

LEVELED BOOK • Z²

Alien Collective III: Transition



MULTI
LEVEL
Z•Z¹•Z²

Written by Rus Buyok • Illustrated by Toma Feizo Gas

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Focus Question

What role does Charlotte play
in the transition?

Words to Know

bipodal
brainwash
casualties
civilians
collaborators
compatible
cult
dissipated
eons
escalation
insignificant
intervene

irony
martyring
MRIs
myriad
perspective
propaganda
proximity
sarcasm
subterfuge
tipping point
transition
unmitigated

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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 had been a prisoner of the aliens and now she was a prisoner of the Resistance. She had reached one inescapable conclusion: When you're locked in a room, after a while it doesn't matter who put you there.

She was never left alone for long, however. Over the next few days, doctors came to her room and examined her again and again, asking her endless questions. She repeated the same answer: The aliens had kept her in a small green hospital room, examined her again and again, and asked her endless questions, but she had told them nothing.

Charlotte doubted the doctors appreciated the **irony** of her statements.

They took X-rays, performed **MRIs**, and did all sorts of other tests, but as far as they could determine, she was a normal human teenager.

Her father visited every day and showed her a video of the "heroic rescue" of her and other members of the original strike team. The edited footage contained dramatic music that could have been lifted straight out of a big-budget action film. Charlotte didn't relish seeing footage of herself being hauled around like a sack of potatoes.

One scene zoomed in on a reptilian face shrouded in a veil of smoke. The voice-over dramatically announced, “These terrifying alien creatures stalked the rescue team, their vicious expressions revealing the aliens’ true bloodlust.”

Charlotte recognized Artie immediately. He was smiling.

Her dad showed her videos of other attacks, too—all edited to look like **unmitigated** successes, though Charlotte noticed not one Streed actually fell to the attackers. Some resembled the war footage she had seen on the news, with Resistance members fighting other humans and the Streed looming ominously in the background.

What difference does it make? You’re all humans, all members of the same species. Artie’s words returned unbidden to her mind repeatedly as she watched, thinking about the number of **casualties** that must have resulted from the attacks.

They were collaborators though, she told herself. They had already given their lives over to the colonizers. Sacrifices needed to be made to ensure our freedom, our humanity.

Artie’s voice came again from her memory: *You recite your father’s propaganda well, Charlotte, but I wonder if you truly believe it.*

Three days later, she heard Artie's voice in her mind for real. When she was alone, she'd been spending her time exploring the link. The Collective had discovered thousands upon thousands of civilizations at various stages of technological development. Some destroyed themselves and their planet. Others were pulled back from the precipice when the Collective stepped in to save who and what they could to keep the planet habitable. Sometimes they could salvage the planet, sometimes they couldn't.

She also found memories of some worlds where the Collective seized the reins of power directly, through **subterfuge**, military action, or a variety of other methods. They all failed for **myriad** reasons.

Then, she came across a strange world. It was rocky and seemed uninhabitable due to its **proximity** to its sun, but life teemed under the surface. **Bipodal** reptilian creatures had constructed amazing complexes of caves that honeycombed entire continents.

I was wondering when you'd get there, Artie said in her mind. Charlotte scanned the room, expecting to find him standing in a corner.

Where are you? Charlotte asked.

Around. Why? Do you miss me? Artie chuckled. If you can't tell, you're looking at my home, though I've never actually been there. My civilization was one of the first to transition successfully.

Charlotte scrambled to seal off her mind.

Don't bother trying to block me out. We already know where you are.

You do? How? Charlotte tentatively asked.

The Resistance isn't as good at hiding as it thinks.

Why haven't you attacked us yet? You could wipe the Resistance off the face of the Earth in minutes.

We could, Artie paused as if considering, *but the consequences of martyring thousands of humans would be counterproductive to our end goal of a successful transition—we've attempted that in the past.*

Charlotte scanned the link and quickly found multiple examples of civilizations that had united in resistance in response to a massacre instigated by the Collective. They didn't end well.

