

Nicobar Lane: The Soul Eater's Story

by Mike Resnick

It seemed that I had been alone for millennia.

I can remember the creation of the galaxy, the white-hot gasses coalescing into suns and worlds, the ever-increasing black hole at the very epicenter.

I can remember the first tentative attempts of starfaring races to populate the worlds of the Milky Way. I remember the laughably small ships racing from planet to planet, and ultimately from system to system.

I remember the explosive wars, the deathdealing weapons, the campaigns, the englobements, the explosions and implosions, the lifeless bodies spinning off into space to take up their eternal orbits.

But what I mostly remember is the aching loneliness, the terrible, frightening knowledge that I was finally the last member of my race in a cold and impersonal galaxy. There was no one with whom I could share my hopes and my fears, my dreams and my longings and my terror.

I'm sure that I had a beginning, a birth, but it was so many billions of years ago that I can no longer remember it. Once, so long ago that I can hardly recall it, there were others of my kind. We floated through the void, fed upon the vast dust clouds, touched in a way that I cannot begin to explain.

Then, one by one, they vanished. Killed, I presume, since otherwise we are eternal. It seemed that one moment the galaxy was filled with us, and the next instant there was only me.

And so it remained -- for days, for years, for centuries, for millennia, for time past measuring. The loneliness closed in around me, became almost tangible, beat me down and dulled my perceptions. Oh, there were still ships traversing the void, but they held no interest for me. They were not my kind, and I was not theirs, and communication seemed futile. I fell into regular but mindless patterns, moving from one feeding ground to another, trying desperately to forget the past until at last I succeeded, and then trying just as desperately to remember it.

And then one day I sensed something different, yet similar. It was a small metal ship, barely a thousandth of my own length. It was not unlike a thousand others I had seen and attempted to avoid -- but this time I was struck by a loneliness as deep and bitter as my own. I knew it could not belong to the ship, which is an inanimate thing, but rather to the being that commanded it. I reached out a mental tendril, and was appalled.

The pilot, indeed the only being aboard the ship, thought of itself as a "man". Its name was Nicobar Lane, and it was a professional hunter -- which is to say, it killed things for its livelihood. I had hoped two starfarers might have something in common, but I could not force myself to make contact with the killer of so many things, let alone consider forming any kind of personal bond with it.

The ship had seen me, or possibly Nicobar Lane had sensed my presence, I did not know which at the time, but there seemed only one thing to do, and so I did it -- I fled at many times light speeds. He followed for a few moments, but I darted into the parsecs-long dust cloud, and he pursued me no further.

I was safe, and he was gone -- and yet ... and yet, there was something about him, something more than the loneliness. Self-appraisal, perhaps. Not exactly regret, for he had no regrets about his occupation -- he felt that he was the best of his race at it, and probably he was -- but regret that the needs and economics of the galaxy should require a being who was so skilled at hunting and killing. Of all the beings of all the galaxy's many races with which I had formed a fleeting bond, only he was totally,

painfully, tragically honest with himself.

There were complexities there, complexities of such a nature that I suspected no one else had ever noted or analyzed them, that Nicobar Lane himself had no idea they were there or that he was anything other than a skilled killer of animals with a vague sense of dissatisfaction concerning his life.

He intrigued me -- a totally honest being. And a lonely one. By rights I should have fled halfway across the galaxy, lost myself in the Greater Magellanic Cloud where he could never find me ... but I was as curious about him as he was about me.

So I remained in the area, feeding locally, making only a perfunctory effort to hide -- and before long I found him again, or perhaps he found me, I am still not clear which. This time he was not alone. He had another of his race with him, an old man whose every thought and every emotion welcomed Death. A beam of some sort leaped from his ship. I analyzed it, saw that it could do me no harm, and made no attempt to avoid it. Instead, I let it drive through my molecules, concentrated on the men's minds, and let them feel what I had felt.

It killed the old man, but I felt no regret, for he wanted nothing more than to die. But its effect on Nicobar Lane was electrifying. I could not separate all his reactions, but primary were pain, and pleasure, and surprise.

And then fury.

