



**BOB SHAW**

THE

**FUGITIVE  
WORLDS**



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# The Fugitive Worlds



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*Put the weapon down, Toller Maraquine. Divivvidiv's tone was both kindly and contemptuous. You are surrounded by more than a thousand stability officers – many of them armed – and any hostile action on your part will most surely result in your death.*

Toller shook his head and spoke in a growl. "I can take many of them with me."

*Possibly, but if that were the way of it you would never see your female again. She is only a few miles from here and within a matter of minutes you could be in her company. Alive you might, possibly, be of some comfort or service to her; but if you are dead . . .*

Toller allowed his sword to fall, heard it ringing on stone pavement, and his eyes filled with tears of frustration.

**Also by Bob Shaw in Orbit:**

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WOODEN SPACESHIPS**

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PART I

*The Return to Land*





## Chapter 1

The lone astronaut had fallen from the very edge of space, down through thousands of miles of gradually thickening atmosphere, a drop which had lasted more than a day. In the later stages of the descent his body had been acted on by wind forces which had carried him far to the west of the capital city. Perhaps through inexperience, perhaps from a desire to be free of the restraints of the fallbag, he had opened his parachute too soon. It had been deployed a good ten miles above the planetary surface, and as a result was being wafted even farther into the sparsely populated regions which lay beyond the White River.

Toller Maraquine II, who had been patrolling the area for eight days, examined the creamy fleck of the parachute through powerful binoculars. It was an inconspicuous object, hardly as bright as the daytime stars, seemingly fixed in position beneath the great curving rim of the sister world which filled the centre of the sky. The movement of Toller's airship made it difficult to keep the parachute centred in his field of view, but he was able to pick out the tiny figure slung beneath it and he felt a growing sense of anticipation.

What would the astronaut have to report?

The very fact that the expedition had lasted longer than expected was a good omen in Toller's eyes, but in any case it would be a relief to pick the man up and transport him to Prad. Patrolling the near-featureless region, with nothing to do but return the companionable waves of farm workers, had been monotonous in the extreme, and Toller had a craving to get back to the city where he could at least find congenial company and a glass of decent wine. There was also some unfinished and highly pleasurable business with

Hariana, a blonde beauty in the Weavers' Guild. He had been in ardent pursuit of her for many days, and he sensed she had been on the verge of yielding when he had been sent away on the current irksome duty.

The airship was running easily before the easterly breeze, requiring only an occasional nudge from the jet engines to keep pace with the parachutist's lateral motion. In spite of the shade provided by the elliptical gasbag overhead, the heat on the upper deck was becoming intense, and Toller knew that the twelve men comprising his crew were as eager as he to see the mission come to an end. Their saffron airmen's blouses were dappled with sweat and their postures were as drooped as was compatible with observance of ship-board discipline.

Two hundred feet below the gondola the striated fields of the region slipped quietly by, forming patterns of stripes which flowed out to the horizon. It was now just over fifty years since the migration to Overland, and the Kolcorronian farmers had had time to impose their designs on the natural colouration of the landscape. On a planet without seasons the edible grasses and other vegetation tended to be heterogeneous, each plant following its own maturation cycle, but the farmers had painstakingly sorted them into synchronous groups to achieve the six harvests a year which had been traditional on the Old World since history began. Each field of grain displayed linear variations in colour, from the delicate green of young shoots to harvest gold and the brown of shorn earth.

"There's another ship to the south of us, sir," shouted Niskodar, the helmsman. "Same altitude or a bit higher. About two miles away."

Toller located the ship—a dark sliver low on the purple-hazed horizon—and turned his glasses on it. The magnified image showed that the craft had blue-and-yellow Sky Service markings, a fact which caused Toller some surprise. Several times in the previous eight days he had glimpsed the ship

which was patrolling the sector adjoining his to the south, but that had been at the mutual limit of the sweeps and the visual contacts had been fleeting. The newcomer was well inside Toller's assigned territory and, as far as he could determine, was closing with him as though also intending to intercept the returning parachutist.

"Get on the sunwriter," he said to Lieutenant Feer, who was at the rail beside him. "Give the commander of that ship my compliments and advise him to change course—I am on the Queen's business and will brook no interference or obstruction."

"Yes, sir," Feer replied eagerly, obviously pleased that the incident had come along to add a hint of savour to the foreday. He opened a locker and took out a sunwriter which was of the new lightweight design employing silvered mirror slats in place of the conventional glass sandwich construction. Feer aimed the instrument and worked the trigger, producing a busy clacking sound. For about a minute after he had finished there was no visible response, then a tiny sun began to blink rapidly on the distant ship.

