

Rolling Stone

Tally considered the bright ribbon, barely fifty centimetres wide, which stretched up to the Stone, nearly ten thousand kilometres above here. Funny how, after five years living in the Macro Space Complex - an ever-growing set of labs and production centres branching out like a spiderweb from the ribbon thirty six thousand kilometres above the equator, precisely so as not to feel any acceleration of any kind - funny how one still tended to think in terms of up and down. Of course, there were the spinners, where everyone had to spend at least two hours out of every twenty four, to make sure their bodies didn't forget entirely about gravity. Maybe it was this that didn't allow one's brain to get over the related concepts either.

In any case, she now bent back slightly and switched off the magnetic soles that were keeping her fixed to the Ring, which, like a bead on an abacus, encircled the ribbon. Her body continued its slow rotation backwards unchecked, until the Stone was straight in front of her. Seen from here, the Stone - thus named because it kept the ribbon tight in the same way as such an object would a string it were being spun with - looked simply like the brightest star in the Galaxy, not a space station. 'Zero rotation', she said to the suit computer. Small amounts of hydrogen peroxide were fired out into space until the desired state was achieved. The inside of her helmet had a holographic covering fashioned to reflect only the six hundred and forty nanometre laser the suit used to display its information, so that it served as a computer screen as well as a barrier between the cosy little biosphere inside and the immense ultra high vacuum without.

'Target.'

With the pad in her left glove she placed the small red 'x' on the screen over the image of the Stone. 'Lock target. Direct acceleration one metre per second squared. Tangential acceleration variable automatic. Display on. Start.'

Her suit began to move forward fairly slowly, at a just perceptible tenth of a G. Just as the capsules which went up and down the ribbon regularly, she in her suit would also have to provide the difference in momentum for the higher orbit she was aiming at. She hoped the two auxiliary fuel tanks she had grabbed for the purpose would be, as her rather hasty mental arithmetic had seemed to assure, enough, or she would be left stranded, peacefully floating off into space.

'Alarm at three thousand seconds. Music list 24. Shuffle. Play.'

Now all she had to do was wait and try to relax. The ribbon, about fifty metres from her, had no noticeable markings on it, so it was useless for gauging her speed with. In the retro-display, the Complex was beginning to fall back, but the Stone remained immobile and infinitely far.

When the music stopped and the alarm went off, it seemed to her she was not moving at all, but rather just hanging near the ribbon, about half way between the Complex and the Stone. However, she knew herself to be travelling now at more than eight thousand kilometres an hour, directly away from the former and towards the latter. She had about a minute and a half now in which to start slowing down before deviation from her course would be the only way of preventing her from slamming into her objective.

'Target remain locked. Direct acceleration minus one metre per second squared.'

In another fifty minutes or so, she would be there, and the destruction could commence.

* * *

'Hello Crick, I hope I'm not interrupting anything.'

'Richard, what a delightful surprise!', said Crick, looking anything but delighted. 'To what do I owe the honour?' He floated over to his director and shook him meekly by the hand.

'Well, it's to do with the results we've been getting from you recently. You see, the structures you and Tally have been obtaining on your surfaces recently are really interesting. So interesting, in fact, that most of my staff are of the opinion that they are computer-generated and not experimental data at all. In the end, I decided to pop up and have a look at your lab for myself, just to prove them all wrong.'

Crick didn't say anything, but seemed to squirm in mid-air somewhat. After a moment, he muttered: 'How absurd. Of course, have a look around.'

This Richard proceeded to do. He floated about, peering into the vacuum chambers. These, of course, were much larger than the ones you would find on earth, as all you had to do to achieve a pretty good vacuum was to open an airlock for a couple of minutes.

'By the way, where is Tally?', asked Richard absently as he scowled at an electron diffraction pattern on a screen.

'Oh, she's in her room. She wasn't feeling too well.'

'Crick, what the Hell is that contraption in there! You're going to have to do a lot of explaining, my friend.'

Then the speakers crackled and they heard a mournful voice. It was Tally.

'OK, Crick, I've got the thrusters going. I've done what you wanted. Now please have mercy, I entreat you not to...'

