

Introduction to  
**Shadow on  
the Stars**

plus two sample chapters

by

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SHADOW ON THE STARS  
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## SHADOW ON THE STARS

### Introduction

Unless I have lost count, which is entirely possible, *Shadow on the Stars* was my sixth novel—which makes it a very early work even among my early work; because in the far-off days of the 1950's I was writing a novel every few months, and I had a couple of dozen of the things on my record before I sprouted my first gray hair.

Beyond any doubt my first book was the juvenile novel, *Revolt on Alpha C*, which I wrote in 1954 when I was still practically a juvenile myself. Then came another juvenile, *Starman's Quest*, in 1956, and later that year my first ostensibly adult novel, *The Thirteenth Immortal* and in early 1957 the quite respectable novel *Master of Life and Death*—which probably ought to be given another turn in print one of these days. A few months later I wrote *Invaders from Earth*, another early book that causes me no embarrassment today. That's five, and so *Shadow on the Stars*, written in October of 1957, would be the sixth. Of course, there were also the two "Robert Randall" collaborations with Randall Garrett, *The Shrouded Planet* and *The Dawning of Light*, in 1955 and 1956, but those weren't solo jobs. And there were a couple of items like the pseudonymous *Lest We Forget Thee, O Earth* (1957) and *Invisible Barriers* (1957) that were patched together out of previously published magazine pieces, but they weren't originally conceived as full-length novels, and I don't feel like counting them, and I hope you'll be willing to ignore them too. So the book you are now holding is my sixth novel, give or take a few exceptions and footnotes.

It was written at the behest of the late Larry T. Shaw, a

bespectacled and pipesmoking gentleman who edited a pair of magazines called *Infinity* and *Science Fiction Adventures*. Shaw, an old-time s-f fan, might have had a splendid career as an editor if he had ever found a major publisher to back him, for his taste was superb and he had the useful knack of coaxing writers to do their best work without seeming actually to be nagging them; but it was his fate always to work for marginal companies in short-lived ventures. *Infinity* was his special pride, a low-budget magazine that ran high-budget stories by the likes of Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, James Blish, Damon Knight, C.M. Kornbluth, and Algis Budrys; it even published Harlan Ellison's first science fiction story. I was a regular contributor to *Infinity* and many of my best short stories appeared there. The companion magazine, *Science Fiction Adventures*, was less ambitious, a blood-and-thunder operation done strictly for fun, featuring novelets of interstellar intrigue and blazing ray-guns. I was a regular contributor to *SFA*, too: in fact, I practically wrote the whole magazine. As I look through my file copies, I see a long story or two by me (usually under some pseudonym) in virtually every issue—"Battle for the Thousand Suns," "Slaves of the Star Giants," "Spawn of the Deadly Sea," and so on. I had fun writing these melodramas of the spaceways, and the readers evidently enjoyed them too, for my stories (under whatever pseudonym) were usually the most popular offerings in each issue.

The original format of *SFA* provided Three Complete New Action Novels (actually, novelets 15,000 to 20,000 words in length) in each issue, plus a few short stories and features. But with the seventh issue, October, 1957, editor Shaw decided to vary the pattern a bit, running only two "novels," a long one and a short one. I was his most reliable contributor, so he asked me to write the "Book-Length Novel" to lead off that issue. I turned in a 28,000-word piece called "Thunder Over Starhaven," which appeared under a pseudonym and which I eventually expanded into a novel. The innovation was successful, apparently, for soon Shaw tried another experiment: filling virtually an entire issue with

one novel.

Again he asked me to do the job. This time it was agreed that the story would appear under my own byline, since “Robert Silverberg” was by now a better known name than any of the pseudonyms I had been using in the magazine; and, since the story would bear my own name, I was a trifle less flamboyant about making use of the pulp-magazine clichés beloved by the magazine’s readers. There would be no hissing villains and basilisk-eyed princesses in this one, no desperate duels with dagger and mace, no feudal overlords swaggering about the stars. Rather, I would write a straightforward science-fiction novel, strongly plotted—but not unduly weighted toward breathless adventure.

