

ALIEN EARTH

by Edmond Hamilton (1904-1977)

Thrilling Wonder Stories, April

Isaac mentions that Edmond Hamilton was known as the “Universe-saver,” but he was also known to “wreck” a few in his day. Indeed, he was (and is, thank goodness) so well known for his space opera that his fine work in other areas of science fiction is not nearly as famous as it ought to be.

*“Alien Earth” is an excellent example of this relative obscurity, a wonderful, moody story that is science fiction at its finest. Amazingly, it has only been reprinted twice—in *The Best of Edmond Hamilton* (1977) and in the anthology *Alien Earth and Other Stories* (1969). It is a pleasure to reprint it again.—M.H.G.*

(There are “great dyings” in the course of biological evolution, periods when in a comparatively short interval of time, a large fraction of the species of living things on Earth die. The most recent example was the period at the end of the Cretaceous, 65,000,000 years ago.

*I have often thought there are also “great dyings” in the history of science fiction, periods when large percentages of the established science fiction writers stopped appearing. The most dramatic example came in 1938, when John Campbell became editor of *Astounding* and introduced an entirely new stable of writers, replacing the old.*

Some old-timers survived, of course (even as some species always survived the biological “great dyings”). To me, one of the most remarkable survivors was Edmond Hamilton. He was one of the great stars of the pre-Campbell era, so grandiose in his plots that he was known as the “Universe-saver.” And yet he was able to narrow his focus and survive, whereas many others who seemed to require a smaller re-adaptation could not do so. In “Alien Earth” there is no Universe being saved; there is only a close look at the world of plants.—I.A.)

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CHAPTER 1

SLOWED-DOWN LIFE

The dead man was standing in a little moonlit clearing in the jungle when Farris found him.

He was a small swart man in white cotton, a typical Laos tribesman of this Indo-China hinterland. He stood without support, eyes open, staring unwinkingly ahead, one foot slightly raised. And he was not breathing.

“But he can’t be dead!” Farris exclaimed. “Dead men don’t stand around in the jungle.”

He was interrupted by Piang, his guide. That cocksure little Annamese had been losing his impudent self-sufficiency ever since they had wandered off the trail. And the motionless, standing dead man had completed his demoralization.

Ever since the two of them had stumbled into this grove of silk-cotton trees and almost run into the dead man, Piang had been goggling in a scared way at the still unmoving figure. Now he burst out volubly:

“The man is *hunati!* Don’t touch him! We must leave here—we have strayed into a bad part of the jungle!”

Farris didn’t budge. He had been a teak-hunter for too many years to be entirely skeptical of the superstitions of Southeast Asia. But, on the other hand, he felt a certain responsibility.

“If this man isn’t really dead, then he’s in bad shape some-how and needs help,” he declared.

“No, no!” Piang insisted. “He is *hunati!* Let us leave here quickly!”

Pale with fright, he looked around the moonlit grove. They were on a low plateau where the jungle was monsoon-forest rather than rain-forest. The big silk-cotton and ficus trees were less choked with brush and creepers here, and they could see along dim forest aisles to gigantic distant banyans that loomed like dark lords of the silver silence.

Silence. There was too much of it to be quite natural. They could faintly hear the usual clatter of birds and monkeys from down in the lowland thickets, and the cough of a tiger echoed from the Laos foothills. But the thick forest here on the plateau was hushed.

Farris went to the motionless, staring tribesman and gently touched his thin brown wrist. For a few moments, he felt no pulse. Then he caught its throb—an incredibly slow beating.

“About one beat every two minutes,” Farris muttered. “How the devil can he keep living?”

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He watched the man’s bare chest. It rose—but so slowly that his eye could hardly detect the motion. It remained expanded for minutes. Then, as slowly, it fell again.

He took his pocket-light and flashed it into the tribesman’s eyes.

There was no reaction to the light, not at first. Then, slowly, the eyelids crept down and closed, and stayed closed, and finally crept open again.

“A wink—but a hundred times slower than normal!” Farris exclaimed. “Pulse, respiration, reactions—they’re all a hundred times slower. The man has either suffered a shock, or been drugged.”

Then he noticed something that gave him a little chill.

The tribesman’s eyeball seemed to be turning with infinite slowness toward him. And the man’s raised foot was a little higher now. As though he were walking—but walking at a pace a hundred times slower than normal.

The thing was eery. There came something more eery. A sound—the sound of a small stick cracking.

Piang exhaled breath in a sound of pure fright, and pointed off into the grove. In the moonlight Farris saw.

There was another tribesman standing a hundred feet away. He, too, was motionless. But his body was bent forward in the attitude of a runner suddenly frozen. And beneath his foot, the stick had cracked.

“They worship the great ones, by the Change!” said the Annamese in a hoarse undertone. “We must not interfere!”

That decided Farris. He had, apparently, stumbled on some sort of

weird jungle rite. And he had had too much experience with Asiatic natives to want to blunder into their private religious mysteries.

His business here in easternmost Indo-China was teak-hunting. It would be difficult enough back in this wild hinterland without antagonizing the tribes. These strangely dead-alive men, what-ever drug or compulsion they were suffering from, could not be in danger if others were near.

“We’ll go on,” Farris said shortly.

Piang led hastily down the slope of the forested plateau. He went through the brush like a scared deer, till they hit the trail again.

“This is it—the path to the Government station,” he said, in great relief. “We must have lost it back at the ravine. I have not been this far back in Laos, many times.”

Farris asked, “Piang, what is *hunati*? This Change that you were talking about?”

The guide became instantly less voluble. “It is a rite of worship.” He added, with some return of his cocksureness, “These tribesmen are very ignorant. They have not been to mission school, as I have.”

“Worship of what?” Farris asked. “The great ones, you said. Who are they?”

