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## LESLIE PERRI

### *Space Episode*



**S**HE stared at her two companions for a moment and then a sickening revulsion replaced fear, the fear that held each of the three in a terrible grip of inertia. Her slim hands bit hard into the back of one of the metal seats. The tiny rocket ship was plummeting to destruction, careening dizzily through space. Here, in the atmosphereless void, their motion was negligible to them, but instruments told a grim story; unless they could blast the forward rockets very soon they would be caught in the Earth's titanic grip and drawn with intensifying acceleration to its surface. They would come screaming down like some colossal shell and the planet's surface would become a molten sore where they struck. And now, while precious seconds fled, the three of them stood transfixed, immobile.

What had happened? A simple thing, an unimportant thing in space. They had encountered a meteor swarm, one utterly infinitesimal in the sight of the looming worlds about them. But it had left one of its members jammed in their forward rocket nozzles, the tubes which determined whether they would land safely or crash in a blaze of incandescence. They had turned off their operating power rather than wreck the ship completely; with no escape for the rocket-blasts, their motors would be smashed to pieces.

The first they knew of disaster, striking unheralded from space, was the ear-shattering impact of the meteor. No sound; just concussion that was worse than any deafening crash. Then the power generator dial shot to the danger line; the ship began to plunge,

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teleplate showing the universe seemingly turning fast somersaults as their ship careened end over end. The truth was evident at once; that impediment must be removed from the forward tubes. One of them must volunteer to clear away the obstruction, or all were doomed.

A time for heroics, this, but none of them felt like heroes. Erik and Michael stood side by side, a sort of bewildered terror on their faces—a “this can’t happen to us” look. Neither had moved or spoken a word since the first investigation. Erik, upon discovering that the outer door was gone, had flung his space suit to the floor with an impotent curse. For that shorn-off door meant that whoever left the ship now could never return; it was a one-way passage. The taller of the two men played with the instruments, spinning them this way and that, then stood waiting. Waiting for heaven alone knew what miracle to happen.

Lida found her confidence in them, that fine confidence she had known up to now, dissolving away, leaving her with an empty feeling which was greater than any fear could have been. She could not square them, as they were now, with the men she had known before—through innumerable Terrestrial dangers on land, sea, and in the clouds. The three had had a planet-wide reputation as reckless and danger-despising. And now. . . .

“Erik!” she cried suddenly. “Damn it, this is not a tea party! We have to do something now. Toss coins or draw lots. Either one of us goes out there now, or we all crack up.”

Michael glanced at her dully as she spoke, his tongue moving over dry lips. Erik closed his eyes, brushing his hair with a limp gesture. Lida’s hands tightened on the back seat; what was wrong with them? She bent forward slightly, her heart beating like a dull and distant drum. The dials on the control board frightened her; she whispered

now. “You see what little time we have left? Nothing’s going to happen unless we make it happen. We’re falling, falling fast.”

Michael slumped in his seat, dropped his head to his knees groaning. Erik looked at her vaguely for a long second, then turned his eyes to the teleplate. Cold perspiration stood on his forehead. This was the dashing Erik Vane, onetime secret dream hero, close companion since that day, years back, when he and Mike had fished her out of the wreck of her plane somewhere in the Pacific. Suddenly, it all seemed amusing to her; the question of sacrifice lay between Michael and Erik—this was strictly men’s work. But they were finding life a sweet thing—a sudden burst of laughter overcame her. There was such an amusing impotency to Erik’s strength and the dash of his clothes; the knuckles stood white on his hands, cold damp fear glittering on his forehead.

And what of Michael, the gallant? He slumped in his seat, holding his face in shaking hands. Could this be the same man who had saved them all by scaling what was virtually a sheer cliff by night and obtaining help from neighboring aborigines? All the dangers they had faced together and overcome together now crowded in her memory, one piling upon another. Scores of times one of them had unhesitatingly faced unpleasant death for the sake of all; she had been no exception.

And there was another picture that made her laugh, too, but it wasn’t a gay laugh. The picture of Michael opening the outer door of the rocket on the night they left, bowing gallantly, speaking extravagantly dear words of welcome to her on their first space flight. Lida clung to a chair, eyes blurring, as she gazed at the control panel, now a welter of glittering metal, polished and useless.

Michael's head shot up suddenly. "Stop laughing! Stop it!" He covered his face with his hands and Lida felt sick; he was crying.

She paused, her eyes filled with bitterness and contempt. Then she smiled wearily, feeling strangely akin to the vacuum outside them. There was only a sudden decision and she made it. This was her exit and to hell with heroes!

She bowed to them scornfully, waving aside their fears with a flippant sweep of her hand. Only one regret remained now. They could have chosen fairly, made a pretense of flipping a coin. She looked cocky and defiant now, gathering tools for her job. A grin twisted her mouth into a quivering scarlet line. Would she make a television headline? Would they name a ramp after her, or, perhaps, some day, a rocket division? There were several photos of her in newspaper files; she hoped they would pick a good one when they ran the story. Oh, hers would be a heroic end.

She put aside the word "end" mentally and turned her attention to what had to be done. Her decision made, she would have to act swiftly or the sacrifice would be useless. The cabin's interior was becoming unreal and horrible with apathy. She ignored the others; they were like figures in a nightmare.

The outer door had been destroyed, no doubt about that. Erik was almost blown from the cabin when he opened the inner door. She would need magnetic clamps from the outset; the neutralizing effect of the airlock between the two doors was gone; that spelled doom for the one who ventured beyond the cabin. Once out, there was no returning. The force of escaping air would not permit it.

