

## Nippers

by Jack Lyon

Life ain't easy here on Outpost. You do what you have to do to survive. The winters are cold, and I got real sick during the last one. Besides, I'm getting old—seventy-two on my last birthday. Mattie ain't getting any younger either, and she's diabetic to boot. Every time she gets sick, I'm afraid I'll lose her. Our twenty-year-old niece, Helen, nurses us when we're doing poorly, and she does more than half the work around the place. I know Helen would like to leave and make a life of her own, but I ain't seen a boy good enough for her yet. Anyway, we couldn't make it without her.

When I was young, I worked in a technocolony—did electronic assembly. I was good at it, too. Then I heard they was mining rare metals on Outpost, so I thought I could make a fortune prospecting, like some of the others had done. Turns out I was wrong, so I took up farming. Not that farming is all that profitable, but at least you get to eat pretty regular. Anyway, we're too old and sick to try something new. And Mattie wouldn't leave this place even if she could.

My land is rocky and full of clay—probably some of the poorest ground on the planet. This year we planted turnips and carrots and squash and peas. They grew, more or less. But long about mid-season, the nippers come through like an iron army, big as dogs, chomping and clacking their way over the fields at night. They ate everything that even looked like a vegetable. Then the ones that was full headed off over the mountains to deliver their goods to the natives. The rest stayed out in the brush waiting for more vegetables to grow, and every so often a few still run into the fields and steal some more. Once one got caught on a rock, and I smashed it with a shovel, but most of the time they're too quick to catch or even to shoot. We've put up fences, but the nippers just bite through or dig under.

The natives make a living pretty much by stealing from everyone else, and they're good at it, too. They're real clever at building machines like the nippers—out of stolen parts, of

course. You don't see natives very often. Last year somebody caught one stealing a cow, and I went clear into town to watch while they killed it. They cut it apart, piece by piece. I say the native had it coming. They won't have nothing to do with humans except take what we produce. Send in the nippers! That's their motto. If I could just get rid of them things, life would be at least a little easier.

That's why I was interested when the salesman come along. Just as bold as you please he come through the front gate and knocked on our big wooden door. Mattie let him in, of course, and they spent several minutes with her googawing about what was a handsome young man like him doing clear out on Outpost and would he like anything to eat, because we was just getting ready to have breakfast. I come downstairs in my working clothes, and the young feller fell all over himself bowing and scraping the way them technocolony folks do. I knew his kind—big talker, good with women, bad with money, and unreliable. Six months from now he'd be out of work. Mattie introduced him to me—his name was Joe Cooper. And right about then is when Helen come in from the kitchen with a plate of biscuits.

Being around Helen all the time, I sort of forget how beautiful she is with her long, blond hair and her big brown eyes. No doubt she's the best-looking girl on Outpost. When the young man seen Helen, his mouth dropped open and his eyes bugged out like turnips, and he dropped his sample case right on the floor. Lucky for him, Mattie come to his rescue, or he'd probably still be standing there. "Why don't you have a seat at the table?" she said.

He got ahold of himself and sort of fell into a chair, and the rest of us sat down too. As Mattie passed the biscuits around, I noticed Helen was watching that young man about as close as he was watching her. We don't get many young men out here. Naturally, quite a few have been interested in Helen, but, like I say, none of them have amounted to much. Besides, most of them are a little afraid of her uncle.

"Well, Joe," I said, "why don't you tell us what you're doing way out here."

He smoothed back his blond hair. "Mr. Brown," he said, "if I told you I had a way to stop the nippers from eating your vegetables, what would you say?"

"I'd say tell me what it is."

"Farm Technologies Incorporated has created a device that reprograms any nippers within five miles to eat nothing but rocks. I'd be happy to give you a demonstration." He smiled at Helen, and she blushed. "Maybe you'd like to watch too."

"Helen's got her own work to do," I said.

After breakfast, we went out to the field behind the house. Sure enough, three or four nippers was running up and down the furrows. Joe took a little aluminum box out of his sample case, set it on the ground, and flipped a switch on the front panel.

The result was amazing. Them nippers stopped dead still. Then all of a sudden they was running all over that field, just eating rocks like they was the most delicious vegetables in the world. I thought about how the natives would look when they opened up the nippers and found all them rocks, and I laughed till I had to hold my sides. It was the greatest thing I ever seen.

"Joe," I said, "how much you want for one of them boxes?"

"Mr. Brown," he said earnestly, "I've been thinking about that. I'd like to *give* you that box—no charge at all."

"What's the catch?"

"You're a plain man, and so am I. When I leave Outpost, I'd like to take Helen with me." He said it just as bold as nippers eat vegetables.