Piang shrugged and lied readily. “I do not know. In all the great forest, there are men who can become *hunati*, it is said. How, I do not know.”

Farris pondered, as he tramped onward. There had been some-thing uncanny about those tribesmen. It had been almost a suspension of animation—but not quite. Only an incredible slow-ing down.

What could have caused it? And what, possibly, could be the purpose of it?

“I should think,” he said, “that a tiger or snake would make short work of a man in that frozen condition.”

Piang shook his head vigorously. “No. A man who is *hunati* is safe—at least, from beasts. No beast would touch him.”

Farris wondered. Was that because the extreme motionlessness

made the beasts ignore them? He supposed that it was some kind of fear-ridden nature-worship. Such animistic beliefs were common in this part of the world. And it was small wonder, Farris thought a little grimly. Nature, here in the tropical forest, wasn't the smiling goddess of temperate lands. It was something, not to be loved, but to be feared.

He ought to know! He had had two days of the Laos jungle since leaving the upper Mekong, when he had expected that one would take him to the French Government botanic survey station that was his goal.

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He brushed stinging winged ants from his sweating neck, and wished that they had stopped at sunset. But the map had showed them but a few miles from the Station. He had not counted on Piang losing the trail. But he should have, for it was only a wretched track that wound along the forested slope of the plateau.

The hundred-foot ficus, dyewood and silk-cotton trees smothered the moonlight. The track twisted constantly to avoid impenetrable bamboo-hells or to ford small streams, and the tangle of creepers and vines had a devilish deftness at tripping one in the dark.

Farris wondered if they had lost their way again. And he wondered not for the first time, why he had ever left America to go into teak.

"That is the Station," said Piang suddenly, in obvious relief.

Just ahead of them on the jungled slope was a flat ledge. Light shone there, from the windows of a rambling bamboo bungalow.

Farris became conscious of all his accumulated weariness, as he went the last few yards. He wondered whether he could get a decent bed here, and what kind of chap this Berreau might be who had chosen to bury himself in such a Godforsaken post of the botanical survey.

The bamboo house was surrounded by tall, graceful dyewoods. But the moonlight showed a garden around it, enclosed by a low sappan hedge.

A voice from the dark veranda reached Farris and startled him. It startled him because it was a girl's voice, speaking in French.

"Please, Andre! Don't go again! It is madness!"

A man's voice rapped harsh answer, "*Lys, tais-toi! Je reviendrai—*"

Farris coughed diplomatically and then said up to the darkness of the veranda, "Monsieur Berreau?"

There was a dead silence. Then the door of the house was swung open so that light spilled out on Farris and his guide.

By the light, Farris saw a man of thirty, bareheaded, in whites—a thin, rigid figure. The girl was only a white blur in the gloom.

He climbed the steps. "I suppose you don't get many visitors. My name is Hugh Farris. I have a letter for you, from the Bureau at Saigon."

There was a pause. Then, "If you will come inside, M'sieu Farris—"

In the lamplit, bamboo-walled living room, Farris glanced quickly at the two.

Berreau looked to his experienced eye like a man who had stayed too long in the tropics—his blond handsomeness tarnished by a corroding climate, his eyes too feverishly restless.

"My sister, Lys," he said, as he took the letter Farris handed.

Farris' surprise increased. A wife, he had supposed until now. Why should a girl under thirty bury herself in this wilderness?

He wasn't surprised that she looked unhappy. She might have been a decently pretty girl, he thought, if she didn't have that woebegone anxious look.

"Will you have a drink?" she asked him. And then, glancing with swift anxiety at her brother, "You'll not be going now, Andre?"

Berreau looked out at the moonlit forest, and a queer, hungry tautness showed his cheekbones in a way Farris didn't like. But the Frenchman turned back.

"No, Lys. And drinks, please. Then tell Ahra to care for his guide."

He read the letter swiftly, as Farris sank with a sigh into a rattan chair. He looked up from it with troubled eyes.

“So you come for teak?”

Farris nodded. “Only to spot and girdle trees. They have to stand a few years then before cutting, you know.”

Berreau said, “The Commissioner writes that I am to give you every assistance. He explains the necessity of opening up new teak cuttings.”

He slowly folded the letter. It was obvious, Farris thought, that the man did not like it, but had to make the best of orders.

“I shall do everything possible to help,” Berreau promised. “You’ll want a native crew, I suppose. I can get one for you.” Then a queer look filmed his eyes. “But there are some forests here that are impracticable for lumbering. I’ll go into that later.”

Farris, feeling every moment more exhausted by the long tramp, was grateful for the rum and soda Lys handed him.

“We have a small extra room—I think it will be comfortable,” she murmured.

He thanked her. “I could sleep on a log, I’m so tired. My muscles are as stiff as though I were *hunati* myself.”

Berreau’s glass dropped with a sudden crash.

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CHAPTER 2

SORCERY OF SCIENCE

Ignoring the shattered glass, the young Frenchman strode quickly toward Farris.

“What do you know of *hunati*?” he asked harshly,

Farris saw with astonishment that the man’s hands were shaking.

“I don’t know anything except what we saw in the forest. We came upon a man standing in the moonlight who looked dead, and wasn’t. He just

seemed incredibly slowed down. Piang said he was *hunati*.”

A flash crossed Berreau’s eyes. He exclaimed, “I knew the Rite would be called! And the others are there—”

He checked himself. It was as though the unaccustomedness of strangers had made him for a moment forget Farris’ presence.

Lys’ blonde head drooped. She looked away from Farris.

“You were saying?” the American prompted.

But Berreau had tightened up. He chose his words now. “The Laos tribes have some queer beliefs, M’sieu Farris. They’re a little hard to understand.”

Farris shrugged. “I’ve seen some queer Asian witchcraft, in my time. But this is unbelievable!”

