

## “Root and Weed”

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Numerous awards hung on the wall in the large den. They had been strategically placed in that exact location so the morning sunshine of Treminal III hit their golden accents just right. Their owner often ate breakfast in the den and watched them come to life with their ethereal glow.

He was doing so now while letting a steaming cup of caf warm his hands and then his throat. His large black eyes caressed the shining words on the various plaques. *Milin Ba'hon—Redrock Primary School Science Fair Winner. Milin Ba'hon—Treminal Secondary Schools Northwest Regionals Science Champion. Milin Ba'hon—Water Springs University Top Honors Graduate. Milin Ba'hon—Water Springs University Award for Excellence in Botany. Milin Ba'hon—Professional Botanists of Treminal III Up-and-Coming Award.*

There were others of various shapes and sizes, some dealing with the more specialized disciplines of plant pathology, plant ecology and horticulture, but the Bith's gaze skipped over to and lingered longer on one plaque in particular: *Milin Ba'hon—Botanist of the Year*. There were two more identical ones beside it, but this was the one his sharp yet myopic vision had memorized every aspect of, every imperfection and every flawless feature. That microscopic dent in the corner was from when he accidentally hit the plaque against the corner of the podium in his nervousness during the ceremony. This award, like the two identical, more recent ones next to it, was what had secured his status as one of the most well-known and respected beings on his homeworld of Treminal III and subsequently had allowed him to become one of the wealthiest beings in the city of Water Springs, if not on the entire planet. This was no small accomplishment amid the rising anti-alien sentiments growing among Humans in the galaxy because of the Empire. Such a feat might not have been possible anywhere else anymore.

Milin Ba'hon smiled to himself. Life—at least here—was good. It always had been. The pictures on the wall of his meetings throughout the years with influential Treminal citizens and government leaders proved it.

His morning caf finished, he strode from the spacious den to the kitchen, put his mug in the dish washing station and then headed to his work area.

Milin took a deep breath as he entered the office-slash-greenhouse, letting the various aromas fill him up like a second cup of caf. Flora of all sorts made their home here, and the greenhouse area was ablaze in the blossoming colors of Corellian Darkroots, Coruscanti Crevice-Creepers, Duro Starbursts, Kashyyyk Field Wickets, and even Alderaanian Dayglows. Milin had personally brought some of the Dayglow plants here a few weeks before Alderaan was destroyed. In the months that had followed the tragedy, he had made it his personal mission to care for and cultivate what could be some of the only Dayglow plants left in the entire galaxy. He prized them even more than his three identical plaques and was infinitely pleased to see the plants thriving

and multiplying under his care, enough to fill one whole corner of his greenhouse area.

The Bith tended all of the plants, scrutinizing them for any tiny abnormalities and trying to detect any variances in their scents or the smell of the potting soil that could indicate something was amiss. Even the feel of the leaves and the soft sounds they made when blowing air passed over them gave him hints about their health. Satisfied, Milin sat at his desk in the office section of the large room and got to work on the day's research.

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He worked steadily as the comfortable sunlight streaming through the multitude of greenhouse windows gradually shifted position, following its sun on its daily trek across the sky. With a smile, Milin noted that the day had at last faded away into afternoon. He saved his work and shut down his computer console before grabbing some equipment and a light jacket. Afternoons were the best time for field research, and nothing was better than that. Plus, today's field research would be another step closer to solving the challenge he was working on. Field research in pursuit of the remedy to a challenge could be the one thing better than normal, more mundane field research.

Milin stowed his field equipment in his landspeeder and within minutes was on his way. Even after so many years of living there, driving through Water Springs was an activity that he always looked forward to. The residents took great care to brighten the buildings with all different sorts of plants in the windows, on the lawns and along the speeder routes, while the city workers kept the banks of the numerous spring-fed rivers meticulous and the waters clean. The city seemed to outdo itself in natural beauty every single year. It was one of the few places where Milin could look around at the plants and see them for the aesthetically wonderful things they were instead of subconsciously analyzing them by their scientific names and their location near other objects and other plants for best growth rates and mathematically quantifying how much sunlight and water they should get in order to reach their full blooming potential.

A shadow jumped across the nearest group of flowering Bissellanes, and an instant later Milin saw what it belonged to. A formation flight of a handful of starfighters flew directly overhead as Milin drove, and then they disappeared in the distance. They hadn't been exceptionally high, but Milin couldn't see them well. No matter. He knew what they were by the sound and by the faint smell of their engine exhaust: Z-95 Headhunters, part of the planetary military force. They were often called on to defend the planet against pirate raids, and the military enjoyed a well-earned status comparable to professional botany organizations. While Milin respected the military's contributions to society, though, the thought of their weapons and the consequences of having that destructive power always made him uneasy, particularly since Alderaan. He steered clear of discussions of the military whenever he could, and remained as neutral as possible whenever he couldn't. The main saving grace was that Milin had once been told that most of the Z-95's weren't even modified to have hyperdrives, and that suited him just fine. Treminal III had always focused on taking care of itself, both its people and its environment, not dealing with things light-years out of its way in other solar systems.