*Good foreday, Captain Maraquine, came the pulsed message. The Countess Vantara returns your greeting. She has decided to take command of this operation in person. Your attendance is no longer required. You are hereby instructed to return to Prad immediately.*

Toller choked back the angry swear words the message had inspired in him. He had never met Countess Vantara, but he knew that she, as well as holding the rank of sky-captain, was a granddaughter of the Queen and that she habitually used the royal connection to enhance her authority. Many other commanders faced with a similar situation would have backed down, perhaps after a token protest, for fear of prejudicing their careers, but Toller was constitutionally unable to accept what he saw as a slur. His hand dropped to the hilt of the sword which had once belonged to his grandfather, and he scowled fiercely in the direction

of the intruding ship as he composed a reply to the countess's imperious message.

"Sir, do you wish to acknowledge the signal?" Lieutenant Feer's manner was absolutely correct, but a certain brightness in his eyes showed that he relished seeing Toller faced with a tricky decision. Although of subordinate rank he was somewhat the older of the two, and he almost certainly subscribed to the general view that Toller had achieved captaincy so early through family influence. It was apparent that the prospect of witnessing a duel between the privileged and the privileged had a strong appeal to the lieutenant.

"Of course I wish to acknowledge it," Toller said, hiding his irritation. "What is that woman's family name?"

"Dervonai, sir."

"All right, forget all that countess frippery and address her as Captain Dervonai. Say: Your kind offer of assistance is noted, but in this instance the presence of another vessel is likely to be more of a hindrance than a help. Continue with your own business and do not impede me in the execution of the Queen's direct orders."

A look of gratification appeared on Feer's narrow face as he beamed Toller's words out to the other ship—he had not expected an outright confrontation to develop so quickly. There was only the briefest pause before a reply came. *Your show of discourtesy, not to say insolence, has also been noted, but I will refrain from reporting it to my grandmother if you withdraw at once. I urge you to be prudent.*

"The arrogant bitch!" Toller snatched the sunwriter out of Feer's hands, aimed it and worked the trigger. *I deem it more prudent to be reported to her Majesty for discourtesy than for treason, which would be the case were I to abandon my mission. I therefore urge you to return to your needlework.*

"Needlework!" Lieutenant Feer, who had been able to read the message from the side, gave an appreciative chuckle as Toller handed the sunwriter back to him. "The lady aviator

won't appreciate that one, sir. I wonder what her reply will be."

"There it is," Toller said, having raised his binoculars just in time to discern smoke pluming out from the other ship's main jets. "She's either departing the scene in a huff or going all out to reach our objective first—and if what I've heard about the Countess Vantara is true . . . Yes! We have a race on our hands!"

"Do you want full speed?"

"What else?" Toller said. "And tell the men to put on parachutes."

At the mention of parachutes Feer's gleeful expression faded and was replaced by one of wariness. "Sir, you don't think it's going to come to—"

"Anything can happen when two ships dispute a single piece of sky." Toller injected a note of joviality into his voice, subtly punishing the lieutenant for the improprieties in his attitude. "A collision could easily result in deaths, and I would prefer it that they were all on the opposition's side."

"Yes, sir." Feer turned away, already signalling to the engineer, and a moment later the main jets began a steady roar as maximum continuous power was applied. The nose of the long gondola lifted as the jet thrust tried to rotate the entire ship about its centre of gravity, but the helmsman quickly corrected its attitude by altering the angle of the engines. He was able to do so single-handed, by means of a lever and ratchets, because the engines were of the modern lightweight type consisting of riveted metal tubes.

Until quite recently each jet would have utilised the entire trunk of a young brakka tree, and consequently would have been heavy and unwieldy. The power source was still a mixture of pikon and halvell crystals, which throughout history had been extracted from the soil by the root systems of brakka trees. Now, however, the crystals were obtained directly from the earth by means of chemical refining methods developed by Toller's father, Cassyll Maraquine.

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Industrial chemistry and metallurgy were the cornerstones of the Maraquine family's immense fortune and power—which in turn were the source of most of the personal difficulties Toller had with his parents. They had expected him to understudy his father in preparation for taking up the reins of the family's industrial empire—a prospect he had viewed with dread—and his relationship with them had been occasionally strained ever since he had chosen to enter the Sky Service in pursuit of excitement and adventure. Those two qualities had been less plentiful than he had hoped for, which was one of the reasons for his determination not to be elbowed aside on this particular occasion. . . .