“It is science, not witchcraft,” Berreau corrected. “Primitive science, born long ago and transmitted by tradition. That man you saw in the forest was under the influence of a chemical not found in our pharmacopeia, but nonetheless potent.”

“You mean that these tribesmen have a drug that can slow the life-process to that incredibly slow tempo?” Farris asked skeptically. “One that modern science doesn’t know about?”

“Is that so strange? Remember, M’sieu Farris, that a century ago an old peasant woman in England was curing heart-disease with foxglove, before a physician studied her cure and discovered digitalis.”

“But why on earth would even a Laos tribesman want to live so much *slower*?” Farris demanded.

“Because,” Berreau answered, “they believe that in that state they can commune with something vastly greater than themselves.”

Lys interrupted. “M’sieu Farris must be very weary. And his bed is ready.”

Farris saw the nervous fear in her face, and realized that she wanted to end this conversation.

He wondered about Berreau, before he dropped off to sleep. There was something odd about the chap. He had been too excited about this *hunati* business.

Yet that was weird enough to upset anyone, that incredible and uncanny slowing-down of a human being's life-tempo. "To commune with something vastly greater than themselves," Berreau had said.

What gods were so strange that a man must live a hundred times slower than normal, to commune with them?

Next morning, he breakfasted with Lys on the broad veranda. The girl told him that her brother had already gone out.

"He will take you later today to the tribal village down in the valley, to arrange for your workers," she said.

Farris noted the faint unhappiness still in her face. She looked silently at the great, green ocean of forest that stretched away below this plateau on whose slope they were.

"You don't like the forest?" he ventured.

"I hate it," she said. "It smothers one, here."

Why, he asked, didn't she leave? The girl shrugged.

"I shall, soon. It is useless to stay. Andre will not go back with me."

She explained. "He has been here five years too long. When he didn't return to France, I came out to bring him. But he won't go. He has ties here now."

Again, she became abruptly silent. Farris discreetly refrained from asking her what ties she meant. There might be an Annamese woman in the background—though Berreau didn't look that type.

The day settled down to the job of being stickily tropical, and the hot still hours of the morning wore on. Farris, sprawling in a chair and getting a welcome rest, waited for Berreau to return.

He didn't return. And as the afternoon waned, Lys looked more and more worried.

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An hour before sunset, she came out onto the veranda, dressed in slacks and jacket.

“I am going down to the village—I’ll be back soon,” she told Farris.

She was a poor liar. Farris got to his feet. “You’re going after your brother. Where is he?”

Distress and doubt struggled in her face. She remained silent.

“Believe me, I want to be a friend,” Farris said quietly. “Your brother is mixed up in something here, isn’t he?”

She nodded, white-faced. “It’s why he wouldn’t go back to France with me. He can’t bring himself to leave. It’s like a horrible fascinating vice.”

“What is?”

She shook her head. “I can’t tell you. Please wait here.”

He watched her leave, and then realized she was not going down the slope but up it—up toward the top of the forested plateau.

He caught up to her in quick strides. “You can’t go up into that forest alone, in a blind search for him.”

“It’s not a blind search. I think I know where he is,” Lys whispered. “But you should not go there. The tribesmen wouldn’t like it!”

Farris instantly understood. “That big grove up on top of the plateau, where we found the *hunati* natives?”

Her unhappy silence was answer enough. “Go back to the bungalow,” he told her. “I’ll find him.”

She would not do that. Farris shrugged, and started forward. “Then we’ll go together.”

She hesitated, then came on. They went up the slope of the plateau, through the forest.

The westering sun sent spears and arrows of burning gold through

chinks in the vast canopy of foliage under which they walked. The solid green of the forest breathed a rank, hot exhalation. Even the birds and monkeys were stifledly quiet at this hour.

“Is Berreau mixed up in that queer *hunati* rite?” Farris asked.

Lys looked up as though to utter a quick denial, but then dropped her eyes.

“Yes, in a way. His passion for botany got him interested in it. Now he’s involved.”

Farris was puzzled. “Why should botanical interest draw a man to that crazy drug-rite or whatever it is?”

She wouldn’t answer that. She walked in silence until they reached the top of the forested plateau. Then she spoke in a whisper.

“We must be quiet now. It will be bad if we are seen here.”

The grove that covered the plateau was pierced by horizontal bars of red sunset light. The great silk-cottons and ficus trees were pillars supporting a vast cathedral-nave of darkening green.

A little way ahead loomed up those huge, monster banyans he had glimpsed before in the moonlight. They dwarfed all the rest, towering bulks that were infinitely ancient and infinitely majestic.

Farris suddenly saw a Laos tribesman, a small brown figure, in the brush ten yards ahead of him. There were two others, farther in the distance. And they were all standing quite still, facing away from him.

They were *hunati*, he knew. In that queer state of slowed-down life, that incredible retardation of the vital processes.

Farris felt a chill. He muttered over his shoulder, “You had better go back down and wait.”

“No,” she whispered. “There is Andre.”

He turned, startled. Then he too saw Berreau.

His blond head bare, his face set and white and masklike, standing frozenly beneath a big wild-fig a hundred feet to the right.

Hunati!

Farris had expected it, but that didn't make it less shocking. It wasn't that the tribesmen mattered less as human beings. It was just that he had talked with a normal Berreau only a few hours before. And now, to see him like this!

Berreau stood in a position ludicrously reminiscent of the old-time "living statues." One foot was slightly raised, his body bent a little forward, his arms raised a little.

Like the frozen tribesmen ahead, Berreau was facing toward the inner recesses of the grove, where the giant banyans loomed.

Farris touched his arm. "Berreau, you have to snap out of this."

"It's no use to speak to him," whispered the girl. "He can't hear."

No, he couldn't hear. He was living at a tempo so low that no ordinary sound could make sense to his ears. His face was a rigid mask, lips slightly parted to breathe, eyes fixed ahead. Slowly, slowly, the lids crept down and veiled those staring eyes and then crept open again in the infinitely slow wink. Slowly, slowly, his slightly raised left foot moved down toward the ground.

