

Alien Collective II: The Link

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,377

LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

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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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**Multi
level
Z•Z¹•Z²**

Glossary

Arbor Day (<i>n.</i>)	an informal holiday dedicated to planting and caring for trees (p. 6)
breakthroughs (<i>n.</i>)	important events or advances in knowledge that move something such as technology, science, or medicine forward (p. 8)
clinic (<i>n.</i>)	a place, often part of a hospital, where patients receive medical care (p. 11)
consumption (<i>n.</i>)	the act of getting and using resources or goods, sometimes to the point of depletion or destruction (p. 9)
habitable (<i>adj.</i>)	capable of supporting life (p. 7)
intergalactic (<i>adj.</i>)	relating to or happening between two or more galaxies (p. 9)
nursery (<i>n.</i>)	a place where young plants are grown to be sold or transplanted elsewhere (p. 5)
perspective (<i>n.</i>)	a person's mental outlook or point of view (p. 10)
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)
saplings (<i>n.</i>)	young trees with slender trunks (p. 10)
technology (<i>n.</i>)	the use of scientific knowledge or tools to make or do something (p. 8)
transitions (<i>v.</i>)	changes from one state, location, or condition to another (p. 9)

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Focus Question

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

Words to Know

Arbor Day	nursery
breakthroughs	perspective
clinic	propaganda
consumption	saplings
habitable	technology
intergalactic	transitions

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?

Why was she thinking of escaping? She was safe in the compound, but this room felt more like prison. Maybe it was just some animal instinct to flee when trapped.

She wasn't going anywhere, so she decided to try and sleep. As she lay in bed, she found herself thinking about the information she had picked up from the link. She knew that the Collective had not been involved in the destruction of any of the civilizations. Instead, they had been passive observers, sometimes for a very long time, but never stepping in. She didn't know whether that was worse.

The emotions from the link remained, like echoes of memories, combining incredible frustration and helplessness. Locked in her room in the Resistance compound, it was a feeling she understood all too well.

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Correlation

LEVEL Z1	
Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60

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

The doctor nodded and began her examination, shining lights in Charlotte’s eyes, listening to her chest, poking and prodding without saying a word. 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 was linked to the entire Collective’s experience and could communicate with them, but that could mean 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. Then she heard the door being locked from the outside.

Charlotte wasn’t sure how long she had been in the room. It had no windows and only two doors. She found that she could get out of bed and walk around when Artie wasn’t there. She couldn’t open the door that led outside, though.

The other door led to a small bathroom with a shower. She slept often, and when she woke, food would be waiting on a small shelf in the corner. Sometimes she woke to find herself unable to move, which meant Artie was there for one of their chats.

I remember everything now, Charlotte thought, focusing on Artie. It was the first time she had attempted to communicate through the Collective Link. Her head still hurt, but the pain had gone down enough to think more clearly over the last few . . . days?

Do you now? Artie’s voice appeared in her mind, sounding skeptical.

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

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

Charlotte could not help her excitement at the thought of getting out of the room—maybe she could find a way to escape.

Something that sounded like a chuckle echoed in her mind.

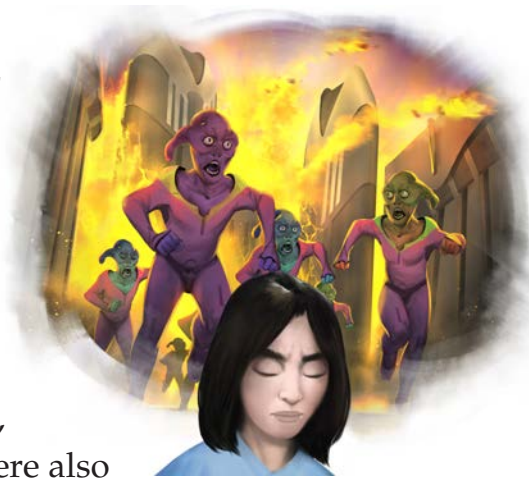
When you leave your room, Artie said, head down the hallway to your right. You'll find me in the observation room at the end.

