

Under the Bridge

The troll lived underneath a bridge. He thought of himself as “Troll”, because that was what humans called him. He didn’t look like many of the pictures that humans had drawn of trolls, and indeed, he looked much like a large human. He was about two metres tall and solidly built, and had a pleasant face. He didn’t have fangs or vicious claws, like some of the pictures, but his ears were pointed.

“Hey, Troll!” the humans would call, and he would jump out from under his bridge, and growl at them, and they would run away laughing. This confused and upset him, because he only wanted to make friends. His growl was just his way of greeting them. They didn’t understand him, and he didn’t understand them.

His worst tormentors were the three Goat brothers. Their farm was the closest to his bridge. They would stomp over the troll’s bridge, and yell at him, telling him how tasty they were and how the next Goat brother would be much tastier. This annoyed the troll in spite of the fact he didn’t understand what they were saying. If he was able to talk to them, he would have told them that he didn’t want to eat anyone. He was a vegetarian, except for the occasional fish, as were all his kind.

He crept out at night, because there were fewer people about, and took apples, and peaches and pears. He loved strawberries and blackberries, but for most of the year he subsisted on leaves and roots. He gleaned seeds from grasses and gathered nuts from trees. He sought out acorns, because of the tasty crunch, and ate hedgerow and woodland fruits that the humans avoided as poisonous, such as nightshade fruit. Some of the marsh plants had a pulpy core, but he didn’t like those much.

The troll was usually awake during morning and evening twilight, and asleep at other times, so when the Goat brothers stomped over his bridge, they woke him up. It got so bad that the troll considered moving to a bridge somewhere else. So early one evening, he headed upstream, to see if he could find another home.

He had no problem traversing the stream bed, of course, but the stream became smaller and smaller. Still, he persisted, and eventually arrived at the source, where the stream ended in a broad pool. A naiad was bathing in the pool, and he startled her a little.

She talked to him, and it would have sounded to human ears like the trickling of water. He growled at her, but she was unafraid. Somehow they understood one another.

“Hullo,” she said, “who are you? I’m Nixie. You were quiet. I usually hear people coming!”

“The humans call me ‘Troll’,” he said.

“That can’t be your name,” Nixie said. “That’s what you are!”

The troll shrugged.

“Yes, I know, but that’s what they call me.”

“Really?” She looked around and spotted some rocks. “You can be ‘Flint’.”

“Flint? Yes. That’s a good name. Thank you!”

“Just a minute,” said Nixie.

The water was up to her shoulders, but she dipped lower into the water and stood up. The pond weed clung to her body, and when she stepped on to dry land, it was suddenly a shimmering green gown that came down almost to her ankles. It had an uneven hem, but it wasn't ragged. She tugged at it here and there, but it still clung in places. She looked much like a human woman, though she would be shorter than most of them and thinner too, with an elfin face and pointed ears. She had long dark hair which floated and flowed around her head. Her skin had a very faint sheen, the slightest hint of the gleam of a fish's scale.

"Come into my grotto," she said.

Flint hesitated. He had never been invited into anyone's home before, and he was by nature shy.

"Come on!" she said, as she stepped back into the water, which turned out to be only ankle deep. She ducked under some ferns which trailed down the rocks at the back of the pool, and she was gone.

The newly named Flint stepped into the water and followed her under the fern. Of course, trolls don't wear shoes, so he didn't worry about getting his feet wet.

He found himself in a spacious cave, with a deep pool in the centre. A sandy bank sloped down to it, and Nixie slipped into the pool as if it was an armchair. Flint sat cross-legged on the sandy bank. He would have been uncomfortable in a chair. He smiled at her.

"This place is nice," he said. "Pretty. Don't humans stumble in here by accident?"

She laughed. "No, it's invisible from outside, and it's protected, too. Do you live under a bridge?"

He thought of his rough and ready home.

"Yes, Nixie, but it's not as nice as this."

The curtain of ferns didn't stop the light entering the grotto, and some of the rocks near the entrance sported a glossy green carpet of moss. The troll gazed at the intricate wetness of the moss plants. He'd seen moss before, of course, but he'd never really looked at it. It was beautiful.

Water trickled down the wall in places, and collected in Nixie's pool, which extended under the ferns and merged into the pool that Nixie had been bathing in. Flint spotted some pots on a ledge near the back of the grotto, but what Nixie kept in them he didn't know, and couldn't guess.