Besides, the Resistance is an essential part of the plan, Artie continued. *The Collective has done this more than a few thousand times now and, although we've made many mistakes, we're finally getting pretty good at transitioning species.*



Charlotte felt images rush into her mind and realized Artie was sending her information directly. She saw a multitude of successful transitions, each accomplished in its own complex manner with the species becoming part of the Collective. Afterward, the planets were restored to a natural balance while the species lived in relative comfort. *The linchpin of each transition was the link, which allowed for direct, honest communication*, Artie explained. It all seemed a little too good to be true.

I get it. You go in and brainwash people until they join your huge cult, Charlotte said.

It's more about helping each species transcend its old patterns to see things in a new way, Artie replied.

You're repeating yourself now. You should come up with a different argument.

I'm not actually arguing anything, only presenting information. You have to reach your own conclusions, whatever they may be. It seems like I'm arguing because you're beginning to question your own point of view.

Why force the link on me? Charlotte asked.

You were available and compatible. Not everyone's mind can support the link, but you're special—well, you and about four million other humans.

Then, a thought occurred to Charlotte. What if all this is a huge lie, and you're planting these images in my head to convince me to join your side?

I was wondering when you'd ask that, Artie said.

Well?

Like the rest of the human race, you're going to have to figure that one out for yourself. Nothing I can show or say to you will ever truly convince you of anything. You have to do this on your own, or the transition will never stick.

Have I ever told you how much I enjoy our cryptic conversations?

Artie laughed. *Human sarcasm certainly is bizarre when translated through the link.*



That night, someone opened the door to her room and light from the hallway woke her, which was strange. The doctors usually left her alone at night, and they always kept the door locked.

In the darkness that returned when the door closed again she could just make out someone sneaking across the room. Her fists clenched as she prepared to defend herself.

“Charlotte?” It was Sam, whispering.
“You awake?”

She turned on the bedside lamp to see her best friend, dressed in dark clothes, freeze and blink at the sudden brightness. It was the first time she’d seen him since the attack on the Streed.

“Hi,” she whispered, staying on the bed.

“Uh, hi,” Sam replied. They stayed in awkward silence for a moment. “So, are you, like, okay? You’re not going to hug me with a tentacle or something, are you?”

Charlotte stifled a laugh, which made Sam laugh, and the awkwardness **dissipated**.

“Good, I’m glad you’re okay, because I’ve come to rescue you,” he said, puffing out his chest.

Charlotte cocked an eyebrow and said, “You?”

He tossed her a pack that contained some clothes she recognized. “Hurry up and get dressed. We don’t have much time.”

Charlotte changed in the bathroom. It felt good to wear real clothes again instead of disposable hospital gowns.

Outside, they passed a sleeping guard and snuck down the hallway, being careful to avoid the nurses’ station. They exited the clinic at the end of a long hallway, where Sam had bypassed the security system.

Charlotte and Sam ran across the parking lot and down the street, ducking into an alley as a vehicle passed.

“It’s getting crazy out here, man,” Sam said as they caught their breath. “My dad and the rest of the upper brass are gearing up for something big.”

“What do you mean ‘big’?” Charlotte asked.

“The coordinated attacks were a massive flop,” Sam replied. “The tech they stole from the collaborators to get through the shield only worked for our strike team. After that, the aliens must have altered the codes or something.”

“Then how did they rescue me?”

“My dad sent a team into the Streed with the usual collaborators, and the aliens were stupid enough to not check them for weapons. After that, it was a piece of cake.”

Charlotte remembered the image of Artie’s smiling face that her dad caught on video.

“Anyway, since they can’t get at the aliens, the Resistance is going to take out some collaborators,” Sam said, an excited expression on his face. “You know the big public housing projects the world governments have built at the aliens’ command? We’re going to destroy a couple of those in every city around the globe. Maybe that will make people think twice about getting chummy with aliens.”

“That’s insane!” Charlotte said. “Those are just innocent people in those buildings.”