Movement, pulse, breathing—all a hundred times slower than normal. Living, but not in a human way—not in a human way at all.

Lys was not so stunned as Farris was. He realized later that she must have seen her brother like this, before.

"We must take him back to the bungalow, somehow," she murmured. "I *can't* let him stay out here for many days and nights, again!"

Farris welcomed the small practical problem that took his thoughts for a moment away from this frozen, standing horror.

"We can rig a stretcher, from our jackets," he said. "I'll cut a couple of poles."

The two bamboos, through the sleeves of the two jackets, made a makeshift stretcher which they laid upon the ground.

Farris lifted Berreau. The man's body was rigid, muscles locked in an effort no less strong because it was infinitely slow.

He got the young Frenchman down on the stretcher, and then looked at the girl. "Can you help carry him? Or will you get a native?"

She shook her head. "The tribesmen mustn't know of this. Andre isn't heavy."

He wasn't. He was light as though wasted by fever, though the sickened Farris knew that it wasn't any fever that had done it.

Why should a civilized young botanist go out into the forest and partake of a filthy primitive drug of some kind that slowed him down to a frozen stupor? It didn't make sense.

Lys bore her share of their living burden through the gathering twilight, in stolid silence. Even when they put Berreau down at intervals to rest, she did not speak.

It was not until they reached the dark bungalow and had put him down on his bed, that the girl sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

Farris spoke with a rough encouragement he did not feel. "Don't get upset. He'll be all right now. I'll soon bring him out of this."

She shook her head. "No, you must not attempt that! He must come out of it by himself. And it will take many days."

The devil it would, Farris thought. He had teak to find, and he needed Berreau to arrange for workers.

Then the dejection of the girl's small figure got him. He patted her shoulder.

"All right, I'll help you take care of him. And together, we'll pound some sense into him and make him go back home. Now you see about dinner."

She lit a gasoline lamp, and went out. He heard her calling the servants.

He looked down at Berreau. He felt a little sick, again. The Frenchman lay, eyes staring toward the ceiling. He was living, breathing—and yet his

retarded life-tempo cut him off from Farris as effectually as death would.

No, not quite. Slowly, so slowly that he could hardly detect the movement, Berreau's eyes turned toward Farris' figure.

Lys came back into the room. She was quiet, but he was getting to know her better, and he knew by her face that she was startled.

"The servants are gone! Ahra, and the girls—and your guide. They must have seen us bring Andre in."

Farris understood. "They left because we brought back a man who's *hunati*?"

She nodded. "All the tribespeople fear the rite. It's said there's only a few who belong to it, but they're dreaded."

Farris spared a moment to curse softly the vanished Annamese. "Piang would bolt like a scared rabbit, from something like this. A sweet beginning for my job here."

"Perhaps you had better leave," Lys said uncertainly. Then she added contradictorily, "No, I can't be heroic about it! Please stay!"

"That's for sure," he told her. "I can't go back down river and report that I shirked my job because of—"

He stopped, for she wasn't listening to him. She was looking past him, toward the bed.

Farris swung around. While they two had been talking, Berreau had been moving. Infinitely slowly—but moving.

His feet were on the floor now. He was getting up. His body straightened with a painful, dragging slowness, for many minutes.

Then his right foot began to rise almost imperceptibly from the floor. He was starting to walk, only a hundred times slower than normal.

He was starting to walk toward the door.

Lys' eyes had a yearning pity in them. "He is trying to go back up to the forest. He will try so long as he is *hunati*."

Farris gently lifted Berreau back to the bed. He felt a cold dampness on his forehead.

What was there up there that drew worshippers in a strange trance of slowed-down life?

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CHAPTER 3

UNHOLY LURE

He turned to the girl and asked, "How long will he stay in this condition?"

"A long time," she answered heavily. "It may take weeks for the *hunati* to wear off."

Farris didn't like the prospect, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"All right, we'll take care of him. You and I."

Lys said, "One of us will have to watch him, all the time. He will keep trying to go back to the forest."

"You've had enough for a while," Farris told her. "I'll watch him tonight."

Farris watched. Not only that night but for many nights. The days went into weeks, and the natives still shunned the house, and he saw nobody except the pale girl and the man who was living in a different way than other humans lived.

Berreau didn't change. He didn't seem to sleep, nor did he seem to need food or drink. His eyes never closed, except in that infinitely slow blinking.

He didn't sleep, and he did not quit moving. He was always moving, only it was in that weird, utterly slow-motion tempo that one could hardly see.

Lys had been right. Berreau wanted to go back to the forest. He might be living a hundred times slower than normal, but he was obviously still

conscious in some weird way, and still trying to go back to the hushed, forbidden forest up there where they had found him.

Farris wearied of lifting the statue-like figure back into bed, and with the girl's permission tied Berreau's ankles. It did not make things much better. It was even more upsetting, in a way, to sit in the lamplit bedroom and watch Berreau's slow struggles for freedom.

The dragging slowness of each tiny movement made Farris' nerves twitch to see. He wished he could give Berreau some sedative to keep him asleep, but he did not dare to do that.

He had found, on Berreau's forearm, a tiny incision stained with sticky green. There were scars of other, old incisions near it. Whatever crazy drug had been injected into the man to make him *hunati* was unknown. Farris did not dare try to counteract its effect.

Finally, Farris glanced up one night from his bored perusal of an old *L'Illustration* and then jumped to his feet.

Berreau still lay on the bed, but he had just winked. Had winked with normal quickness, and not that slow, dragging blink.

"Berreau!" Farris said quickly. "Are you all right now? Can you hear me?"

Berreau looked up at him with a level, unfriendly gaze. "I can hear you. May I ask why you meddled?"