Nixie stood up and as she emerged from the pool her pond weed clothes instantly became a dry dress again. She picked up two pottery mugs, filled them from a trickle at the back of the grotto, and handed one to Flint.

"Spring water," she said. "There's nothing better."

Flint nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "Up a little tributary near my bridge there's a small spring, and I often go up there for a drink. The water in the stream under my bridge isn't too bad, though."

He didn't mention that he usually bent down to drink directly from the stream, sipping water from his palm. Somehow, all of a sudden, it seemed so inelegant.

Nixie reached out of her pool and took down a large pot. She pulled off the top and passed the pot to Flint.

“Nuts and seeds,” she said. “Help yourself. You do eat nuts and seeds, don’t you?”

“Yes, thank you.” He took a handful and handed the jar back. “Can I ask, do you eat meat, Nixie?”

“No, unless you count a fish now and then. You?”

“The same.” He smiled. “I’ve never thought to save nuts and seeds. Trolls are not very bright they say.”

“Do they? I’ve never met a troll before and you seem quite bright.”

“Thank you.”

He picked up an oval stone, and his troll senses told him that it was a fairly soft one. He started to carve it with his fingernail as they chatted.

It had been early evening when he set out, and it gradually got darker. Some of the rock of the grotto glowed with a soft luminescence. He knew that he had to go.

“Thank you, Nixie. I’ve enjoyed chatting with you. Here!”

He handed over his stone.

“Oh, that’s me! Oh, how amazing. How did you do that?”

“Troll fingernails. The rock has to be fairly soft, though. Be careful with it, because it could wear away.”

“I know what I can do!” She dipped a finger in the pool and wetted the stone and it became shiny. “That should do it.”

Flint had a look. “Hmm, it’s like it has been glazed. That’s a useful talent.”

Nixie nodded.

“Anyway,” said Flint, “I must be going. I hope that I can call on you again?”

“Oh, please do! It can be very quiet up here. Humans sometimes come up to the pool, but they usually come in a group. They can be rowdy, and they often leave rubbish lying around. I hear them coming and don’t let them see me, and I certainly don’t invite them into my grotto!”

Flint nodded, and left, but not before she had kissed him on the cheek. It was a dark night, but he didn’t need much light as he travelled down the stream. When he approached his bridge, he frowned. His place wasn’t like Nixie’s pool and grotto, and he didn’t know what she would think of it if she visited. He wondered what he could do to make it more pleasant.

The troll’s bridge had two stone piers and a wooden deck. He usually lived between one of the piers and the stone abutment at one end of the bridge, where there was a sandy slope leading down to the stream. When Flint stood upright, the deck of the bridge was half a metre or so above his head. At both the upstream and downstream sides of the bridge he had planted small bushes which over the years had grown into quite large trees, so that his living area was difficult to get into from the banks of the river. He didn’t know it, but it was in fact a protected area. No humans could get into it without an invitation, just like Nixie’s grotto, and neither could members of the other races.

He tried to fashion two stone mugs, but though his fingernails would do the job it was arduous and time-consuming. Flint thought carefully. Flint! He took two flint stones from the stream and hit one against the other and broke off a flake. With the flake he started to chip away at some small softer rocks, and managed to create two rough stone mugs. He turned them over in his hands. Hmm. They looked a bit rough and ready. He squeezed one of the mugs where there was a bulge, and was surprised when the bulge disappeared.

He experimented. By carefully squeezing, pushing and pulling the mugs he removed most of the imperfections, ending up with two pretty good-looking mugs. He admired them. He hadn't known that he could do that!

He took a bigger rock and inspected it. Hmm. He pushed on the centre and it indented a little, but it was hard. The flake allowed him to hollow out the rock, but it was slow going, so he found a piece of metal that someone had dropped over the edge of the bridge, and sharpened it on a piece of hard smooth rock. He held his workpiece between his legs and used a rock to hammer on his makeshift chisel. Things went a lot quicker after that, though he had to keep sharpening the piece of metal, and soon he had a sort of stone bucket. He thought that he needed a harder piece of metal. And a proper hammer or mallet.

“OK,” he said to himself.

He exerted pressure on the sides of the bucket and carefully gave it some shape. It became less of a bucket and more like a squat vase. He put aside his creation and restarted with a taller, slimmer rock, and ended up with a passable ewer or flask. He had a sudden thought and marked the circumference of the flask at the widest part with his fingernail. There, that looked a lot better!

