**The Plant-People**

**By Conrad W. Vaatstra**

**Prologue**

 Before humans were dominant in this world, there were the leaf-people. Tiny humanoid insects, they had hard, black, scaly skin, thin, knobbly limbs, and were, on average, 200 µm (micrometers) tall. Plant-people, also known as *Planta Parva*, lived on nutrients from the leaf veins and cells. There are 3 species of plant people: the Leaf-Dwellers (*Folium parvum*), the Bark-Dwellers (*Parvus cortex incolae*), and the Root-Dwellers (*Radix parva habitatoribus* ). All the species are similar, with slight differences in behavior, skin color, and height. This story is about one particular Leaf-Dweller, named Arok…

**Main Story**

 “Wheeeeeet! Wheeeeet!”

 The Leaf-Dwellers of Athrak City scurried through the catacombs of Athrak into the Meeting Place. Arok was swept along in the rush next to his friend K’zak, their feet hurrying along with many other feet. The shrill whistle of the surface sentry whistled over the crowd. Arok lost sight of K’zak, who had been lagging behind. He tried to slow down and stop, calling out the name of his friend, but the rushing torrent of the crowd pushing him was too strong. He gave up resisting the push after getting multiple insults hurled at him, and decided it would be best to concentrate on pushing towards the sides of the tunnel. The walls, ceiling, and floor were of a light green color, soft and spongy, and were slightly translucent, so you could see the myriads of plant cells in the leaf. Sunlight filtered through the roof, shedding green light into the passageway. Then, dark shapes broke the constant stream of light and descended onto the surface of the leaf. Arok looked up, and then realized why the alarm was called. There were aphids coming!

 The Meeting Place was in the base of the center vein of the leaf of Athrak, and was the core of all life in the leaf-city. Leaf-Dwellers had diverted the flow of water and nutrients around the island in the vein eons ago, and had constructed closed bridges to access the honeycomb of the Place, even though plant-people can live for around 5 hours without breathing. Now, as the aphids started eating the leaves that Athrak and neighboring Kredal inhabited, the Place was the only haven of safety in the whole twig. Arok was about to cross one of the bridges into the Meeting Place, when he stopped.

“What if I brought the Ladybirds to the aphid infested areas? Aphids are brainless. They live to eat, and eat to live, but Ladybirds are one of the most respected and intelligent organisms in the whole tree. They also eat aphids!” he thought.

 He made a decision, albeit slightly rushed by the infuriated Leaf-Dwellers behind him.

Arok jumped into one of the many service shutes for bridge maintenance and slid down into the main current of the nutrient vessel. He sealed his spiracles against the flow of nutrient-enriched water, and settled in for the ride down to the bark of the trunk.

 Arok saw many sights through the cells between the vein and the cities that both scared and fascinated him. He realized that Athrak and Kredal were not the only cities in the Leaf-Dweller territory. Many other towns, villages, and cities were spread around the many twigs and branches of the oak tree that they lived in. Some were whole, with thousands of Leaf-Dwellers in each one, but others were empty and desolate, eaten by aphids and other mindless carnivorous bugs. Arok turned away from these, and soon fell asleep.

 He awoke an hour later by a sudden change from light to total absence of light. He put his hand out and felt the rough, woody surface of the bark encircling the vein. He was now in the trunk of the Father-Tree.

Arok ran his hand along the wall for a while. He felt each different knot and ridge in the phellem of the vessel he was in. He had now passed out of the main vein, and was in an exterior tube running down the trunk. He was now also almost out of air. The offshoot to the Ladybird colony was close. Arok felt his hand slip into a large air-filled hole in the vein. He grabbed the lip with one hand as it slipped almost out of reach. Now came the hard part. He had to pull himself up with his hands against the relentless torrential onslaught of the current of the nutrient-enriched liquid. Arok wrenched himself up and over the edge of the entrance, and opened his spiracles. As he gasped in the sweet air that the hole provided. Arok realized that it was not just a hole. It was a tunnel, and he could hear muffled voices coming from the end of it. He crawled forward, and hit a wall. He sighed with disappointment and flopped down. “I’m just going to die here now, am I?”, he muttered. Then his hand touched a handle on the wall. Filled with excitement, he turned it and pushed against the wall. The door opened, and he fell into open space. The ground was a long way down.

Arok awoke on a short, flat bed roughly hewn into the wall of the bark. A massive bug with a red and black-spotted exoskeleton loomed over him.

“Are you unhurt?”, asked the beetle, with a strange, rasping voice.