It took Farris aback. He had been playing nurse so long that he had unconsciously come to think of the other as a sick man who would be grateful to him. He realized now that Berreau was coldly angry, not grateful.

The Frenchman was untying his ankles. His movements were shaky, his hands trembling, but he stood up normally.

"Well?" he asked.

Farris shrugged. "Your sister was going up there after you. I helped her bring you back. That's all."

Berreau looked a little startled. "Lys did that? But it's a breaking of the Rite! It can mean trouble for her!"

Resentment and raw nerves made Farris suddenly brutal. "Why should you worry about Lys now, when you've made her wretched for months by your dabbling in native wizardries?"

Berreau didn't retort angrily, as he had expected. The young Frenchman answered heavily.

"It's true. I've done that to Lys."

Farris exclaimed, "Berreau, why do you do it? Why this unholy business of going *hunati*, of living a hundred times slower? What can you gain by it?"

The other man looked at him with haggard eyes. "By doing it, I've entered an alien world. A world that exists around us all our lives, but that we never live in or understand at all."

"What world?"

"The world of green leaf and root and branch," Berreau answered. "The world of plant life, which we can never comprehend because of the difference between its life-tempo and our life-tempo."

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Farris began dimly to understand. "You mean, this *hunati* change makes you live at the same tempo as plants?"

Berreau nodded. "Yes. And that simple difference in life-tempo is the doorway into an unknown, incredible world."

"But how?"

The Frenchman pointed to the half-healed incision on his bare arm. "The drug does it. A native drug, that slows down metabolism, heart-action, respiration, nerve-messages, everything.

"Chlorophyll is its basis. The green blood of plant-life, the complex chemical that enables plants to take their energy direct from sunlight. The natives prepare it directly from grasses, by some method of their own."

"I shouldn't think," Farris said incredulously, "that chloro-phyll could have any effect on an animal organism."

“Your saying that,” Berreau retorted, “shows that your bio-chemical knowledge is out of date. Back in March of Nineteen Forty-Eight, two Chicago chemists engaged in mass production or extraction of chlorophyll, announced that their injection of it into dogs and rats seemed to prolong life greatly by altering the oxidation capacity of the cells.

“Prolong life greatly—yes! But it prolongs it, by slowing it down! A tree lives longer than a man, because it doesn’t live so fast. You can make a man live as long—*and as slowly*—as a tree, by injecting the right chlorophyll compound into his blood.”

Farris said, “That’s what you meant, by saying that primitive peoples sometimes anticipate modern scientific discoveries?”

Berreau nodded. “This chlorophyll *hunati* solution may be an age-old secret. I believe it’s always been known to a few among the primitive forest-folk of the world.”

He looked somberly past the American. “Tree-worship is as old as the human race. The Sacred Tree of Sumeria, the groves of Dodona, the oaks of the Druids, the tree Ygdrasil of the Norse, even our own Christmas Tree—they all stem from primi-tive worship of that other, alien kind of life with which we share Earth.

“I think that a few secret worshippers have always known how to prepare the chlorophyll drug that enabled them to attain complete communion with that other kind of life, by living at the same slow rate for a time.”

Farris stared. “But how did *you* get taken into this queer secret worship?”

The other man shrugged. “The worshippers were grateful to me, because I had saved the forests here from possible death.”

He walked across to the corner of the room that was fitted as a botanical laboratory, and took down a test-tube. It was filled with dusty, tiny spores of a leprous, gray-green color.

“This is the Burmese Blight, that’s withered whole great forests down south of the Mekong. A deadly thing, to tropical trees. It was starting to work up into this Laos country, but I showed the tribes how to stop it. The secret *hunati* sect made me one of them, in reward.”

“But I still can’t understand why an educated man like you would want to join such a crazy mumbo-jumbo,” Farris said.

“*Dieu*, I’m trying to make you understand why! To show you that it was my curiosity as a botanist that made me join the Rite and take the drug!”

Berreau rushed on. “But you can’t understand, any more than Lys could! You can’t comprehend the wonder and strangeness and beauty of living that other kind of life!”

Something in Berreau’s white, rapt face, in his haunted eyes, made Farris’ skin crawl. His words seemed momentarily to lift a veil, to make the familiar vaguely strange and terrifying.

“Berreau, listen! You’ve got to cut this and leave here at once.”

The Frenchman smiled mirthlessly. “I know. Many times, I have told myself so. But I do not go. How can I leave something that is a botanist’s heaven?”

* * * *

Lys had come into the room, was looking wanly at her brother’s tare.

“Andre, won’t you give it up and go home with me?” she appealed.

“Or are you too sunken in this uncanny habit to care whether your sister breaks her heart?” Farris demanded.

Berreau flared. “You’re a smug pair! You treat me like a drug addict, without knowing the wonder of the experience I’ve had! I’ve gone into another world, an alien Earth that is around us every day of our lives and that we can’t even see. And I’m going back again, and again.”

“Use that chlorophyll drug and go *hunati* again?” Farris said grimly.

Berreau nodded defiantly.

“No,” said Farris. “You’re not. For if you do, we’ll just go out there and bring you in again. You’ll be quite helpless to prevent us, once you’re *hunati*.”

The other man raged. “There’s a way I can stop you from doing that!

Your threats are dangerous!”

“There’s no way,” Farris said flatly. “Once you’ve frozen yourself into that slower life-tempo, you’re helpless against nor-mal people. And I’m not threatening. I’m trying to save your sanity, man!”

Berreau flung out of the room without answer. Lys looked at the American, with tears glimmering in her eyes.

“Don’t worry about it,” he reassured her. “He’ll get over it, in time.”

“I fear not,” the girl whispered. “It has become a madness in his brain.”

Inwardly, Farris agreed. Whatever the lure of the unknown world that Berreau had entered by that change in life-tempo, it had caught him beyond all redemption.