"Can't do it," I said. "Mattie and I are too old. Helen practically runs this place. Without her, I don't think we could make it."

"I certainly understand, sir. But I've got to tell you I've traveled to most of the colonies selling one thing or another. I've seen lots of beautiful women, but not one who even comes close to Helen." He drew himself up to his full height. "I've been looking for a woman that beautiful ever since I was old enough to know what a beautiful woman was. I'm young, but I know what I want."

"You know what you want, huh?" I said. "How many jobs you held in the past two years?"

"Four," he said, looking down. "But the one I've got now is really going to amount to something."

"Too bad *you* ain't," I said. I turned and walked away from the field.

"Mr. Brown, please wait," he said, running after me. "Just forget what I said, all right? Are you still interested in one of my machines?"

"Depends on the price," I said, still walking.

"Two hundred silver," he said. "Not much, really."

I stopped and looked him square in the eye. "Not much, huh? That would take every bit of savings I've got."

"But wouldn't it be worth it? Look at your field. What would it be worth to you to save the three-fourths of your crop that you're losing now?"

I looked out at the nearly empty furrows. There was still some squash plants and a few root crops untouched, but the rest was a disaster.

"All right," I said. "I'll take one. Then I want you out of here."

We went back to the house, and I paid him. Then he gave me one of the machines from his case, with instructions and warranty. Helen had been out back putting laundry on the clothesline, but I noticed she poked her head around the corner as we finished our business.

"Thank you, Mr. Brown," the salesman said. As he walked away, he waved, but he was waving at Helen, not at me.

When he was out of sight, I went around the corner, where Helen was still standing. "What do you think you're doing?" I asked. "You thinking about that young man?"

"No, Uncle," she said, real quick.

"Good. Then get back to your laundry." I watched until she went out back; then I went out to milk the goats.

The next morning after breakfast I looked out the back window, and there was Helen and that salesman talking under the apple tree. I was just getting ready to holler when he kissed her. Then he jumped over the fence and come around to the front of the house and up the walk, trying to look like he'd just arrived. Just then Helen come in the back door and went upstairs. When he knocked, I opened the door.

"What do you want?" I asked, and I didn't smile, either.

"I just came to see if your new machine was working all right for you," he said.

"No you didn't," I said. "You come to talk to Helen. But it ain't right. You trying to take Helen, that's just the same as if you come in here and tried to take my crops, only worse. You take Helen, you might just as well kill us outright, 'cause we can't make it without her. Now you get out of here, and you stay out. I see you here again, you might not get another chance to leave. You get my drift?"

He left, but the way he stalked off down the path, I knew he'd be back. When I turned back into the house, I could hear Helen crying up in her bedroom.

I took my new machine and went out into the field to see if I could turn some more nippers into rock eaters. A few of them had finally found the squash plants way out there in the furrows, and I could see their metal jaws moving through the leaves. It was funny, but I almost felt kind of sorry for them. Oh, I knew they wasn't really alive—they was just machines sent in by the natives to pick up some food. But they seemed alive, smelling out the vegetables. They kept trying to fill their bellies, but they never got to keep what they worked for. Someone was always taking it away from them. But they didn't ever give up.

"You and me, we're a lot alike," I said to the nippers. I didn't even turn on the machine. I just let them eat and eat and eat.

When I got back to the house, I knew what to do. I got a screwdriver out of the toolbox and opened up the machine. I was glad I'd worked in a technocolony—it didn't take long to figure out the circuits. I made a few simple adjustments, and then I was done.

Helen went to bed early that evening, but she didn't really go to bed. She was packing. I could hear her opening and closing her dresser drawers. Mattie stood up, but she didn't know what was going on. "Aren't you coming to bed, Tom?" she asked.

"No," I said. "You go on up. I want to read some more about my new machine." I pulled out the instructions and started reading, and she went to bed. Then I pulled my chair over to the front window and just watched the road. The sky was cloudy, but enough light from the moon shone through that I could see the trees pitching in the night wind, and I could see the road real clear. Sure enough, about midnight a man come walking down the road, and he was carrying a ladder. His blond hair shone white in the moonlight. I didn't wait no longer than that. Real quiet, I opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. Then I switched on the machine and waited.

At first I wondered if anything would really happen. But then I could hear the clanking and snapping, and I knew the nippers was coming. I went back in the house and watched out the window.

It didn't take long. In just a minute the road was filled with nippers, and in a minute more all that was left was the ladder. I wondered what the natives would think when they opened up them nippers.

In the morning, Helen cried for a long time with her face buried in Mattie's lap. She didn't know he was dead; she just knew he hadn't come for her. I felt a little sorry for her, but then, like I said before, life ain't easy here on Outpost. You do what you have to do to survive.