“Shadow on the Stars” is what I called it, and that was the name it appeared under in the April, 1958 issue of *Science Fiction Adventures*. The cover announced in big yellow letters, “A COMPLETE NEW BOOK—35¢” and indeed it did take up most of the issue, spanning 112 of the 130 pages and leaving room only for two tiny short stories and the feature columns. Mainly it was a time-paradox novel—a theme that always has fascinated me—but there was at least one concession to the traditional policy of the magazine, a vast space battle involving an “unstoppable armada” of “seven hundred seventy-five dreadnoughts.” I chose to handle the big battle scene, though, in a very untraditional underplayed manner, as you will see; and I did a bit of fooling around with the ending, too, providing two twentieth chapters.

The readers loved it. The next issue was full of letters of praise, including one that said, “Silverberg is becoming a really disciplined artist,” and asserted that “Shadow on the Stars” seemed somehow to synthesize the previously antithetical traditions of Robert A. Heinlein and E.E. Smith. (Actually, I thought it owed more to A.E. van Vogt.) And then *Science Fiction Adventures* went out of business, for reasons unconnected with the quantity of material I was contributing to it. A lot of magazines folded in 1958, including a few that I never wrote for at all.

The next destination for “Shadow on the Stars” was Ace Books. Editor Donald A. Wollheim bought it, retitled it *Steps on Terra*, and published it later in 1958 in his Ace Double Novel series, with a book by a British writer, Lan Wright, on the other side.

What Lan Wright is doing these days, I have no idea: But here is *Shadow on the Stars*, back in print under its original title for the first time since its historic original appearance more than forty years ago, for your amusement.

Robert Silverberg  
Oakland, California  
October, 2000

## ONE

EWING woke slowly, sensing the coldness all about him. It was slowly withdrawing down the length of his body; his head and shoulders were out of the freeze now, the rest of his body gradually emerging. He stirred as well as he could, and the delicately spun web of foam that had cradled him in the journey across space shivered as he moved.

He extended a hand and heaved downward on the lever six inches from his wrist. A burst of fluid shot forward from the spinnerettes above him, dissolving the web that bound him. The coldness drained from his legs. Stiffly he rose, moving as if he were very old, and stretched gingerly.

He had slept eleven months, fourteen days, and some six hours, according to the panel above his sleeping area. The panel registered time in Galactic Absolute Units. And the second, the Galactic Absolute Unit of temporal measure, was an arbitrary figure, accepted by the galaxy only because it had been devised by the mother world.

Ewing touched an enameled stud and a segment of the inner surface of the ship's wall swung away, revealing a soft glowing vision-plate. A planet hung centered in the green depths of the plate—a planet green itself, with vast seas bordering its continents.

Earth.

Ewing knew what his next task was. Moving quickly, now that circulation was returning to his thawed limbs, he strode to the compact bulk of the subetheric generator on the opposite wall and spun the contact dial. A blue light glowed.

“Baird Ewing speaking,” he said to the pickup grid. “I wish to report that I’ve taken up a position in orbit around Earth after a successful flight. All’s well so far. I’ll be de-

scending to Earth shortly. Further reports will follow.”

He broke contact. This very moment, he knew, his words were leaping across the galaxy toward his home world, via subetheric carrier wave. Fifteen days would elapse before his message arrived on Corwin.

Ewing had wanted to stay awake, all the long months of his solitary trip. There was reading he wanted to do, and music disks to play. The idea of spending nearly a year asleep was appalling to him; all that time wasted!

But they had been adamant. “You’re crossing sixteen parsecs of space in a one-man ship,” they told him. “Nobody can stay awake all that time and come out of it sane, Ewing, And we need you sane.”

He tried to protest. It was no good. The people of Corwin were sending him to Earth at great expense to do a job of vital importance; unless they could be absolutely certain that he would arrive in good condition, they would do better sending someone else. Reluctantly, Ewing yielded. They lowered him into the nutrient bath and showed him how to trip the foot levers that brought about suspension and the hand levers that would release him when his time was up. They sealed off his ship and shot it into the dark, a lonely raft on the broad sea, a coffin-sized spaceship built for one ...



At least ten minutes went by before he was fully restored to normal physiological functioning. He stared in the mirror at the strange silken stubble that had sprouted on his face. He looked oddly emaciated; he had never been a fleshy man, but now, he looked skeletal, his cheeks shrunken, his skin tight-drawn over the jutting bones of his face. His hair seemed to have faded too; it had been a rich auburn on that day in 3805 when he left Corwin on his emergency mission to Earth, but now it was a dark, nondescript mud-brown. Ewing was a big man, long-muscled rather than stocky, with a fierce expression contradicted by mild, questioning eyes.