A chill swept Farris when he thought of it—men out there, living at the same tempo as plants, stepping clear out of the plane of animal life to a strangely different kind of life and world.

The bungalow was oppressively silent that day—the servants gone, Berreau sulking in his laboratory, Lys moving about with misery in her eyes.

But Berreau didn’t try to go out, though Farris had been expecting that and had been prepared for a clash. And by evening, Berreau seemed to have got over his sulks. He helped prepare dinner.

He was almost gay, at the meal—a febrile good humor that Farris didn’t quite like. By common consent, none of the three spoke of what was uppermost in their minds.

Berreau retired, and Farris told Lys, “Go to bed—you’ve lost so much sleep lately you’re half asleep now I’ll keep watch.”

In his own room, Farris found drowsiness assailing him too. He sank back in a chair, fighting the heaviness that weighed down his eyelids.

Then, suddenly, he understood. “Drugged!” he exclaimed, and found his voice little more than a whisper. “Something in the dinner!”

“Yes,” said a remote voice. “Yes, Farris.”

Berreau had come in. He loomed gigantic to Farris' blurred eyes. He came closer, and Farris saw in his hand a needle that dripped sticky green.

"I'm sorry, Farris." He was rolling up Farris' sleeve, and Farris could not resist. "I'm sorry to do this to you and Lys. But you *would* interfere. And this is the only way I can keep you from bringing me back."

Farris felt the sting of the needle. He felt nothing more, before drugged unconsciousness claimed him.

* * * *

CHAPTER 4

INCREDIBLE WORLD

Farris awoke, and for a dazed moment wondered what it was that so bewildered him. Then he realized.

It was the daylight. It came and went, every few minutes. There was the darkness of night in the bedroom, and then a sudden burst of dawn, a little period of brilliant sunlight, and then night again.

It came and went, as he watched numbly, like the slow, steady beating of a great pulse—a systole and diastole of light and darkness.

Days shortened to minutes? But how could that be? And then, as he awakened fully, he remembered.

"Hunati! He injected the chlorophyll drug into my blood-stream!"

Yes. He was *hunati*, now. Living at a tempo a hundred times slower than normal.

And that was why day and night seemed a hundred times faster than normal, to him. He had, already, lived through several days!

Farris stumbled to his feet. As he did so, he knocked his pipe from the arm of the chair.

It did not fall to the floor. It just disappeared instantly, and the next instant was lying on the floor.

“It fell. But it fell so fast I couldn’t see it.”

Farris felt his brain reel to the impact of the unearthly. He found that he was trembling violently.

He fought to get a grip on himself. This wasn’t witchcraft. It was a secret and devilish science, but it wasn’t supernatural.

He, himself, felt as normal as ever. It was his surroundings, the swift rush of day and night especially, that alone told him he was changed.

He heard a scream, and stumbled out to the living-room of the bungalow. Lys came running toward him.

She still wore her jacket and slacks, having obviously been too worried about her brother to retire completely. And there was terror in her face.

“What’s happened?” she cried. “The light—”

He took her by the shoulders. “Lys, don’t lose your nerve. What’s happened is that we’re *hunati* now. Your brother did it—drugged us at dinner, then injected the chlorophyll compound into us.”

“But why?” she cried.

“Don’t you see? He was going *hunati* himself again, going back up to the forest. And we could easily overtake and bring him back, if we remained normal. So he changed us too, to prevent that.”

Farris went into Berreau’s room. It was as he had expected. The Frenchman was gone.

“I’ll go after him,” he said tightly. “He’s got to come back, for he may have an antidote to that hellish stuff. You wait here.”

Lys clung to him. “No! I’d go mad, here by myself, like this.”

She was, he saw, on the brink of hysterics. He didn’t wonder. The slow, pulsing beat of day and night alone was enough to unseat one’s reason.

He acceded. “All right. But wait till I get something.”

He went back to Berreau's room and took a big bolo-knife he had seen leaning in a corner. Then he saw something else, something glittering in the pulsing light, on the botanist's laboratory-table.

Farris stuffed that into his pocket. If force couldn't bring Berreau back, the threat of this other thing might influence him.

He and Lys hurried out onto the veranda and down the steps. And then they stopped, appalled.

The great forest that loomed before them was now a nightmare sight. It seethed and stirred with unearthly life great branches clawing and whipping at each other as they fought for the light, vines writhing through them at incredible speed, a rustling up-roar of tossing, living plant-life.

Lys shrank back. "The forest is *alive* now!"

"It's just the same as always," Farris reassured. "It's we who have changed—who are living so slowly now that the plants seem to live faster."

"And Andre is out in that!" Lys shuddered. Then courage came back into her pale face. "But I'm not afraid."

* * * *

They started up through the forest toward the plateau of giant trees. And now there was an awful unreality about this incredible world.

Farris felt no difference in himself. There was no sensation of slowing down. His own motions and perceptions appeared normal. It was simply that all around him the vegetation had now a savage motility that was animal in its swiftness.

Grasses sprang up beneath his feet, tiny green spears climbing toward the light. Buds swelled, burst, spread their bright petals on the air, breathed out their fragrance—and died.

New leaves leaped joyously up from every twig, lived out their brief and vital moment, withered and fell. The forest was a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of colors, from pale green to yellowed brown, that rippled as the swift tides of growth and death washed over it.

But it was not peaceful nor serene, that life of the forest. Before, it had seemed to Farris that the plants of the earth existed in a placid inertia

utterly different from the beasts, who must constantly hunt or be hunted. Now he saw how mistaken he had been.

Close by, a tropical nettle crawled up beside a giant fern. Octopus-like, its tendrils flashed around and through the plant. The fern writhed. Its fronds tossed wildly, its stalks strove to be free. But the stinging death conquered it.