He put the two containers next to the mugs and was pleased with what he had achieved so far. He knew that he would only get better at this new craft.

It was going to be Nixie's first visit to his bridge, and Flint waited anxiously. Suddenly she was there. She was swimming downstream, but he knew that the water was only ankle deep where she was swimming. She stood up and her green dress clung to her curves. Flint's heart did somersaults.

“How did you do that?” he asked. “It's not deep enough!”

Nixie laughed and put her finger on his lips.

“It's a talent of mine. So this is where you live.”

“Yes, It's not as pretty as your grotto, I'm afraid.”

Nixie looked around. There was a sandy bank, and a pool formed by a diversion of the river. A large rock had a shelf on it which held two stone goblets and some stone jars. The abutment of the bridge formed a solid backdrop, it was true, but the trees on the downstream and upstream sides of the bridge softened the feel of Flint's home. She slid into the pool. It had the feel of an artificial pool, but it was infused with love.

She looked at the bridge. The waters of the stream probed the piers of the bridge and allowed them to temporarily split its flow. Although it was an artificial structure, there was a harmony between the bridge and the stream, an honesty, that Nixie liked.

“I like it, Flint. It's cosy. Friendly. Thank you for the pool. You made it didn't you?”

“Yes. I diverted the stream a little. I was careful. Drink?”

“Yes, please.”

Flint filled his two stone mugs with water from the stone ewer and passed one to her. He sat cross-legged on the sandy beach near to the pool.

“Ah! Spring water?” she asked.

“Yes. But if I store it for too long, it becomes stale. I’ve just filled the ewer from the spring. What do you think of the mugs? They are the first that I’ve ever made.”

“These are the first that you’ve made? They’re good! You can do better, much better, my dear.”

From her it wasn’t criticism. It was encouragement, so he nodded. He showed her the ewer with the design round the circumference. She said it was beautiful, and he was pleased.

“I can do better,” he said, laughing.

She took a reed from a plant growing partly in the water, and showed him how to draw a design on one of his mugs. It wasn’t easy for her as she didn’t usually engrave rocks, but water will eventually wear away stone, and he got the idea.

“I can do that,” he said, smiling at her. “How do you make your cups and pots?”

“Oh, I use mud. Not all mud works properly. I use a type of mud that allows me to form the shape that I want. Then I leave it for a day or so and it goes hard. The humans put their pots into a fire, but I don’t have to do that.”

He reached for one of the stone jars.

“You eat fruit, don’t you, Nixie? I’ve got some blackberries and some apples!”

“Yum! I don’t have brambles up near my grotto and I love blackberries. Where did you get the apples?”

“Oh, on one of the farms.”

“Do they mind you taking their apples?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure they know that I take them. I only take a few, and I try to do something for them in return. I fixed the wall round the orchard when I took these.”

Nixie nodded.

They chatted for a long time, and the sun had long gone down when she left. Before she went, though, she kissed Flint on the lips and he held her gently. Then she walked to the centre of the stream and slid into the water. Flint knew that it was only knee-deep, if that, but she submerged and headed upstream, and a slight luminescence showed him where she was. But it was faint and he soon lost sight of her.

The Mage and the Boffin looked down on the horde of ogres, which was heading east below their vantage point.

“How can we stop them?” asked the Boffin. She was a bit despondent.

“I don’t know, my dear. Our powers are limited in this space for some reason, so although we can blast an individual ogre, we can’t divert the whole horde. Anyway, that would just send them off in a different direction. We need something else.”

They had seen the devastation that the ogres had left in their wake. Some of their friends were dealing with that problem, helping the survivors, repairing their houses and re-seeding their fields. They were even bringing in livestock from other spaces, but it would be years before everything was back to normal.

“We need to stop them just rolling forward over everything in their path. Let’s see where they are heading.”

They stepped forward along the line of the ogres’ advance.

“This looks promising,” said the Boffin. “That stream could be a barrier. Steep banks on both sides. It’s almost a river. And the bridge. Can we defend those, though?”

The Mage brought out a scrying ball from somewhere under his robes.

“Yes, my dear, we can defend them. Or, rather, we can help some locals to defend them.”

“Hmm?” she said, looking at the ball. “Oh, I see. Yes, we can, too!”

“There are hundreds of them!” said the refugee. “The ogres just smash everything in their way. They trample all the crops, flatten the buildings, and chase all the animals. Any animal or human that they catch, they tear to pieces and eat.”