His stomach felt hollow. His shanks were spindly. He felt drained of vigor.

But there was a job to do.

Adjoining the subetheric generator was an insystem communicator. He switched it on, staring at the pale ball that was Earth in the screen on the far wall. A crackle of static rewarded him. He held his breath, waiting, waiting for the first words he would have heard in pure Terrestrial. He wondered if they would understand his Anglo-Corwin.

After all, it was nearly a thousand years since the colony had been planted, and almost five hundred since the people of Corwin had last had intercourse of any kind with Earth. Languages diverge, in five hundred years.

A voice said, "Earth station Double Prime. Who calls, please? Speak up. Speak, please."

Ewing smiled. It was intelligible!

He said, "One-man ship out of the Free World of Corwin calling. I'm in a stabilized orbit fifty thousand kilometers above Earth ground level. Request permission to land at coördinates of your designation."

There was a long silence, too long to be attributed sheerly to transmission lag. Ewing wondered if he had spoken too quickly, or if his words had lost their Terrestrial meanings.

Finally came a response: "Free World of *which*, did you say?"

"Corwin. Epsilon Ursae Majoris XII. It's a former Terrestrial colony."

Again there was an uncomfortable pause. "Corwin. . . Corwin. Oh. I guess it's okay for you to land. You have a warp-drive ship?"

"Yes," Ewing said. "With photonic modifiers, of course. And ion-beam for atmospheric passage."

His Earthside respondent said, "Are photonic modifiers radioactive?"

Ewing was taken aback for a moment. Frowning at the speaker grid, he said, "If you mean radioactive in the normal sense of emitting hard particles, no. The photonic modifier merely converts—" He stopped. "Do I have to explain the whole thing to you?"

"Not unless you want to stay up there all day, Corwin. If your ship's not hot, come on down. Coördinates for landing



will follow.”

Ewing carefully jotted the figures down as they came in, read them back for confirmation, thanked the Earthman, and signed off. He integrated the figures and programmed them for the ship’s calculators.

His throat felt dry. Something about the Earthman’s tone of voice troubled him. The man had been too flip, careless of mind, impatient.

*Perhaps I was expecting too much, Ewing thought. After all, he was just doing a routine job.*

It was a jarring beginning, nonetheless. Ewing realized he, like the Corwinites, had a highly idealized mental image of an Earthman as a being compassionately wise, physically superb, a superman in all respects. It would be disappointing to learn that the fabled inhabitants of the legendary motherworld were mere human beings themselves, like their remote descendants on the colony worlds.

Ewing strapped himself in for the downward jaunt through the atmospheric blanket of Earth and nudged the lever that controlled the autopilot. The ultimate leg of his journey had begun. Within an hour, he would actually stand on the soil of Earth herself.

*I hope they’ll be able to help us, he thought. Bright in his mind was a vivid mental image: faceless hordes of barbaric Klodni sweeping down on the galaxy out of Andromeda, devouring world after world in their relentless drive inward toward civilization’s heart.*

Already four worlds had fallen to the Klodni since the aliens had begun their campaign of conquest. The timetable said they would reach Corwin within the next decade.

Cities destroyed, women and children carried into slavery, the glittering spire of the World Building a charred ruin, the University destroyed, the fertile fields blackened by the Klodni scorched-earth tactics—

Ewing shuddered as his tiny ship spiraled Earthward, bobbing in the thickening layers of atmosphere. *Earth will help us, he told himself comfortingly, Earth will save her colonies from conquest.*

Ewing felt capillaries bursting under the increasing drag of deceleration. He gripped the handrests and shouted to relieve the tension on his eardrums, but there was no way of relieving the tension within. The thunder of his jets boomed through the framework of the ship, and the green planet grew frighteningly huge in the clear plastic of the view-screen.

□

Minutes later, the ship came to rest on a broad ferroconcrete landing apron; it hung poised a moment on its own jet-wash, then settled gently to earth. With gravity-heavy fingers Ewing unfastened himself. Through the vision-screen he saw small beetle-like autotrucks come rumbling over the field toward his ship. The decontamination squad, no doubt; robot-manned, of course.