Plus, Milin had to give the military credit for being easy to work with. Just outside of Water Springs was a huge parcel of land owned by the Treminal III Air and Space Forces. This land was unique in that it contained an exceptionally large number of diverse landscapes and ecosystems for its relatively small size on the planet, the result of a quirky combination of

weather system interfaces with local terrain and tectonic activity. It was a perfect survival training area for all types of different elements for the ASF members.

That mosaic of different environments so close together was also a botanist's dream come true. The military was willing to accommodate scientific requests to use this land, and that's where Milin was headed. It was by far the most convenient place to get the varied field samples he would need to solve the problem posed to him by the Treminal government: a nonnative plant had arrived, likely via a space transport of some kind, and it was killing native plants throughout vastly different environments. Milin was to find a solution, and because the intruder plant grew and multiplied quickly, time was of the essence before it did irreparable damage to the native plants across the world. Milin had stopped watching planetary newscasts lately because the aggressive progress of the intruder plants, informally dubbed Stranglers, was often a featured story. On any other planet that might have been strange, but Milin accepted it as the norm here. He'd long ago fallen into the habit of avoiding the local Holonews when he was working a difficult plant problem.

The Bith drove his landspeeder up to an unattended perimeter gate of the training area. When he had contacted the ASF last night about coming they had told him the compound wouldn't be in use that day and had given him a temporary access code. That access code now opened the gate for Milin when he entered it in the gate's control console, and he drove through.

This area was mostly flat grassland with wildflowers, weeds and streams here and there. He drove along the designated speeder route for ten minutes before he reached his favorite "base camp" spot. He parked, grabbed his gear and then set out on foot to find a sample of the first affected native plant. This one was easy and took only a minute; it was the rest that were a bit farther away. But no matter. The exercise would do him good, and it was a nice afternoon.

Kilometer after kilometer Milin walked deeper into the training area. The grasslands eventually gave way to rocky soil and boulders where only the most hardy plants could survive. Most of the plants that he felt could give him insight about a way to fight the intruder plants would be found here.

Afternoon faded into evening as Milin finished collecting the rocky-area native plant specimens as well as a few Stranglers and began walking to his final target. Only one more native plant to get, and then he could be home for a late supper. He made his way out of the rough landscape and followed the bank of a river into hills which soon became rocky ravines and small canyons carved out by numerous streams and the shifting of tectonic plates. Milin followed a foot trail into one particular shallow ravine, stopped at the bottom to empty his boots of small pebbles and put on his jacket to protect against the dusk insects that liked the taste of Bith blood. The evening was dark and it was even darker in the ravine, so he turned on his glowrod. Milin walked along the bottom of the relatively benign ravine to where he knew a good batch of Mudblossoms grew.

Fifteen minutes later he had collected some Mudblossoms and was on his way back through the ravine toward the foot trail when the loud sound of Headhunter engines filled his ears again and echoed crazily off the walls of the ravine. Milin looked up but could only see a sliver of twilight sky and one or two bright, fuzzy stars that had come out. He continued on even though he was puzzled at the starfighter's presence and its close proximity—it almost sounded like it was nearby and running on repulsors, but with the strange echoes, who knew?

The echoes had just died out when new ones took their place. These new ones, however, belonged to engines or repulsors Milin didn't recognize. The smell of engine exhaust was

different too. These sounds were definitely coming from something flying low and slow, and they cut out a few seconds later. Milin's curiosity was piqued. And besides, if he had gotten incorrect information from the ASF contact and these vehicles were about to start shooting things all around him, he wanted to know.

The scientist stopped at a place where the ravine's walls shortened and were sufficiently craggy for him to possibly climb high enough to get a peek at what was out there. He got out his macrobinoculars, set the rest of his gear down and climbed up a few steps, just barely managing to get an eye over the top of the ravine wall. It was a struggle to both hold onto the wall and get the binocs in place, but without them everything of interest would be nothing but a big blur in the dark.

Milin caught the scent of several Humans and Twi'leks before he was able to find them visually. At last he did, if only for a few seconds due to his awkward position. Two Z-95 Headhunters with some sort of blue markings on them, likely indicators that they belonged to either the squadron at Water Springs Base or the nearby Bluehill Base, sat on the ground with a Human in a Treminal III ASF flightsuit disembarking from each. They were closer than he had expected. Across the rocky clearing from them sat what looked like two Koensayr Y-wings, though Milin had never paid enough attention to military starfighters in general to be certain. Two Twi'leks had climbed out of those and were wearing unfamiliar grey flightsuits definitely not from either Treminal III or IV. The beings began walking toward each other.