Lianas crawled like great serpents among the trees, encircling the trunks, twining themselves swiftly along the branches, striking their hungry parasitic roots into the living bark.

And the trees fought them. Farris could see how the branches lashed and struck against the killer vines. It was like watching a man struggle against the crushing coils of the python.

Very likely. Because the trees, the plants, knew. In their own strange, alien fashion, they were as sentient as their swifter brothers.

Hunter and hunted. The strangling lianas, the deadly, beautiful orchid that was like a cancer eating a healthy trunk, the leprous, crawling fungi—they were the wolves and the jackals of this leafy world.

Even among the trees, Farris saw, existence was a grim and never-ending struggle. Silk-cotton and bamboo and ficus trees—they too knew pain and fear and the dread of death.

He could hear them. Now, with his aural nerves slowed to an incredible receptivity, he heard the voice of the forest, the true voice that had nothing to do with the familiar sounds of wind in the branches.

The primal voice of birth and death that spoke before ever man appeared on Earth, and would continue to speak after he was gone.

At first he had been conscious only of that vast, rustling uproar. Now he could distinguish separate sounds—the thin screams of grass blades and bamboo-shoots thrusting and surging out of the earth, the lash and groan of enmeshed and dying branches, the laughter of young leaves high in the sky, the stealthy whisper of the coiling vines.

And almost, he could hear thoughts, speaking in his mind. The age-old thoughts of the trees.

Farris felt a freezing dread. He did not want to listen to the thoughts of

the trees.

And the slow, steady pulsing of darkness and light went on. Days and nights, rushing with terrible speed over the *hunati*.

Lys, stumbling along the trail beside him, uttered a little cry of terror. A snaky black vine had darted out of the bush at her with cobra swiftness, looping swiftly to encircle her body.

Farris swung his bolo, slashed through the vine. But it struck out again, growing with that appalling speed, its tip groping for him.

He slashed again with sick horror, and pulled the girl onward, on up the side of the plateau.

"I am afraid!" she gasped. "I can hear the thoughts—the thoughts of the forest!"

"It's your own imagination!" he told her. "Don't listen!"

But he too could hear them! Very faintly, like sounds just below the threshold of hearing. It seemed to him that every minute—or every minute-long day—he was able to get more clearly the telepathic impulses of these organisms that lived an undreamed-of life of their own, side by side with man, yet forever barred from him, except when man was *hunati*.

* * * *

It seemed to him that the temper of the forest had changed, that his slaying of the vine had made it aware of them. Like a crowd aroused to anger, the massed trees around them grew wrathful. A tossing and moaning rose among them.

Branches struck at Farris and the girl, lianas groped with blind heads and snakelike grace toward them. Brush and bramble clawed them spitefully, reaching out thorny arms to rake their flesh. The slender saplings lashed them like leafy whips, the swift-growing bamboo spears sought to block their path, canes clattering together as if in rage.

"It's only in our own minds!" he said to the girl. "Because the forest is living at the same rate as we, we imagine it's aware of us."

He had to believe that, he knew. He had to, because when he quit believing it there was only black madness.

“No!” cried Lys. “No! The forest knows we are here.”

Panic fear threatened Farris’ self-control, as the mad uproar of the forest increased. He ran, dragging the girl with him, sheltering her with his body from the lashing of the raging forest.

They ran on, deeper into the mighty grove upon the plateau, under the pulsing rush of day and darkness. And now the trees about them were brawling giants, great silk-cotton and ficus that struck crashing blows at each other as their branches fought for clear sky—contending and terrible leafy giants beneath which the two humans were pigmies.

But the lesser forest beneath them still tossed and surged with wrath, still plucked and tore at the two running humans. And still, and clearer, stronger, Farris’ reeling mind caught the dim impact of unguessable telepathic impulses.

Then, drowning all those dim and raging thoughts, came vast and dominating impulses of greater majesty, thought-voices deep and strong and alien as the voice of primal Earth.

“Stop them!” they seemed to echo in Farris’ mind. “Stop them! Slay them! For they are our enemies!”

Lys uttered a trembling cry. “Andre!”

Farris saw him, then. Saw Berreau ahead, standing in the shadow of the monster banyans there. His arms were upraised toward those looming colossi, as though in worship. Over him towered the leafy giants, dominating all the forest.

“Stop them! Slay them!”

They thundered, now, those majestic thought-voices that Farris’ mind could barely hear. He was closer to them—closer—

He knew, then, even though his mind refused to admit the knowledge Knew whence those mighty voices came, and why Berreau worshipped the banyans.

And surely they were godlike, these green colossi who had lived for ages, whose arms reached skyward and whose aerial roots drooped and stirred and groped like hundreds of hands!

Farris forced that thought violently away. He was a man, of the world of men, and he must not worship alien lords.

Berreau had turned toward them. The man's eyes were hot and raging, and Farris knew even before Berreau spoke that he was no longer altogether sane.

"Go, both of you!" he ordered. "You were fools, to come here after me! You killed as you came through the forest, and the forest knows!"

"Berreau, listen!" Farris appealed. "You've got to go back with us, forget this madness!"

Berreau laughed shrilly. "Is it madness that the Lords even now voice their wrath against you? You hear it in your mind, but you are afraid to listen! Be afraid, Farris! There is reason! You have slain trees, for many years, as you have just slain here— and the forest knows you for a foe."

"Andre!" Lys was sobbing, her face half-buried in her hands.

Farris felt his mind cracking under the impact of the crazy scene. The ceaseless, rushing pulse of light and darkness, the rustling uproar of the seething forest around them, the vines creeping snakelike and branches whipping at them and giant banyans rocking angrily overhead.

"*This* is the world that man lives in all his life, and never sees or senses!" Berreau was shouting. "I've come into it, again and again. And each time, I've heard more clearly the voices of the Great Ones!