The Goat brothers and some of their neighbours had gathered in the brothers’ kitchen to hear the refugee’s message.

“Is there no way to stop them?” asked Eric Goat. “What about fire?”

“They are stupid, but there are so many of them. Some of us set up a line of fire, and the first ones stopped. But then the others behind them pushed them into the fire. The ones in the front died but others followed them, and eventually the bodies piled up and the fire went out. We barely escaped. The same with water. We partly blocked the stream to make it deeper than usual then retreated across it, but they just fell in and drowned, and the bodies piled up and eventually they made it across. The stream was completely blocked and flooded the fields and that slowed them a bit.”

“What about swords and spears? What about arrows and guns?”

“They don’t fight. Swords and spears will kill them, but we don’t have many. A few guys used pitchforks and other farm implements, but it was dangerous. You could stick a pitchfork in one’s chest and it would still rumble on if you didn’t hit some important organ. You could attack their legs and that would eventually stop them. But others followed. There were too many. An arrow would kill one, or a shotgun blast, but we soon ran out of ammunition.”

“How did you get away?”

“Humans can run faster than they can travel. I’ve come as far and as fast as I could, warning people. Most people are headed for the heights. The ogres don’t seem to like climbing hills. They flow through the valleys, and they don’t move very fast.”

Eric looked around. He wasn't a bad man, and was well respected in the community. It's true he teased the troll, but that was a bit of thoughtlessness. He would have been horrified if someone had told him how upset the troll was by the teasing. He thought of trolls as being mindless, like the ogres, not that that excused his teasing.

"Well, lads," he said, "we'll send the women and children up to the heights. Me and my brothers will try to hold them at the bridge, and everyone else should spread out along the stream. We should be able to get them as they climb out of the stream. I can't think of anything else, can you?"

The rest all shook their heads.

"Right. Let's do it. Make sure that you can retreat if you have to."

When the neighbours had left, Evan, the youngest Goat brother, said "It's pointless, isn't it? Why don't we just run for the hills?"

"We have to try, Evan," said George Goat, the middle brother. "They wreck everything. If we can stop them... Well, we can save the farm. Otherwise, we would have to start again, and that would be grim."

They gathered axes and scythes, their only weapons, and headed for the bridge.

"Flint, are you there? Flint?"

Nixie's voice! The troll was trying, with some success, to encourage a climbing plant to grow over the abutment of the bridge. He looked upstream, and saw Nixie and two humans walking down the stream. Flint knew immediately that the humans were special, because all three were walking on the surface of the water.

"Good morning, and welcome!" he said. "Nixie. Ma'am, Sir."

"Flint, this is the Mage, and this is the Boffin. Flint, apparently there is a problem, and the Mage and the Boffin are here to request our help."

"Yes," said the Boffin, "There's an infestation of ogres headed your way. They won't affect you much but they will devastate the humans in the area."

"I've alerted my sisters along the stream. We can hold them back but we can't stop them completely. They will try to cross the stream at the bridge. Flint, you can help to hold them at the bridge!"

"The humans have not been nice to me! They stamp on the bridge and wake me up! I've tried to make friends, but they don't understand me!" He hung his head and sighed. "But still, I can't abandon them. What do we do?"

"Good lad," said the Mage.

Nixie kissed him, and he realized how small she was. She was half a head shorter than the humans. He himself was half a head taller than the humans. He kissed her gently.

"The humans can't understand you, Flint?" asked the Boffin. "We can fix that."

A plume of bubbles travelled up the stream.

“Oh, there’s Trixie!” said Nixie, waving. “She’s heading upstream, and she’ll defend a stretch of water up the stream.”

A hand rose from the water and waved at her.

“Flint, I have to go and protect my spring. Be careful.”

He kissed her again. “You too, Nixie!”

The ogre horde reached the stream, and it was as if they had hit a wall. They all piled up at the top of the bank, and milled around. The sheer press pushed a few over the bank and the fallers struggled across the stream. They seemed to fall into deep pools where there were none. Most drowned in the ankle deep water, but some made it across. They climbed the bank on the other side only to find the humans waiting for them. Those that weren’t killed just wandered around until they fell back into the stream or encountered more humans.

Nib patrolled his small stretch of the stream. His big brother was upstream somewhere, and Jules from the next door farm was downstream. On the other side of the stream the ogres were milling about. Those nearest to the bank were trying to get away and those further away were pushing towards the bank. So far, none of them had come down the bank in his section. Nib had heard a rumour that there was a barrier at the top of the bank on the other side of the stream, but he didn’t know how it was being created, or who it was being created by.