That was all Milin could see with his tenuous handhold, and before he could fall he quickly climbed back down to the bottom of the cool, damp ravine where he was out of sight. At least it didn't look like they'd be shooting anything. His curiosity at the strange meeting got the better of him, though, and he strained to hear what was happening through the still air and the odd echoes of the ravine.

"Welcome back," one of the Humans said in a native accent. The voice was just barely discernable at this distance, and Milin concentrated hard on listening. By moving a few steps he found a place where the ravine walls produced a more coherent echo.

"Thanks for having us back." That voice was pitched differently...likely one of the Twi'leks. The accent was foreign. "I'm glad we can have this talk and that you're willing to listen to our request. In what capacity are you here?"

"I only have limited authority, same as before," said the first Human speaker. "I'm mainly the non-comm-waves messenger for my superiors and the government."

"Very well," said the same Twi'lek. Apparently this was a two-being conversation. "We have no desire to endanger you here or strain your hospitality, so I'll get right to it. The Empire is really cracking down on us and aggressively seeking us out and hunting us down. Our starfighter forces are taking a severe beating as a result. We can't thank you enough for how much you've helped in the past, first by lending us those squadrons and then by allowing some of your personnel to be transferred for a more permanent tour of duty with us in the Alliance. I hope the squadron members who have already come back are doing well here with their families and consider their past assistance to our cause to be a positive experience, and we're doing everything we can to give the best care possible to your personnel who are still with us. They're a valuable asset. But now after losing so many of our people in Imperial fights and raids, we're finding that we need additional assistance again, and again on a more permanent basis if at all possible. Can you help?"

Milin's vision started to turn blue at the edges. Was he hearing what he thought he was

hearing? Blood rushed into his head.

The Bith didn't hear anything for a few moments, and then he caught the Human's voice again. "How many did you have in mind, and how 'permanently' are we talking here?"

Normally Milin would have wondered at the strange language interpretations of Humans, but he was too consumed by eavesdropping on the conversation to do so now.

"Whatever you can spare for as long as you can spare it," the Twi'lek replied. "If we can do another transfer for a whole tour of duty or longer like before, that would be most appreciated."

"How soon?"

"As soon as you can arrange it."

There was another bout of silence. "We might be able to work something out. It'll be hard to do another permanent transfer group without any leaks to the public or the Empire, but I'll pass along your request. Is there anything else you want me to tell my superiors?"

"No," said the Twi'lek, "that's all. When you have your answer either way, you know how to get in touch."

"Yes," the Human said. "And nothing personal or anything, but I hope the next time one of these face-to-face meetings is needed, maybe one of our pilots could come along with you. Some of them haven't been back for a while, and I'd like to at least see them again and make sure they're all right. We miss them around here."

"We were hoping to arrange that, as I'm certain they're just as anxious to come back for a visit, but the locations and timing just didn't work out this time."

"I understand."

"On behalf of the Alliance, thank you." After the Twi'lek said this, there was no more discussion. A minute later the various repulsorlifts sounded into being, the engines throttled up and flew away. The world was silent again except for the fading echoes off the ravine walls.

Milin simply stood there in the dark. The scientific mind that could easily comprehend the intricate workings of cell multiplication in plant growth could not wrap itself around what he had just witnessed.

"How? When? When did this happen? How could I have not known about something like this?" Milin whispered in a strained voice to the warm Treminal air. "There must be an explanation for this. A reasonable explanation. It's a small, rogue group within the military who's associating with the Rebellion. Not the—the *squadrons* he mentioned. Or the whole military. Or the civilian government... This planet wouldn't do something like that. This planet's not like that. It wouldn't be so foolish as to fight against the Empire, even in secret..."

The warm air suddenly seemed thick and muggy. For lack of anything else to focus on in the dark, Milin felt his gaze drop down to his gear. Nestled safely inside was the sample container with the Stranglers he had gotten a specimen of, the intruder plant that had arrived from another planet and was damaging the world he loved. In addition to that, on top of the pile of gear were the Mudblossoms Milin had collected and had been in the process of putting in containers when the starfighters had landed. He slowly reached down and picked one up.

He scrutinized the details of the Mudblossom, hoping to distract himself from the imagined implications of what he had heard. Milin's sharp eyes traced the stem, the leaf patterns, the veins, the flowers; he noticed how each aspect of the native plant had directly evolved to survive in the unique environment of Treminal III: its sunlight, its air composition, its moisture levels.

And then all Milin could see in his hand was an Alderaanian Dayglow.  
The plant fell out of his limp grasp and floated to the ground.

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*The End*

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