your species is making contact with beings from another world. Artie’s voice echoed in her brain. *Why do you think that is?*

Charlotte found it a little difficult to speak as her mind processed the destruction of vast numbers of worlds, but she managed, “Too far.”

That's a good starting point. Reaching outer space requires a certain level of technology, and traveling between stars takes exceptionally advanced technology. Still, mathematically, with nearly infinite worlds out there, logic would dictate that some of them would have contacted Earth by now, yet the Collective is the first to do so. Why?

Charlotte shook her head and wiped tears from her cheeks, still **distraught** from what she had just seen and felt. Artie gave her a disappointed look, as if he had expected more from her.

It's really very simple: they destroy themselves. It turns out that it's much easier for a species to develop new technologies than it is for them to learn to use those technologies safely and responsibly. Major scientific breakthroughs are extremely dangerous unless a species has already developed the maturity to use them wisely. You've seen countless examples of what happens when that maturity and wisdom are lacking.

Charlotte let go of the experiences, feeling the terrible destruction fade to the back of her mind. “Next you're going to tell me that we're all one and we should all hug Earth and each other.”

Artie emitted a low growl that she realized was a laugh. *That does sound rather sentimental, doesn't it? Really, though, all your species needs to do is to stop being so self-centered and think of something beyond yourselves.*

"I've been abducted by **intergalactic tree huggers**," Charlotte quipped.

We're trying to assist your species as it transitions into an advanced, intergalactic civilization.

"You didn't really ask if we wanted to transition."

*It was inevitable. As you know, we've seen this happen a multitude of times, and while each situation is somewhat unique, the end result is not. With your power sources, rampant **consumption**, overpopulation, and complete disregard for the **biome**, you would have destroyed yourselves in short order, and we couldn't allow that.*

"How do you know?" Charlotte snapped.
"Maybe we could have *transitioned* on our own.
Besides, who gave you the right to get involved?
We're free to destroy ourselves if we want."

There's always a chance of natural transition, yes, but the Collective's involvement greatly increases the probability of success. You're also correct that you are free to destroy yourselves, Artie gestured out the window at the scarred land, except you'd take everything else with you. Habitable planets are few and far between in the galaxy, and the loss of any of them is a tragedy.

“So the answer is to surrender, let you take over, and give up our freedom? We should go against our own human nature and just accept that we are your slaves in order to save ourselves from the off chance that we might blow ourselves up? I’m not sure that’s a fair trade.”

As they watched, a detail of human workers exited the tower and began to disperse into the field. Some carried bags of seeds that they scattered as they walked, while others had shovels and saplings ready to be planted.

It's a matter of perspective, Artie said.

“You won’t win.”

It's not about winning; it's about survival. You may come to see that soon, however. As much as I have enjoyed our exchange, you need to return to your room to rest. Tomorrow we'll do the second procedure.



Pain. Darkness. A planet dying. Explosions. Where? People yelling. The Collective landing in ships. Something roaring. Another planet ending.

Charlotte felt herself being lifted off the bed and carried. She tried to fight, but every movement sent shock waves of pain through her body. There was a burning smell. She tried to open her eyes, but everything was moving and painful, so she closed them again.

The Collective was there—all of them.

A moment later, darkness took her.

Charlotte woke to her dad's face looking down on her.

"Morning, sunshine," he said, breaking into a broad smile. Charlotte immediately embraced him.

"How long was I gone?" she asked as she looked around. She was in one of the rooms at the **clinic** in the compound. The sterile room had polished tiles and light green walls—strangely similar to her room in the Streed. The only significant difference was the window along one wall.

"About ten days," he said. "We brought you here three days ago, but you've been unconscious the entire time."



Charlotte's head throbbed, but not nearly as bad as it had when she woke up in the alien Streed. She couldn't remember much of what happened after her talk with Artie in the observation room. She had returned to her bed and fallen asleep. Had they finished the procedure? The last time, it felt like an uncontrolled **deluge** of information, but now she felt almost completely normal.

"Are you feeling okay?" her dad asked.

Charlotte nodded. "Just a bit of a headache, but I'm fine. Hungry."

Her dad laughed. "Of course you are. I'll see if I can scrounge up some food. I'll let the doctors know you're awake," he said and left the room.

Charlotte lay back down and rubbed her temples. Her mind felt clear, as though nothing had ever happened. She examined her thoughts, her memories, and nothing felt jumbled, out of place, or distorted, but would she really know if it were?

Cautiously, she thought about one of the civilizations that had been destroyed: the planet with the violet-tinged ocean. Instantaneously, the entire Collective's experience rushed into her mind as if she had accessed a computer file. The images and information were crisp, clear, and self-contained.

She tried another planet, with the same result, then another. Soon, she was scrolling through them faster than she could have imagined. This time, though, the emotions accompanied the raw data—pain, fear, anger, and ultimately, intense sadness. The amount of information being dumped into her brain made her a bit woozy, then nauseous, so she stopped. It was as if she had closed a browser window and her mind was back to normal again.