I had not meant to hurt him, only to share at the most basic level what he was doing to me. For the moment that we were in contact, I found to my surprise that it was not the pain that had elicited his fury, but rather the pleasure. Even he did not understand what he had felt or was feeling now, but he knew that it made him uncomfortable, and that I was the source of it, so he turned his rage upon me. I fled but remained nearby, in case his fury should dissipate -- and after a time, it did.

We met again, and again, and again. Each time we shared the bond, as he came closer and closer to leaving his past life and joining me in the present. And each time we met, I perceived yet a new emotion: shame.

And, along with the shame, one more reaction: guilt.

Still, neither the shame nor the guilt stopped him from flying into the vast interstellar void to approach me. He had to break away a number of times to refuel his vessel, but each time he came back we intertwined our emotional tendrils -- and yet never once did I perceive him to be free of the shame or the guilt.

And then came the day that he approached me out by a red binary, and I discovered that he had an alien being with him, a being that was neither lonely nor honest, but simply filled with a sense of purpose -- and that purpose was to kill me. I was sure Nicobar Lane would not allow this to happen, so I made no move to flee.

Then a beam shot out, and I felt pain such as I had never known before. The agony came close to burning all my neural circuits, but finally it subsided enough for me to try to bond telepathically with Nicobar Lane and find out why he had done this, or if it had been done without his permission.

What I received shocked me almost as much as the burst of energy. In the past, he had thought of me as the Dreamwish Beast and the Starduster and a host of other appellations -- but now, with a cold fury fueled by his shame, he knew me only as the Soul Eater, and there was no shred of mercy in his thoughts, only an overwhelming desire to end my existence, as if that would bring peace to his own.

I knew that I must flee if I were to remain alive, and in my panic I did not bother to analyze whether remaining alive was a worthy goal for one such as me. I began racing toward the rim of the galaxy with Nicobar Lane's ship in hot pursuit. When I reached it, I realized that I would not have the energy to cross the enormous void between galaxies, and there was no food for me between the Milky Way and Andromeda, so I turned back and headed toward the Galactic Core. The ship matched my every move, and as I neared the black hole that filled the Core, I changed my angle of approach and let it slingshot me into another universe.

The ship followed me, but I noticed a difference when he emerged. The alien was dead, and it was just him and me, alone in an unknown universe. He took up the pursuit again, I fled again, and finally, when I was almost out of range, another beam of deadly energy shot out and struck me.

I could bear no more pain. I had tried to form a link with this most unusual of creatures. I wanted only to bond with him, to share his loneliness and his sorrow, and this was the result: he had all but killed me. I was in a new universe, but it varied only in detail from the one I had so recently departed. There were none of my kind here. In fact, Nicobar Lane and I might well be the only two living things in the whole of this new creation -- and his sole desire was to destroy me.

I had the energy to race away again, but to what end? An eternity of loneliness? Or, as my energies lessened, a painful death that had been anticipated for days or months or years? Better to have it over with right here, right now.

I came to a stop and turned to him.

You have won, I tried to say. _I do not know why you have grown to hate and fear me, because I have never tried to harm you. I was lonely. You were lonely. We are two thinking beings. I thought that was enough. Evidently I was wrong, though I still do not know why. Go ahead and end it now. I will not run again._

Then the strangest thing happened. It was almost as if he could not only read my thoughts but see into my very soul, and I could respond in kind. He stared at me in his viewscreen, a score of conflicting emotions crossing his face.

Finally he reached for a control, and I prepared for my death.

"Ah, hell," he said, and fired a pulse that seemed to engulf me in warmth and -- dare I say it? -- love. I felt it, analyzed it, returned it mentally ... and finally, for the first time in eons, I was no longer alone.

We approached the black hole again, and soon emerged into this, our universe.

We remain at the edge of civilization, just close enough for him to get fuel for his ship when he needs it. Then we race off to the Magellanic Clouds, content with each other's thoughts and company.

I know that Man is a short-lived race, and soon he will be gone, and I will be alone again.

But having experienced the bond we shared, I may be lonely again, but I will never be without hope again -- for now I know that the Maker of All Things has not forgotten me. I have found this warmth and intimacy once, and I will seek it again and again until the stars come racing back and the universe implodes into a single atom.

And even then, at the very last nanosecond of existence, what is left of me will still remember what is left of him.

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