The door silently slid open as she approached. She squinted against the bright sunlight from the wall of windows on the other side. Beyond the windows, she saw rolling, grass-covered hills dotted with trees and a small city rising up in the distance. It took her a moment to realize that she must be inside the tower that the Resistance had attacked. If only she could get out, she could make her way back to the compound in less than a day.

In the empty hallway, she turned to her left and moved as quickly as she could toward the doorway at the end.

As she approached, the large door opened, but she glimpsed a flash of blue light across the opening. When she pressed her hand against it, she felt a familiar electric tingling. It was as solid as steel. She wouldn't be escaping that way.

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, emotions were also there—pain, fear, anger, and ultimately, terrible sadness. The amount of information being dumped into her brain made her a bit woozy, so she stopped. It was as if she had closed a browser window and her mind was back to normal again.



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

"You must be starving," 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, looking at a chart. "How are you feeling today, Charlotte?" she asked with a fake smile.

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 avalanche of information, but now she felt almost 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 twisted, 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. Suddenly the entire Collective's experience rushed into her mind as if she had opened a computer file. The images and information were crisp, clear, and self-contained.

She turned around and made her way past her room again and down the hallway. She passed a few other small doors that didn't open as the others had. Charlotte wondered if the aliens made other prisoners go through these awful experiments—or whatever they were.

At the end of the hall, she came to another large door that slid open. She reached out with her hand first to make sure she didn't run into another shield, but it passed through easily.

The windows continued around the walls inside the room. To her left, she could still see the hills and grass. Artie was standing with his back to her, still wearing the same red robes. The alien didn't move when she entered, keeping his gaze focused on the bright white room beyond the windows.

As Charlotte drew closer, she saw tier after tier of small black pots filled with dark, healthy-looking soil. Those at the bottom had tiny 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. The species is native to this part of the country, but we made a few changes. The trees now grow a little faster, stay alive longer, 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. The rolling hills stretched into the distance, but the grass ended at a line of burnt trees. The earth beyond it was scorched, and large craters dotted the ground. The destruction ended abruptly in front of the building where the blue shield must have stood.

Nearly fifty humans died 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.

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, the 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 hugged 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 room had polished tiles and light green walls—strangely similar to her room in the Streed. The only real 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.”

There's always a chance of natural transition, yes, but the Collective's assistance greatly increases the chance 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. The loss of any habitable planet is a tragedy.

"So the answer is to surrender, let you take over, and give up our freedom? We 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, human workers exited the tower and began to spread out into the field. Some carried bags of seeds that they scattered in front of them, 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.



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

*You repeat your father's **propaganda** well, Charlotte, but I wonder if you truly believe it.*

"Of course I do," she said. "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.*

Images of destroyed civilizations flashed through Charlotte's mind again. They were jumbled and overwhelming, making it difficult to focus. She tried again and again, but she couldn't point to any evidence that showed 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 big that it contains unimaginable numbers of them. This galaxy alone is home to more than one hundred billion planets similar to your own.*

It's only now, however, 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 is even more advanced. Still, with so many worlds out there, why didn't some of them contact Earth before the Collective?*

Charlotte shook her head and wiped tears from her cheeks, still upset 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 to learn to use them safely and responsibly. **Breakthroughs** in science are extremely dangerous unless a species is mature enough to use them wisely. You've seen many 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 sappy, doesn't it? Really, though, all that is required is that your species stop being so self-centered and think of something beyond yourselves.*

"I've been kidnapped by alien tree huggers," Charlotte groaned.

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

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

*It was unavoidable. As you know, we've seen this happen many times, and while each situation is somewhat different, the end result is not. With your power sources, uncontrolled **consumption**, overpopulation, and complete disregard for the environment, you would have destroyed yourselves in short order. 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 decide? We're free to destroy ourselves if we want."