Charlotte was still processing and thinking about what she had seen when her father returned with something to eat and she forgot about anything else.



“You must be **ravenous**,” her dad said as she tore into the sandwich and soup. Charlotte just grunted a response and took another bite.

When she finished, she handed her empty plate and bowl to her dad, suddenly sleepy.

Just then, the door opened and a doctor strolled in, glancing at a chart. “How are you feeling today, Charlotte?” she asked with an insincere smile.

“Better,” Charlotte replied. “Happy to be home.”



The doctor nodded and silently began her examination, shining lights in Charlotte's eyes, listening to her chest, poking and prodding. When she was done, the doctor said, "I know you're tired, but before I let you go back to sleep, I need you to tell me what happened in the Streed. Did they do anything to you?"

Charlotte looked at her dad and opened her mouth to reply, but a thought stopped her: What would they do if she told them the truth? She had direct access to the entire Collective's experience and could communicate with them, but theoretically, they had access to her as well. Would they think she had been brainwashed or turned into a spy for the aliens?

"I don't remember," she lied. "I'm sorry, but I'm really tired. Maybe something will come back to me later."

The doctor was about to speak when her dad said, "Okay, get some sleep. We'll talk later."

The doctor flashed her dad a frustrated look, but they both left. Charlotte heard the distinct sound of the door being locked from the outside.

Despite her exhaustion and throbbing head, Charlotte stayed awake. The locked door meant they didn't trust her, but could she blame them? Would she have trusted someone who spent an entire week in an alien Streed? Likely not.

She checked the windows, but they were sealed shut. Could she break the glass without them noticing?

Then another thought occurred to her: Why was she thinking of escaping? She was safe in the compound, but this room felt more like a prison. Maybe it was just some **primal** animal instinct to flee when trapped.

She wasn't going anywhere, so she decided to try to sleep. As she lay in bed, her mind wandered and she found herself thinking about the information she had absorbed from the link.

She could confirm that the Collective had not been involved in the destruction of any of the civilizations. They had refrained from intervening in the affairs of other worlds, confining themselves to being passive bystanders instead. They had watched those worlds decline from the sidelines, sometimes for very long periods of time, until their ultimate **demise**. She didn't know whether that was worse.

The emotions passed through the link lingered, like echoes of memories, combining frustration and helplessness, and bringing it all to boil. Locked in her room in the Resistance compound, it was a feeling she understood all too well.

Glossary

abductees (<i>n.</i>)	people who have been taken away by force (p. 5)
Arbor Day (<i>n.</i>)	an informal holiday dedicated to planting and caring for trees (p. 7)
biome (<i>n.</i>)	a community of plants and animals that occupy a specific type of habitat (p. 10)
breakthroughs (<i>n.</i>)	important events or advances in knowledge that move something such as technology, science, or medicine forward (p. 9)
bucolic (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the pleasant parts of country life (p. 5)
clinic (<i>n.</i>)	a place, often part of a hospital, where patients receive medical care (p. 12)
consumption (<i>n.</i>)	the act of getting and using resources or goods, sometimes to the point of depletion or destruction (p. 10)
deluge (<i>n.</i>)	a large amount of something, such as rain, that arrives all at once (p. 13)
demise (<i>n.</i>)	the end or failure of something; death (p. 18)
diminutive (<i>adj.</i>)	very small (p. 6)

distraught (<i>adj.</i>)	very upset; overcome with worry and emotion (p. 9)
habitable (<i>adj.</i>)	capable of supporting life (p. 8)
incredulous (<i>adj.</i>)	not believing or not accepting something presented as true (p. 3)
indigenous (<i>adj.</i>)	native to a particular place (p. 6)
intergalactic (<i>adj.</i>)	relating to or happening between two or more galaxies (p. 10)
nursery (<i>n.</i>)	a place where young plants are grown to be sold or transplanted elsewhere (p. 6)
perspective (<i>n.</i>)	a person's mental outlook or point of view (p. 11)
primal (<i>adj.</i>)	powerful, primitive, or basic (p. 17)
propaganda (<i>n.</i>)	false or exaggerated stories or information that is spread in order to influence people or promote a particular point of view (p. 7)
ravenous (<i>adj.</i>)	very hungry; starving (p. 15)
saplings (<i>n.</i>)	young trees (p. 11)
spartan (<i>adj.</i>)	marked by simplicity and lack of excess; minimal (p. 3)
technology (<i>n.</i>)	the use of scientific knowledge or tools to make or do something (p. 9)
transitions (<i>v.</i>)	changes from one state, location, or condition to another (p. 10)

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Word Count: 2,579

Connections

Writing

Do you think the Collective has the right to intervene on Earth to stop it from destroying itself? Why or why not? Use details from the text to support your answer.

Science

Earth is the only planet in our solar system known to have life. Research the other planets and write a report about why they would not be habitable for human life.

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