'Tally!', cried Richard, glancing over at the ever-paler looking Crick. 'This is Richard here. What on earth are you talking about?'

'Richard? Are you with Crick? Is he at his computer?'

'Crick? No, he's edging suspiciously towards the door. Crick, stay right where you are!'

'Oh, Richard, don't let him near the computer, for Heaven's sake!'

At that moment a shrill alarm went off in the lab, as indeed all over the Complex, and on a monitor flashed the words: "Maximum Alert: Shaft Tension Drop".

'That was me, Richard', wailed Tally. 'I've got the thrusters going!'

'What thrusters? Where are you?'

'In the Stone. The safety thrusters, in case of damage to the ribbon, to stop the Stone flying off. I've got them going, and the elevator will be destroyed. I'm so sorry, Crick forced me to do it. He controls the bots in my head, you don't know what he can do!' She started to sob.

'What bots? I can't believe this!'

'Tally, you're lying, you're mad', stammered Crick.

'Nanobots', continued the desperate voice over the shrieking siren. 'We didn't want to give up our previous research, so we've been making up the surface stuff and carrying on with the nanobots for tumours. As no one else new, we were experimenting on ourselves. But once they were in my brain, Crick found he could threaten me into doing what he wanted. I think he's been paid to destroy the elevator!'

Richard swung round, but Crick was nowhere to be seen.

'Listen, Tally. If what you say is true, he can't hurt you now. Can you reverse the thrust?'

'Not from here. I've already turned them off, but for reverse I'll have to make my way to the central unit. And I've already overridden the automatic, so there's nothing you can do from down there! Oh, what have I done!'

'Tally, is there anyone else up there with you?'

'No, just my unworthy self'

'OK, human life is more important than a lift. Get yourself out of there before you pick up too much speed, you'll make it back to the Complex in your suit'

'I haven't got much fuel left, I won't be able to decelerate. I'm going back to the central unit to try and save this thing. Good bye, Richard.'

'Tally, wait, there's nothing to be done, get out, we'll pick you up in a shuttle!'

There was no answer.

Richard cursed several times in crescendo and then rang the Complex director, to explain what had happened. The ribbon, which was already hurtling through the ring at a few hundred kilometres an hour, would have to be severed in order to save the Complex. Fortunately, conservation of angular momentum would see to it that the Stone, no longer in a stable orbit, would tumble away east from the Complex and not hit it on its inexorable way down. One could only hope that what didn't burn up would land in some ocean. The Complex would be evacuated anyway though until safety could be assured.

The speakers crackled once more.

'Richard, this is Tally. I have failed. I haven't been able to reverse it. I have caused devastation and misery. Now only this most horrifying death by incineration can redeem me...'

'Tally, what nonsense. You mustn't blame yourself. It was Crick's doing and he'll pay for it. Now get out of there, and we'll pick you up.'

Tally put her helmet back on and did as she was told. Once out of the airlock, she set what was left of her fuel to counteracting the momentum she had gained along with the stone as it was pulled down by the weight of the ribbon. This done, she had only to wait for the shuttle.

'Music list. Like a Rolling Stone. Play.'

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Two days later, at a hospital near her hometown, Tally had the nanobots extracted from her brain. No surgery was needed, as she knew the frequencies they responded to and in what way.

Crick was never found, and though he may have perished, it was generally assumed that, in the general confusion, he must have made it to one of the evacuation shuttles and escaped unnoticed.

A week after the catastrophe, Tally went all alone on a holiday in the Alps, to recover from her ordeal. In the small town she stayed at she met with a short bearded man in dark glasses who presented her with a suitcase. She opened it, inspected its contents, and closed it with an air of satisfaction.

'Now that it's over', she inquired of the mysterious man, 'I wonder if you would be so kind as to tell me what purpose you had, whoever you are, in bringing down the Elevator?'

'I'm sorry, Dr. I would not be authorised to tell you even if I knew myself. I would suggest you didn't let such trivial questions interfere with the enjoyment of your newly acquired wealth.

Goodbye.'