Arok coughed, and then asked back, “Who are you?”

“I am Ezligak, the Ruler of the Tribe and the High Elder of the Spotted People. Why are you here? Is there trouble in the upper realm of the Father-Tree?”

Arok got out of the bed-like structure, and drew himself up to his full height. He proclaimed in a loud voice, “I am Arok Oldvine, the son of Darvil, a Leaf-Dweller of the city of Athrak.”

 “Athrak, eh? How goes it there?” Ezligak said, interestedly.

 Arok replied, saying, “There is a horde of aphids attacking the Leaf-People in the upper foliage of the Father-Tree, and drinking the sacred tree-blood.”

The Elder of the Spotted People reared up on its hind limbs and roared in a loud voice, “This is sacrilege! We must not let the devastating hordes of the Mindless Ones consume our Father-Tree. By the Heartwood of the First Tree, they must be destroyed!” Then, while scooping me with one horny claw, he loped into the Meeting Place of the Spotted Ones.

The Place was infested with Lady-birds. They were on the floor, hanging off the walls, and resting on the innumerable ledges in the vast cavern. We were on a large ledge overlooking the Place, obviously the High Elder’s balcony. Ezligak set me down onto the floor, and, turning towards the assembly, raised a strange formation of bark to his mouth. A strange whistling hoot issued through it, and the Place fell silent. He then spoke through the bark thing, which magnified his voice many times over. This is what he said:

“People of the Ladybird City, I have called you together to discuss a very pressing topic. The Father-Tree is being ravaged by a horde of mindless scavengers. The sacred blood of the Tree is being drunk by violators of the Law of the Forest. The people of Athrak City, and the other Leaf-Dweller communities were allied with us in the past, and now here is our chance to renew this alliance. Also, aphids are invaders in this island of peace, and we are the only inhabitants who are able to drive them out. So, People of the Ladybirds, are you with me? Will you help drive these invaders out?”

Resounding cheers rebounded off the walls of the Place as Ezligak finished his speech and bowed. Then, at some unseen signal, every single insect in the Place unfolded its wings and took off up a wide passage at the back of the cavernous room. Arok fired up his wings and took off after them.

 The passageway was very long and narrow, and the air was filled with the sound of a multitude of beating wings. Arok caught up with Ezligak in the vanguard of the army.

 Then, a faint glow filled the tunnel, and after one final corner, Arok took in his first sight of the Outside World. There was green grass below him, and blue sky above him, the expanse interrupted by the spreading foliage of the Father-Tree. Arok followed the stream of Ladybirds upwards towards the interruption, and soon was under the leaves, twisting in and out of the maze of branches, limbs, and twigs. Alighting on a thin twig, Arok then saw his first view of his home from the outside. A simple leaf, Athrak was swarming with aphids, who were tearing and destroying many simple abodes in which Leaf-Dwellers lived. Leaf-People were trying to deter the aphids, using themselves and other uninhabited leaves as bait.

 Ezligak charged at the offending insects, his army behind him, roaring in the Ancient Tongue of the Spotted Ones. “*Al Korun, Lakerlav Aman! Al’Kreadl meiln Vicland!* '' Aphids flew in the terrible onslaught.

 The battle raged over many hours, sometimes the aphids winning, sometimes the Ladybird army taking the lead. The Leaf-People came out and decided to help the Ladybirds by launching tiny, hard spears at the antagonists whenever they had a chance. The dead aphids and Ladybirds fell in a decaying rain back to the forest floor, where scavengers feasted freely on the remains.

 When the last of the aphids had either flown away or been killed, Arok and The High Elder of the Ladybirds flew to the surface of Athrak city, where they were greeted by cheers that echoed around the Tree. The mayor of the City, and the Elder of Athrak’s Place stood out in front of the crowd. Ezligak landed, and, bowing before the mayor and the Elder, rasped, “The aphids have been vanquished, and your city has been freed. Now, the Ladybird colony would like to put forth an offer of alliance before you.”

 The Elder stepped forward, and returned Ezligak’s bow. Then he raised his head and replied, “We would be honored to be allied with you. After all, you did save us from imminent death.” Then Ezligak shook limbs with the Elder and flew off with his army towards the Colony of the Ladybirds. Arok waved goodbye, and watched them fly till they disappeared into the leafy green haze that was the grass. He turned around to go back into the hole that led into the interior of the city when his friend K’zak flew out of it and hugged him. He whispered, “You saved us all.” Then they turned and went down into the leaf-city.

The End