He waited until they had done their job, then sprung the hatch on his ship and climbed out. The air smelled good—strange, since his home had a twenty-three percent oxygen content, two parts in a hundred richer than Earth's—and the day was warm.

Ewing spied the vaulting sweep of a terminal building and headed toward it.

A robot, blocky and faceless, scanned him with photo-beams as he passed through the swinging doors. Within, the terminal was a maze of blinking lights, red-green, on-off, up-down. Momentarily, Ewing was dazed.

Beings of all kinds thronged the building. Ewing saw four semi-humanoid forms with bulbous heads engaged in a busy discussion near where he stood. Further in the distance swarms of more Terrestrial beings moved about. Ewing was startled by their appearance.

Some were “normal” —oddly muscular and rugged-looking, but not so much that they would cause any surprised comment on Corwin. But the others!

Dressed flamboyantly in shimmering robes of turquoise and black, gray and gold, they presented a weird sight. One had no ears; his skull was bare, decorated only by jeweled pendants that seemed to be riveted to the flesh of his scalp.

Another had one leg and supported himself by a luminous crutch. A third wore gleaming emeralds on a golden nose ring.

No two of them seemed to look alike. As a trained student of cultural patterns, Ewing was aware of the cause of the phenomenon; overelaboration of decoration was a common evolution for highly advanced societies, such as Earth's. But it made him feel terribly provincial to see the gaudy display. Corwin was a new world, even after a thousand years of colonization; such fancies were yet to take root there.

Hesitantly, he approached the group of dandified Terrestrials nearest him. They were chattering in artificial-sounding, high-pitched voices.

"Pardon," Ewing said. "I've just arrived from the Free World of Corwin. Is there some place where I can register with the authorities?"

The conversation ceased as if cut off with an ax. The trio whirled, facing Ewing. "You be from a colony world?" asked the uniped, in barely intelligible accents.

Ewing nodded. "Corwin. Sixteen parsecs away. We were settled by Earth a thousand years ago."

They exchanged words at a speed that made comprehension impossible; it seemed like a private language, some made-up doubletalk. Ewing watched the rouged faces, feeling distaste.

"Where can I register with the authorities?" he asked again, a little stiffly.

The earless one giggled shrilly. "What authorities? This is Earth, friend! We come and go as we please."

A sense of uneasiness grew in Ewing. He disliked these Terrestrials almost upon sight, after just a moment's contact.

A new voice, strange, harshly accented, said, "Did I hear you say you were from a colony?"

Ewing turned. One of the "normal" Terrestrials was speaking to him—a man about five-feet-eight, with a thick, squarish face, beetling brows looming over dark smoldering eyes, and a cropped, bullet-shaped head. His voice was

dull and ugly sounding.

"I'm from Corwin," Ewing said.

The other frowned, screwing up his massive brows. He said, "Where's that?"

"Sixteen parsecs. Epsilon Ursae Majoris XII. Earth colony."

"And what are you doing on Earth?"

The belligerent tone annoyed Ewing. The Corwinite said, in a bleak voice, "I'm an officially accredited ambassador from my world to the government of Earth. I'm looking for the customs authority."

"There are none," the squat man said. "The Earthers did away with them about a century back. Couldn't be bothered with them, they said." He grinned in cheerful contempt at the three dandies, who had moved further away and were murmuring busily to each other in their private language. "The Earthers can't hardly be bothered with anything."

Ewing was puzzled. "Aren't you from Earth yourself? I mean—"

"Me?" The deep chest emitted a rumbling, sardonic chuckle. "You folk really are isolated, aren't you? I'm a Sirian. Sirius IV—oldest Terrestrial colony there is. Suppose we get a drink. I want to talk to you."

## TWO

SOMEWHAT unwillingly, Ewing followed the burly Sirian through the thronged terminal toward a refreshment room at the far side of the arcade. As soon as they were seated at a gleaming translucent table, the Sirian stared levelly at Ewing and said, "First things come first. What's your name?"

"Baird Ewing. You?"

"Rollun Firnik. What brings you to Earth, Ewing?"