Suddenly there was a splash and a shriek! He ran down the stream, staying on the bank, and saw that an ogre had fallen down the opposite bank and landed in the stream. Near to the ogre was a young girl in a long blue and green dress. She was sitting on a small bank of shingle and was scuttling backwards, away from the ogre.

The ogre had fallen hard and was gathering what senses it had. It saw the girl and started towards her. Nib leapt down the bank and stuck his grandfather’s sword into the beast’s midriff and it sighed and sat down. Nib was surprised at how hard it had been to stab the ogre. It seemed so easy in the Moving Pictures where the hero plunged his sword into his enemies and maybe lopped off a limb or two! The beast rolled over and the sword was pulled from Nib’s hand, so he jumped over the beast’s corpse and, pulled it free with some effort.

“Oh, no! They’re breaking through! I must get back to the water,” said the girl, as three more ogres tumbled into the stream. She scrambled back to the stream and stood looking at the bank.

“Get away from my stream!” she screamed, raising her arms.

For an instant Nib saw a purple haze travel along the top of the bank, and ogres stopped falling down the bank. Nib realized that her voice was like the rush of water over stones, and yet he understood her. She was not human.

“I’m Bizzie. That ogre landed in the stream and washed me out of the water,” said the girl.

He looked blankly at her. What did she mean? “Busy?”

“That’s my name. Bizzie.”

“I’m Nib,” he said.

Then he had to stop talking as the ogres who had fallen into the stream approached. One of them disappeared under the water, and Nib was shocked. The water was barely ankle deep! Then he had to deal with an ogre who had somehow made it across the shallow stream. Things quietened down after a while, and Bizzie sat in the stream looking up at the top of the bank.

“We can talk, Nib. I’ve just got to keep part of, uh, my mind on the barrier. Uh! That was a big push! Don’t worry I can, uh! I can do it easily. But sometimes one might get pushed over by the others. Can, uh! Can you handle them if that happens?”

“Sure, Bizzie,” he said. He could see the strain in Bizzie’s face, but she seemed confident.

“You seem quite young, if you don’t mind me saying,” said Nib.

“Uh! I’m about sixteen in your terms. I’m the youngest one here!” she said with pride. “The youngest naiad, that is. Uh.”

“Me too! I’m sixteen too. You’re making that barrier? All by yourself?”

“Me and my aunts! Uh! We’re spaced out along the stream. Ooops! One got through. Could you, please?”

Nib killed the ogre. It was absurdly easy, as it just tried to climb the bank. After he had killed a few it was messy and depressing.

The press at the top of the bank eased, and Bizzie stopped saying “Uh!”. It seemed natural to lie back against a rock with his arm around her. Bizzie kept the barrier up, her feet in the stream, until she suddenly said “It’s over.”

She relaxed.

“How do you know?” asked Nib.

“One of my aunts upstream sent a message.”

“Sent a message? How?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah!”

“She peed into the stream. Her pee contains the message.”

She still had her feet in the water.

“Oh, that’s ... useful.”

“Yeah.” She laughed.

They stayed together comfortably for a while, and then they heard his brother coming along the bank.

“Gotta go,” said Bizzie.

She kissed his cheek and said “The rapids by the water meadows. Below the church. I’m there most evenings from a couple of hours before sunset to a couple of hours after.”

She slipped into the water and disappeared. Nib climbed the bank to meet his brother.

“I’m impressed, kid. You’ve got quite a few of them.”

“Yeah, bro. But it wasn’t fun.”

His brother sighed. “No, it wasn’t, was it? Let’s go home.”

A little earlier the Goat brothers had waited nervously on the bridge. The horde had appeared and a few ogres had started across the bridge.

Eric and his brothers attacked them with their makeshift weapons, and they managed to stop the first wave, but others pushed their crippled or dead companions off the bridge and advanced. It was grim work, as the ogres didn’t fight back, just as the refugee had told them. The brothers were forced back by the sheer numbers of the ogres, and then one of them accidentally stepped on Evan. George had to help him to safety while Eric fought the ogres alone. George and Eric were pushed hard by the ogres and were close to being forced off of the bridge.

“What can we do?” asked Flint, despairingly. “They are being pushed back!”

“It’s your bridge, Flint. No one can cross it without your permission,” said the Boffin.

“You’re right,” said Flint. He stood tall, and clenched his fists. He climbed onto the bridge.