He returned his attention to the astronaut, who was still a good mile above the surface of the undulating farmlands. There was no practical point in racing to the parachutist's estimated touchdown point, but it might strengthen Vantara's case if she could claim to have been at the site first. Toller guessed that she had by pure chance intercepted the sunwriter message he had relayed to the palace earlier in the day, and then had decided on a whim to take over at the interesting phase of what had been a tedious mission.

He was considering whether or not to send her a final warning message when he noticed that a line of dark blue had appeared on the western horizon. His binoculars confirmed that there was a substantial body of water ahead, and on consulting his charts he found that it was called Lake Amblaraate. It was more than five miles across, which meant that the astronaut had little chance of drifting himself clear of its edges, but it was traversed by a line of small, low-lying islands from which a skilful parachutist ought to be able to select a good landing site.

Toller beckoned Feer to him and showed him the chart. "I think we may be in for some sport," he said. "Those islets look scarcely big enough to accommodate a parade ground. If yonder flyaway seed manages to plant himself on one of them the task of plucking him up again will call for some

## THE RETURN TO LAND

fancy airmanship. I wonder if the lady aviator, as you dubbed her, will remain so anxious to claim the honour."

"The important thing is that the messenger and his dispatches are conveyed safely to the Queen," Feer replied. "Does it really matter who picks him up?"

Toller gave him a broad smile. "Oh yes, lieutenant—it matters a great deal."

He leaned on the gondola's rail, enjoying the cooling effect of the gathering slipstream, and watched the other ship draw nearer on the converging course. The range was still too great for him to be able to see any of the crew clearly, even with binoculars, but he knew they were all female. It had been Queen Daseene herself who had insisted on women being allowed to enter the Sky Service. That had been during the emergency of twenty-six years earlier, at the time of the threatened invasion from the Old World, but the tradition persisted to the present day, though for mainly practical reasons it had been decided not to use mixed crews. Toller, who had spent most of his active service on the far side of Overland, had not previously encountered any of the very few airships crewed by women, and he was interested in finding out if gender had any noticeable effect on ship-handling techniques.

As he had expected, both ships reached Lake Amblaraate while the parachutist was still high above them. Toller judged which of the islands was most likely to provide the touchdown point, ordered his ship down to a hundred feet and began cruising in a circle around the triangular patch of green. To his annoyance, Vantara adopted a similar tactic, taking up a station at the opposite side of the circle. The two ships rotated as though attached to the ends of an invisible rod, the intermittent blasts of their jets disturbing colonies of birds which nested on the low ground.

"This is a waste of good crystals," Toller grumbled.

"A criminal waste." Feer nodded, permitting himself a hint of a smile over the fact that his commander was



frequently reprimanded by the Service's quartermaster general for using up his stores of pikon and halvell at a greater rate than any other captain because of his impatient flying style.

"That woman should be grounded and—" Toller broke off as the parachutist, apparently having agreed with his audience on a choice of landing site, abruptly furled part of his canopy, increasing his fall-speed and steepening his angle of descent.

"Get us down there with all possible speed!" Toller ordered. "Use all four anchor guns on first contact—we must land on the first pass."

The smile returned to Toller's face as he saw that the crucial moment had come while his ship was well to the west of the island, so that a single natural manoeuvre would bring it into position for an upwind landing. It very much looked as though the aerial wheel of chance had declared against Vantara. He glanced again at the Countess's ship and was appalled to see that it was already breaking out of the flight pattern and beginning a steep descent to the island, obviously intent on making an illegal downwind landing.

"The bitch," Toller whispered. "The stupid bitch!"

He watched helplessly as the other vessel, its speed enhanced by the following breeze, speared down through the lowest levels of the air and drove towards the centre of the island. *Too fast*, he thought. *The anchors will never take the strain!* Puffs of smoke appeared on each side of the gondola as its keel touched the grass and the anchor cannon fired their barbs into the ground. The ship slowed abruptly, its gasbag distorting. For a moment it looked as though Toller's prediction would be proved wrong, then both ropes on the left side of the gondola snapped. The ship rolled and turned, hauling its rear anchor out of the soil, and would have broken free had not the crew member on the solitary remaining anchor begun paying out line at maximum possible speed, thus easing the strain on the rope. Against the odds the single