Firnik's manner was offensively blunt. Ewing toyed with the golden-amber drink the Sirian had bought for him, sipped it idly, put it down. "I told you," he said quietly. "I'm an ambassador from the government of Corwin to the government of Earth. It's as simple as that."

"It is? When did you people last have any contact with the rest of the galaxy?"

"Five hundred years ago. But—"

"Five hundred years," Firnik repeated speculatively. "And now you decide to reopen contact with Earth." He squinted at Ewing, chin resting on balled fist. "Just like that. Poof! Enter one ambassador. It isn't just out of sociability, is it, Ewing? What's the reason behind your visit?"

"I'm not familiar with the latest news in this sector of the galaxy," Ewing said. "Have you heard any mention of the Klodni?"

"Klodni?" the Sirian repeated. "No. The name doesn't mean a thing to me. Should it?"

"News travels slowly through the galaxy," Ewing said. "The Klodni are a humanoid race that evolved—somewhere in the Andromeda star cluster. I've seen solidographs of them. They're little greasy creatures, about five feet high, with a sort of ant-like civilization. A war-fleet of Klodni is on the move."

Firnik rolled an eyebrow upward. He said nothing.

“A couple thousand Klodni ships entered our galaxy about four years ago. They landed on Barnholt—that’s a colony world about a hundred fifty light-years deeper in space than we are—and wiped the place clean. After about a year they picked up and moved on. They’ve been to four planets so far, and no one’s been able to stop them yet. They swarm over a planet and destroy everything they see, then go on to the next world.”

“What of it?”

“We’ve plotted their probable course. They’re going to attack Corwin in ten years or so, give or take one year either way. We know we can’t fight them back, either. We just aren’t a militarized people. And we can’t militarize in less than ten years and hope to win.” Ewing paused, sipped at his drink. It was surprisingly mild, he thought.

He went on: “As soon as the nature of the Klodni menace became known, we radioed a message to Earth explaining the situation and asking for help. We got no answer, even figuring in the subetheric lag. We radioed again. Still no reply from Earth.”

“So you decided to send an ambassador,” Firnik said. “Figuring your messages must have gone astray, no doubt. You wanted to negotiate for help at first hand.”

“Yes.”

The Sirian chuckled. “You know something? It’s three hundred years since anybody on Earth last fired anything deadlier than a popgun. They’re total pacifists.”

“That can’t be true!”

Suddenly the sardonic amiability left Firnik. His voice was almost toneless as he said, “I’ll forgive you this time, because you’re a stranger and don’t know the customs. But the next time you call me a liar I’ll kill you.”

Ewing’s jaw stiffened. Barbarian, he thought. Out loud he said, “In other word, I’ve wasted my time by coming here, then?”

The Sirian shrugged unconcernedly. “Better fight your own battles. The Earthers can’t help you.”

"But they're in danger too," Ewing protested. "Do you think the Klodni are going to stop before they've reached Earth?"

"How long do you think it'll take them to get as far as Earth?" Firnik asked.

"A century at least."

"A century. All right. They have to pass through Sirius IV on their way to Earth. We'll take care of them when the time comes."

And I came sixteen parsecs across the galaxy to ask for help, Ewing thought.

He stood up. "It's been very interesting talking to you. And thanks for the drink."

"Good luck to you," the Sirian said in parting. It was not meant in a spirit of cheer. It sounded openly derisive, Ewing thought.

He made his way through the crowded room to the long shining-walled corridor of the spaceport arcade. A ship was blasting off outside on the ferroconcrete apron; Ewing watched it a moment as it thundered out of sight. He realized that if any truth lay in the Sirian's words, he might just as well return to Corwin now and report failure.

But it was hard to accept the concept of a decadent, spineless Earth. True, they had had no contact with the mother world for five centuries; but the legend still gleamed on Corwin and the other colony worlds of its immediate galactic area—the legend of the mother planet where human life first began, hundreds of centuries before.

He remembered the stories of the pioneers of space, the first bold venturers to the other planets, then the brave colonists who had extended Earth's sway to half a thousand worlds. Through a natural process, contact with the homeland had withered in the span of years; there was little reason for self-sufficient worlds a sky apart to maintain anything as fantastically expensive as interstellar communication systems simply for reasons of sentiment. A colony world has economic problems as it is.

There had always been the legend of Earth, though, to

guide the Corwinites. When trouble arose, Earth would be there to help.