"The oldest and mightiest creatures on our planet! Long ago, men knew that and worshipped them for the wisdom they could teach. Yes, worshipped them as Ygdrasil and the Druid Oak and the Sacred Tree! But modern men have forgotten this other Earth. Except me, Farris—except me! I've found wisdom in this world such as you never dreamed. And your stupid blindness is not going to drag me out of it!"

* * * *

Farris realized then that it was too late to reason with Berreau. The man had come too often and too far into this other Earth that was as alien to humanity as thought it lay across the universe.

It was because he had feared that, that he had brought the little thing

in his jacket pocket. The one thing with which he might force Berreau to obey.

Farris took it out of his pocket. He held it up so that the other could see it.

“You know what it is, Berreau! And you know what I can do with it, if you force me to!”

Wild dread leaped into Berreau’s eyes as he recognized that glittering little vial from his own laboratory.

“The Burmese Blight! You wouldn’t, Farris! You wouldn’t turn that loose *here!*”

“I will!” Farris said hoarsely. “I will, unless you come out of here with us, now!”

Raging hate and fear were in Berreau’s eyes as he stared at that innocent corked glass vial of gray-green dust.

He said thickly, “For this, I will kill!”

Lys screamed. Black lianas had crept upon her as she stood with her face hidden in her hands. They had writhed around her legs like twining serpents, they were pulling her down.

The forest seemed to roar with triumph. Vine and branch and bramble and creeper surged toward them. Dimly thunderous throbbed the strange telepathic voices.

“Slay them!” said the trees.

Farris leaped into that coiling mass of vines, his bolo slashing. He cut loose the twining lianas that held the girl, sliced fiercely at the branches that whipped wildly at them.

Then, from behind, Berreau’s savage blow on his elbow knocked the bolo from his hand.

“I told you not to kill, Farris! I told you!”

“Slay them!” pulsed the alien thought.

Berreau spoke, his eyes not leaving Farris. "Run, Lys. Leave the forest. This—murderer must die."

He lunged as he spoke, and there was death in his white face and clutching hands.

Farris Was knocked back, against one of the giant banyan trunks. They rolled, grappling. And already the vines were sliding around them—looping and enmeshing them, tightening upon them!

It was then that the forest shrieked.

A cry telepathic and auditory at the same time—and dreadful. An utterance of alien agony beyond anything human.

Berreau's hands fell away from Farris. The Frenchman, en-meshed with him by the coiling vines, looked up in horror.

Then Farris saw what had happened. The little vial, the vial of the blight, had smashed against the banyan trunk as Berreau charged.

And that little splash of gray-green mould was rushing through the forest faster than flame! The blight, the gray-green killer from far away, propagating itself with appalling rapidity! "*Dieu!*" screamed Berreau. "*Non—non—*"

Even normally, a blight seems to spread swiftly. And to Farris and the other two, slowed down as they were, this blight was a raging cold fire of death.

It flashed up trunks and limbs and aerial roots of the majestic banyans, eating leaf and spore and bud. It ran triumphantly across the ground, over vine and grass and shrub, bursting up other trees, leaping along the airy bridges of lianas.

And it leaped among the vines that enmeshed the two men! In mad death-agonies the creepers writhed and tightened.

Farris felt the musty mould in his mouth and nostrils, felt the construction as of steel cables crushing the life from him. The world seemed to darken—

Then a steel blade hissed and flashed, and the pressure loosened. Lys' voice was in his ears, Lys' hand trying to drag him from the dying,

tightening creepers that she had partly slashed through. He wrenched free. "My brother!" she gasped.

* * * *

With the bolo he sliced clumsily through the mass of dying writhing snake-vines that still enmeshed Berreau.

Berreau's face appeared, as he tore away the slashed creepers. It was dark purple, rigid, his eyes staring and dead. The tightening vines had caught him around the throat, strangling him.

Lys knelt beside him, crying wildly. But Farris dragged her to her feet.

"We have to get out of here! He's dead—but I'll carry his body!"

"No, leave it," she sobbed. "Leave it here, in the forest."

Dead eyes, looking up at the death of the alien world of life into which he had now crossed, forever! Yes, it was fitting.

Farris' heart quailed as he stumbled away with Lys through the forest that was rocking and raging in its death-throes.

Far away around them, the gray-green death was leaping on. And fainter, fainter, came the strange telepathic cries that he would never be sure he had really heard.

"We die, brothers! We die!"

And then, when it seemed to Farris that sanity must give way beneath the weight of alien agony, there came a sudden change.

The pulsing rush of alternate day and night lengthened in tempo. Each period of light and darkness was longer now, and longer—

Out of a period of dizzying semi-consciousness, Farris came back to awareness. They were standing unsteadily in the blighted forest, in bright sunlight.

And they were no longer *hunati*.

The chlorophyll drug had spent its force in their bodies, and they had come back to the normal tempo of human life.

Lys looked up dazedly, at the forest that now seemed static, peaceful, immobile—and in which the gray-green blight now crept so slowly they could not see it move.

“The same forest, and it’s still writhing in death!” Farris said huskily. “But now that we’re living at normal speed again, we can’t see it!”

“Please, let us go!” choked the girl. “Away from here, at once!”

It took but an hour to return to the bungalow and pack what they could carry, before they took the trail toward the Mekong.

Sunset saw them out of the blighted area of the forest, well on their way toward the river.

“Will it kill all the forest?” whispered the girl.

“No. The forest will fight back, come back, conquer the blight, in time. A long time, by our reckoning—years, decades. But to *them*, that fierce struggle is raging on even now.”

And as they walked on, it seemed to Farris that still in his mind there pulsed faintly from far behind that alien, throbbing cry.

“We die, brothers!”

He did not look back. But he knew that he would not come back to this or any other forest, and that his profession was ended, and that he would never kill a tree again.

* * * *