

# Food for Thought

by R. K. Wigal

It felt as if he were being stung by thousands of tiny mosquitos. When the Chief Physician looked down at his arm, he saw nothing. But the pain was still there. He quickly took out a hypo and injected an antihistamine into his bloodstream. Just then, the rest of the landing party started feeling it, so Dr. Benjamin Carr hurriedly injected them. His medscan readings showed nothing unusual. Then he said, "Away mission's over!" We're beaming back to the ship until I can get a handle on this, and then fix it!" He then activated his mincom, "Carr to Ranger! We have a medical problem!"

"Crane here, do you have an emergency?"

"No, Commander. At least not yet. But I want all five of us teleported directly to the Infirmary and once we're on board, I want a level ten force field placed around it. I'll fill you in later."

"Consider it done, Doc!"

Carr turned to the others and said, "I need you to bring whatever samples you gathered with you."

Once in the Infirmary, Carr asked, "How's the pain?" He already knew the answer.

Zoologist Karen Ziegler answered first, "It's only in the arms and legs, but it really hurts, Doc!" The others said much the same. Botanist Carl Stakely said "Ben, I think it's getting worse." Carr looked at the others quizzically. They shook their heads.

"I'm going to take blood and skin cell samples," the doctor said. He then drew blood from the four, from himself, and he followed by taking skin scrapings.

"Now, who brought what from the planet?"

Zoologist Karen Ziegler responded, "I brought some very nice vid-recs of animal tracks I'd never seen before."

Geologist Andros Petrov said, "I picked up a few good mineral samples, but nothing exotic."

Geoffrey Knowles said that his archeological search was fruitless. "I found no signs of civilized habitation whatsoever, Doctor, so I brought nothing back."

Botanist Carl Stakely, starting to grimace from the worsening pain, said that he had uprooted and potted half a dozen unique looking plant specimens and pointed to them.

"Understood. Any ideas before I get started?" the chief physician asked the group. Shrugs and shaken heads were the only responses he received. "Very well," he said.

Dr. Carr turned and stepped into the adjoining room, a medical lab, small, yet laden with state of the art diagnostic equipment and research facilities. He examined the minerals visually first, looking closely at every square millimeter of each with a magnifier. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. He chipped several tiny fragments from each pebble sized sample, then set the minerals aside. He then began looking over each plant. The plants were either sumac, fern or ivy. All were lush green. None had flowers or seed pods. They were cool to the touch. They exhibited nothing unusual. As carefully as he could, he took cell scrapings from the leaves and stalks of each plant. Then, he prepared a number of sterile vials and placed into each a minute portion of the blood, skin-cell, mineral, plant-leaf and plant-stem samples. He placed the vials into receptacles inside the particle analyzer, and then turned it on. "Well now, let's see what secrets you can reveal to us," he mused aloud.

Dr. Carr was about to go to his desk and await the results of the analysis when he noticed that the pain had begun to reassert itself. He looked again at the mineral samples. There was nothing

different about them. When he touched the plants, he noticed that one of them was warmer to the touch than it had been earlier. *I wonder,* he thought. He spoke into his mincom, "Carr to Minara."

"Minara here," a feminine voice with a barely noticeable accent responded. "What can I do for you, Doctor?"

"Can you come to the med lab please? I need to take advantage of your special expertise."

"I'll be right there."

Petite, telepathic Doctor of Science Valea Minara, originally from the planet Danar, walked into the med lab a few minutes later. Good evening, Ben. What exactly do you need?

"Hello, Valea. I need to get your... sense... of something. I have a hunch...I just need your confirmation."

Valea walked around the lab briefly, stopping near the plant samples. "I see what you mean, Ben. Your intuition is correct."

"Thank you, Valea. I owe you one."

Valea Minara left the lab just as the particle analyzer's chime sounded. Dr. Carr looked over the data in its readout. *That explains a lot,* he thought to himself. *The P.A. always comes through.*

Returning to the infirmary, Dr. Carr once again addressed the group. The pain, he said, is caused by a simple molecule that enters the bloodstream through the skin and clamps itself onto a pain generating nerve. Its size makes it extremely difficult to detect and nearly impossible to combat. It's harder to cure than a virus. These molecules are a defense mechanism of one or more of the plant species. When pestered by an animal...or, in our case, a human, the plant emits the molecules which attack the pest. And it appears," he told Stakely, "that you are still being attacked. To be on the safe side, we are returning all plants and minerals to the surface. The Minerals are probably benign, but we're not taking any chances. Carl, I'll be taking your notes. You're in no condition to go anywhere."

Dr. Carr and Andros Petrov returned to the planet's surface. Petrov returned each mineral to the exact spot where he had found it. Dr. Carr, using Stakely's notes, replanted every floral specimen in its original location. The two then returned to the ship.

Mission Commander Crane, Dr. Carr and the other away team members met for a debriefing an hour later. All symptoms of pain had vanished. Dr. Carr informed the mission commander and the others as to what had occurred. Then he added, "Theo, I believe, and Dr. Minara agrees with me, that the plant that fires the molecules also communicates with them remotely. Once the plants were returned to their habitat, the molecules released their grip...but not until then."

Theo Crane cocked an eyebrow, "Telepathic plants? Hardly seems possible, and doesn't seem at all believable. Nevertheless, Doctor, your findings do give credence to the idea. I daresay it's an interesting concept and it certainly warrants additional study. Let's look into it further...carefully!"