“They’re collaborators. Sacrifices have to be made—you know that.” Sam’s expression darkened. “Maybe the aliens did do something to you.”

“No,” Charlotte said. “It just seems like a drastic next step.”

“Good, because that’s why I broke you out. I knew you wouldn’t want to miss it.”

She jolted upright. “It’s happening tonight?”
Sam nodded.

Charlotte’s head swam, unable to really process what was happening. Hundreds of people lived in those complexes, tens of thousands around the world, many of them elderly people or young families that had done nothing but accept the aliens’ assistance like so many others. Did the fact that these people weren’t part of the Resistance really make them collaborators? They were not fighting for either side—they were simply surviving.

Suddenly, she realized what Artie meant when he said the Resistance had a role to play.

“We have to stop them!” she yelled to Sam.

“Why would we do that?” Sam asked, his expression incredulous.

“Because it’s exactly what the aliens want,” Charlotte began. “Think about it. The world governments tolerate the Resistance because we’re just a fringe group. We don’t pose much of a threat because we only target the aliens and the people who work directly for them. But this kind of operation will turn everyone against us. If we start attacking **civilians**, they’re going to wipe us out.”

Sam was quiet for a moment, his face unreadable. Then he slowly asked, "How do you know what the aliens want?"

Charlotte couldn't think of a response. In frustration, she blurted out, "We have to save humanity from ourselves!"

Sam shook his head, refusing to look at her. He gave a short whistle, and four soldiers appeared at either end of the alley. Charlotte stood there, knowing escape was impossible, and waited for them to take her back into custody.



It had all been a trap or a test, but if that were true, did the Resistance still plan to attack the civilians? She couldn't take that chance.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and concentrated on opening herself up to the link. She could see it in her mind, a vastness of shimmering tendrils spreading across the galaxy, ending and exploding into pinpoints of light that released even more tendrils until it looked like an endless sea of fireworks all going off at once.

Confronted with such immensity, she suddenly felt incredibly **insignificant**. It felt like standing up to speak before a crowd of trillions. She swallowed hard, and started.



She poured all her fear, worry, and confusion into the message, watching as the tendrils radiated out from her mind like a wave. First, she explained what was happening on Earth, and then she pleaded for the Collective to **intervene**.

For what felt like a long time, she heard no reply as the soldiers walked her through the town. Then, a solitary voice responded. It radiated power and wisdom as well as the deep sorrow of one who has lived for **eons**.

We cannot.

Charlotte waited for something more, but nothing came. A fiery fury began in her chest.

What? You can't be serious! She was screaming into the link. You claim to be here to save us from ourselves. Well, this seems like a prime moment! How can you stand by and watch all these innocent people die?

You're not seeing the big picture, came the reply. This time she recognized Artie. If you shift your perspective and look at it from a distance, you'll understand why this has to happen. Don't see the individuals. See your species in its entirety now as well as what it could be.

All I see are two sides making terrible decisions, Charlotte said, and innocent people being caught in the middle. If you let this happen, you're just as bad as the Resistance.

And if we stop it, what then?

You'll be heroes, she said.

*For a moment, yes. Then, humans will come to rely on our protection, and the frustrated Resistance will become even more desperate and dangerous, causing endless **escalation** in the cycle of destruction and suffering until you are a refugee species from your own planet.*

Charlotte was quiet. She had seen the exact thing Artie suggested happen on other planets.

Change is painful. We're at a tipping point, and the plan has to unfold in its entirety or the success of the transition will be in jeopardy. Our responsibility is to save your species as a whole and the habitability of the planet. This is the only way.

Charlotte digested the words. She thought of all the civilizations that had destroyed themselves and the countless lives lost because they failed to realize the consequences of their actions. She thought about the innocent people living in the developments.

She realized she couldn't save them.

The aliens were only doing what they thought was right, but she knew it wasn't. There had to be a better way. She would help them and her species find it.

The explosion in the city could be seen from the Resistance compound, many miles away.