“Get off of my bridge!” he yelled, throwing ogres to the left and to the right.

Eric Goat came up alongside him. “Hey, I can understand you, Troll! It’s our bridge too!” He looked at the horde and yelled. “Get off of our bridge!”

George came up on the other side. “Yeah! Get off our bridge!”

Flint looked from one to the other and laughed. “Our bridge! Come on, humans, let’s do this!”

George, Eric and Flint held the bridge. The ogres kept trying to cross, and they kept pushing them back. Most of the bodies fell into the stream. There was the occasional flash and bang among the ogres, but the defenders had no time to wonder what was happening. Suddenly the pressure eased. The ogres had become packed together and in the press, they seemed to have turned on each other. The defenders only had an occasional ogre to deal with and it was soon over.

“Well done, Troll,” said Eric.

“My name is Flint.”

“Sorry, pal! Pleased to meet you, Flint. Well done. I’m Eric and this is George.”

“Well done, humans. It was my bridge, after all.”

“Built by humans.”

Flint acknowledged that. “Our bridge?”

The humans nodded.

“Eric?” Flint asked. “Can you please stop stamping and banging on my, er, our bridge? I sleep during the day, Eric. I sleep during the night. I’m usually only awake around sun rise and sun set.”

“Sure, Flint. I’m sorry about that. We didn’t mean any harm.” He was suddenly embarrassed.

“Thanks,” said Flint.

“Thank you, Flint,” said Eric. “You could have hidden under the bridge and waited until they had gone.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t seem right.”

“I wonder how so many of them drowned?” said George Goat. “The stream is not that deep!”

“Some of my friends. Water people. They’re even shyer than I am.”

“Oh! Oh, I see. Thank them for us please, Flint.”

“I’ll make sure the message gets to them, George.”

“So that’s over,” said the Boffin.

“Yes,” said the Mage. “I saw your fireworks.”

“Yeah. Didn’t make much difference. Made me feel better, though. I’m surprised that they turned on each other like that.”

“Ah! They were pressed together and just started to hit out. That’s normal. I did throw a little confusion charm into the middle of them.”

“A little conf...”? You doped them?”

“Er, in your terms, yes. I think it helped a bit. Actually, I’m surprised that the naiads were able to protect the stream so well. I would have expected more of the ogres to have broken through.”

“I helped them a little.”

“You did? Your science and their magic?”

“Yeah. Surprised?”

He considered and smiled at his wife.

“Not really. Power is power after all. We’ve never worried about drawing a line between your paradigm and mine, have we, my dear? Do you have any idea where the ogre horde came from?”

The Boffin looked at her instrument. She touched something and adjusted something else.

“Er, no. It’s odd.”

The Mage showed her his scrying ball. Of course, she was used to interpreting it.

“Mmm. It’s confused. Cloudy. No clear indication. Changing all the time. So you’ve no idea either?”

He shook his head.

“Nope. Though my ball shows that they are unlikely to turn up here again.”

He passed his hand over his ball, and she looked at it, then checked her instrument.

“Yeah, I agree.”

“Well, at least we’ve broken down the barrier between the humans and the trolls. For this generation, at least.”

She sighed. "Yes. It's a pity it won't last longer. Humans forget so quickly."

"We are human, my dear."

"Yeah. But we are special, dear."

"Um, yeah."

"And I don't regret it one bit."

"Me neither. Shall we go home?"

"Let's tidy up a bit first."

So they did. Most of the ogre bodies appeared just above the surface of the sun and were vaporized, and then the Mage and the Boffin disappeared from the space. The next day, the humans woke to find that almost all the ogre bodies had gone. They gathered the rest together and burnt them.

Flint and Nixie looked down at the little creatures in the pool. They were like large tadpoles, but with brighter markings.

"The small ones are girls? And the big one is a boy?"

"Yes. Three naiads and one troll."

"They are beautiful, aren't they?"

He put his arm around Nixie and smiled at her. He put his finger into the pool, and one of the baby naiads swam up and nibbled at his finger tip.

"Yes, they are! Our children. I'm so looking forward to when they have grown enough to leave the pool."

"Me too," said Flint.

"Of course, when he is old enough, the boy will go and live with you."

"I wonder what happened to my father? I don't remember him at all. I guess I'll never know."

Nixie nodded and slipped into the pool. The little creatures swam to their mother and suckled, while their father looked on fondly from the side of the pool.