On the black, glistening floor of the cabin lay Erik's glittering, iridium-woven spacesuit. He had ventured that much at least, pulled it from a locker and tossed it to the floor. Fortunately the

gyroscopes were working. She stepped into the suit, smiling grimly. It was much too long and wide all over. Her fingers were swift and sure, adjusting the steel clamps.

Michael was still in a semi-coma. Erik was watching her reflection. He knew what she was doing. His shoulders were rigid now, but he made no move to stop her. And now memory played the final ironic trick. She recalled Michael saying, with his arm around her shoulders, “When we get to Mars, you’ll be the glamor girl of the planet. It’ll be wonderful, Lida—just the two of us.” His eyes had hinted at things he did not put into words and even though she knew that nothing of the kind would happen so long as there were three of them, she had been glad for him then.

She jerked up the front zipper, trying to close her memories with the same motion. There weren’t many seconds to spare now. She fastened the tools to her belt, checked them and with them her signal sending button with the receiving set on the instrument board. Then, with shaking hands she could not help, she picked up the helmet.

Michael looked up suddenly, incredulity filling his eyes. Erik wheeled around from the teleplate.

“Lida!” he said, his voice hoarse.

Gone was the bitterness and contempt now. “So long, Erik,” she replied softly. “I’ll do the best I can. Watch for the signal on the control board. I’ll send it through when the rocket nozzles are clear—that is, if I’m not blown from the ship.”

He swayed for an instant, lurched over to where she stood. “I can’t let you do it. Give me the suit, Lida. I’ll go.” She looked at him, cynical and proud, her eyes glittering like steel and her small chin thrust forward determinedly. These words he had said—what were they but words he flung from him, reaching out to pull together the tatters of his self-respect? She pitied him.

“There’s no time for that now,” she replied crisply. “Good luck.”

On a sudden impulse she darted over to Michael and struck him sharply across the face. He looked up suddenly, his eyes widening in amazement. “Aren’t you going to say—goodbye?”

“Lida,” he muttered, “don’t go. Don’t leave us now; it won’t do any good, Lida. Take off the suit and we’ll all go together.”

She shook her head defiantly. “No! There’s still time. Goodbye, Michael.” She fastened on the helmet, her hands cold. Steeling herself against the sudden chill of terror that was seeping through her, she forced herself to the inner door. She pressed the electric release, her hands, heavily swathed, clinging to the steel ring. The panel slid open slowly; a buzzing sound would be filling the cabin now, but she could not hear it. She could feel their eyes on her. With a magnetic clamp in readiness, she waited for the moment when the aperture would be wide enough. Then suddenly, pressing the button in reverse, she plunged through and was hurtled against the wall of the air lock. The magnetic clamp held!

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Lida glanced around her. The inner door was shut already; this, then, was her final goodbye. There could be no returning to the cabin. She was conscious of a dull, throbbing pain in her arm. It was numb from the impact. Frantically, trying to save time, she worked it up and down until gradually life returned to it. Then she made her way to the ragged-edged gash in the hull. Nothing remained of the outer door. Clinging to a large metal splinter, she made a hurried survey.

The path of the meteor and the damage it had done was clearly visible. It had ploughed a deep welt-like furrow in the side of the ship and piled melted metal and large chunks from the side over the nozzle ends. There were probably meteor fragments as well.

But her job would be easy even so. Judicious blasting with the torch would take care of everything. Placing a heavily padded foot in the still glowing furrow, she detached a magnetic clamp from her belt.

Space lay around her and, as she worked, she felt a nameless dread seep into her being. The face of the planet was directly *above*. Desperately, she tried not to look at it. Despite her efforts, she could not help but glance upward at its looming immensity, cringing as she did so. It was so horribly large—falling on her. It seemed to be drawing her *up*, the way an electromagnet catches a piece of scrap-iron. And around her was space, space filled with pinpoints, billiard balls, and footballs of light. She knew she must not stop to look at them. They would charm away her senses and burn out her eyes. She knew this without ever having been told. There was a horror in space, not anything alive, but a dread that chilled and stole away one's life.

Slowly, carefully, she made her way up the side of the ship, using her torch, when necessary, to clear obstructions. Finally she reached the nose, rested against the boldly painted nameplate *Ares*. A sense of the horrible irony of the situation struck her. If they had immediately fired the forward rockets when the meteor struck, the tremendous blast furnace would have melted the obstruction, for, she saw now, it was very slight. Given a chance to harden, however, it was a different story; to blast now, with it there, would blow out the tubes.

She understood, now, why men who had faced all manner of Terrestrial dangers had become weak and helpless here. They had been fools, all of them, to come on this flight without conditioning—space was no place for humans unless they had been conditioned to it gradually. And they had thought themselves so clever in the way they had evaded the requirements for a license.

She pressed the signal button at her waist as the last trace of the obstruction was eaten away. An instant later, there was an answering flash in the small metal tube next to it; they had been watching the control button. A single tear ran down her nose as she thought: "I hope they go to hell, damn them."

Pulling her hand from the magnetic clamp, she straightened up stiffly, and, with a hard, quick push jumped clear of the ship. It swerved suddenly and with dizzying violence knocked her clear of their rockets. She had not considered the imminence of them before. The thought of being charred. . . .

Earth loomed above her. She had not the acceleration of the ship. Soon it would leave her behind. She would float out here in an orbit of her own, a second moon. Perhaps a meteor would strike her some day; perhaps in the future space-voyagers would find her and bring her home. Soon, within an hour at the most, there would be no more air. But why wait hours? With a sudden movement, she threw open the helmet of her suit.

The ship was gone now. Michael and Erik were safe. And something tenuous had clamped itself over her nose and mouth so that she could no longer breathe. For an instant she struggled, lungs bursting, as in the throes of a nightmare. Her thoughts cried out, "Michael! Michael!"

The darkness gathered her in.