Now there was trouble on the horizon. *And Earth*, Ewing thought. *Can we count on her help?*

He watched the throngs of bejeweled dandies glumly, and wondered.

He paused by a railing that looked out over the wide sweep of the spacefield. A plaque, copperhued, proclaimed the fact that this particular section of the arcade had been erected A.D. 2716. Ewing, a newcomer in an ancient world, felt a tingle of awe. The building in which he stood had been constructed more than a century before the first ships from Earth blasted down on Corwin, which then had been only a nameless world on the star charts. And the men who had built this building, eleven hundred years ago, were as remote in space-time from the present-day Terrans as were the people of Corwin at this moment.

It was a bitter thought, that he had wasted his trip. There was his wife, and his son—for more than two years Laira would have no husband, Blade no father. And for what? All for a wasted trip to a planet whose glories lay far in its past?

Somewhere on Earth, he thought, there will be someone who can help. This planet produced us all. A shred of vitality must remain in it somewhere. I won't leave without trying to find it.



Some painstaking questioning of one of the stationary robot guards finally got him the information he wanted: there was a place where incoming outworlders could register if they chose. He made provisions for the care and storage of his ship until his departure, and signed himself in at the Hall of Records as Baird Ewing, Ambassador from the Free World of Corwin. There was a hotel affiliated with the spaceport terminal; Ewing requested and was assigned a room in it. He signed a slip granting the robot spaceport attendants permission to enter his ship and transfer his personal belongings to his hotel room.



The room was attractive, if a little cramped. Ewing was accustomed to the spaciousness of his home on Corwin, a planet on which only eighteen million people lived in an area greater than the habitable landmass of Earth. He had helped to build the home himself, twelve years ago when he married Laira. It sprawled over nearly eleven acres of land. To be confined to a room only about fifteen feet on a side was a novel experience for him.

The lighting was subdued and indirect; he searched for the source unsuccessfully. His fingers probed the walls, but no electroluminescent panels were in evidence. The Earthers had evidently developed some new technique for diffused multisource lighting.

An outlet covered with a speaking grid served as his connection with the office downstairs. He switched the communicator panel on, after some inward deliberation. A robot voice said immediately, "How may we serve you, Mr. Ewing?"

"Is there such a thing as a library on the premises?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Would you have someone select a volume of Terran history covering the last thousand years, and have it sent up to me. Also any recent newspapers, magazines, or things like that."

"Of course, sir."

It seemed that hardly five minutes passed before the chime on his room door bleeped discreetly:

"Come in," he said.

The door had been attuned to the sound of his voice; as he spoke, there was the whispering sound of relays closing, and the door whistled open. A robot stood just outside. His flat metal arms were stacked high with microreels.

"You ordered reading matter, sir."

"Thanks. Would you leave them over there, near the viewer?"

When the robot had gone, he lifted the most massive reel from the stack and scanned its title, *Earth and the Galaxy* was the title. In smaller letters it said, *A Study in*

*Colonial Relationships.*

Ewing nodded approvingly. This was the way to begin, he told himself: fill in the background before embarking on any specific course of action. The mocking Sirian had perhaps underestimated Earth's strength deliberately, for obscure reasons of his own. He did not seem like a trustworthy sort.

He opened the reel and slid it into the viewer, twisting it until he heard the familiar *click!* The viewer was of the same model in use on Corwin, and he had no difficulties with it. He switched on the screen; the title page appeared, and a moment's work with the focusing switches rendered the image brightly sharp:

*Chapter One, he read. The earliest period of expansion.*

*The Age of Interstellar Colonization may rightly be said to have opened in the year 2560, when the development of the Haley Subwarp Drive made possible—*

The door chimed again. Irritated, Ewing looked up from his book. He was not expecting visitors, nor had he asked the hotel service staff for anything.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Ewing?" said a familiar voice. "Might I come in? I'd like to talk to you again. We met briefly at the terminal this afternoon."

Ewing recognized the voice. It belonged to the earless Earther in turquoise robes who had been so little help to him earlier. *What can he want with me?* Ewing wondered.

"All right," he said. "Come in."

The door responded to the command: It slid back obediently. The slim Terrestrial smiled apologetically at Ewing, murmured a soft greeting, and entered.

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