Epilogue

After the attacks on the housing developments, the news was filled with images of government raids on Resistance compounds around the globe. One video showed Charlotte being rescued from a makeshift prison. Being the only person ever to have been rescued from both the aliens and the Resistance made her quite a celebrity.

Not long after being freed, Charlotte found herself standing before a crowd of reporters who had assembled at a press conference.

Just breathe, Artie said in her mind. Remember, your species needs people like you, people who will lead and make the tough choices for the betterment of all.

Charlotte nodded to one of the cameras and stepped up to the microphone at the podium.

“Hello everyone,” she began. “I’d like to tell you about my time with both the Resistance and the Collective, but let me start by saying we are all flawed. Through my experiences, I’ve learned that if we focus on a larger perspective and work together, we may just survive the challenging time ahead. We’ll need to mature and evolve as a species, but that’s been the story of life since its beginning. And for the first time in the history of our species, we do not have to do this alone . . .”

Glossary

bipedal (<i>adj.</i>)	having two feet (p. 5)
brainwash (<i>v.</i>)	to change a person's ideas or beliefs using force or persuasion (p. 7)
casualties (<i>n.</i>)	people injured, killed, or missing during a war, accident, or disaster (p. 4)
civilians (<i>n.</i>)	people who are not members of the military or police (p. 12)
collaborators (<i>n.</i>)	people who assist or cooperate with enemy forces in times of war (p. 4)
compatible (<i>adj.</i>)	able to coexist or work together without trouble or conflict (p. 8)
cult (<i>n.</i>)	a group of people who are extremely devoted to a person or idea, often to a dangerous degree (p. 7)
dissipated (<i>v.</i>)	disappeared by spreading out or separating into parts (p. 9)
eons (<i>n.</i>)	very long periods of time that can't be measured or defined (p. 15)
escalation (<i>n.</i>)	an increase in degree or severity (p. 16)
insignificant (<i>adj.</i>)	lacking in importance, meaning, worth, or size (p. 14)
intervene (<i>v.</i>)	to come between or get involved in something, such as a situation or process, to prevent or change the outcome or result (p. 15)
irony (<i>n.</i>)	a series of similar or connected events with an unexpected twist (p. 3)

martyring (<i>v.</i>)	killing a person because of his or her beliefs, resulting in an increase of sympathy or support for his or her cause (p. 6)
MRIs (<i>n.</i>)	physical examinations done with a device that uses a magnetic field to make computer images of the inside of something; magnetic resonance imagings (p. 3)
myriad (<i>adj.</i>)	having or involving an extremely large number of things (p. 5)
perspective (<i>n.</i>)	a person's mental outlook or point of view (p. 15)
propaganda (<i>n.</i>)	false or exaggerated stories or information that is spread in order to influence people or promote a particular viewpoint (p. 4)
proximity (<i>n.</i>)	closeness in space; nearness (p. 5)
sarcasm (<i>n.</i>)	remarks that mean the opposite of what they seem to mean and are intended to make fun of or tease (p. 8)
subterfuge (<i>n.</i>)	the act of using tricks or deceit to reach a goal (p. 5)
tipping point (<i>n.</i>)	the critical point in a process when an important shift or change occurs (p. 16)
transition (<i>v.</i>)	to change from one state, location, or condition to another (p. 6)
unmitigated (<i>adj.</i>)	complete or absolute; not lessened in severity or degree (p. 4)

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A Reading A-Z Level Z2 Leveled Book

Word Count: 2,578

Connections

Writing

If you were Charlotte, what new plan could you create to save the human race? How would that plan be different from the Resistance's plan and the Collective's plan?

Social Studies

Research a civilization that collapsed, such as the Aztec or Roman Empires. Write a report about its culture and what led to its disappearance.

The logo for Reading A-Z features the word "Reading" in a large, bold, red sans-serif font. The letter "A" is stylized with a small sun-like icon above it, consisting of several short yellow lines radiating upwards from behind the letter. To the right of "Reading" is the letters "A-Z" in a smaller, bold, black sans-serif font.

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