

Daemon Bridge

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

Good to make your acquaintance. Just call me Brak. My full name is longer and more complex. Many Visitors like you from the Mundane world find our names unpronounceable and so we simply abbreviate.

I am a Senior Sergeant of the Guardians, that body of Mages and Soldiers who police the crossing between the worlds, as we have done since time immemorial ensuring that Magic and Mundane are forever separated. It is a responsibility that I'm proud to have held for many years, as did my father and his father before him. It is an ancient and honourable profession, although in truth it can be a bit boring sometimes.

Our principal responsibility is guarding the Old Bridge over the shallow but perilous straights between the world of Magic and the Mundane world. The treacherous channel is traversed by two long causeways built with great labour in aeons past from heavy blocks of dull grey stone. The crossing proper is formed by the bridge itself, its arches buttressed by the causeways and formed from the same stone but constantly alive with orange sparkles. These lights, forever moving inside the rock itself, are the magical sprites which form the reinforcements that hold the bridge in place.

The bridge and causeway are vitally important to us all. It is the only safe way to travel between the worlds. The straights are notoriously untrustworthy and dangerous, often fatally so. In the sea between the worlds, nothing can be relied upon. Sailing boats are suddenly becalmed or blown uncontrollably off-course. Engines or thaumatological forces will fail without warning during any attempted crossing. Mysterious storms, dead spots, a whole clutch of vicious sea serpents and kraken – these days, few would willingly chance the crossing by sea.

Flying is fraught with its own dangers, and with even more chance of a fatal result. Both aircraft engines and levitation spells will disintegrate catastrophically whilst attempting a crossing, while kites

and gliders are at the mercy of any of several large species of dragon. Take my advice: don't ever attempt a passage this way.

With all these fearsome obstacles, some might question the need for the Guardians at all. The answer is plain enough. Since the bridge is the only route between the Two Worlds, our task is to prevent the import and export of Proscribed Goods and Beasts, in accordance with the ancient edicts handed down by the Mages' Convention.

Now, it is not our business to prevent Travellers from crossing between the worlds, in either direction. Whatever your mission, your purpose, we will not impede your progress, except in those very few cases where the Master Mages of the Board of Control have banned an individual from passing between the worlds. We police only the crossing itself, not what you get up to on the other side.

A Guardian acting as a soldier is almost unheard of these days, I'm pleased to say. The Old Bridge has witnessed invasion forces, twice from Mundane to Magic and once from Magic to Mundane, as ill-advised or perhaps merely deranged leaders sought to impose their will on the other world. All these attempts ground to a halt after only a few hours, as either the invaders from Magic found they had no defences against cannon and machine guns, or the invaders from Mundane were beset by fireballs and other directed magical energies that can be manifested by even the most junior Guardian thaumaturge.

Ever learning from their experience, the authorities in both worlds have installed traps – gaps in the fabric of the bridge where the roadway could be rapidly removed, cutting off the only route. On the Mundane side, the trap is covered with stout planks of wood, now so worn and scuffed as to be indistinguishable from the surrounding stonework, with strategically-placed explosive charges which would drop any invader into the sea at the touch of a lever.

On the Magical side, the trap is floored with pure magic – translucent orange which flows and scintillates incessantly, and through which the waves are clearly visible far below. Walking over the magic floor is considered a test of will for Mundane Visitors – a few cannot bring themselves to step onto the gap, and are therefore forever unable to enter the world of Magic.

Our day-to-day work is to watch, to inspect travellers and their transport to detect and confiscate contraband. Of course we employ a whole gamut of magical means of detection, but so often we rely on our intuition – the Guardian's 'nose' for Travellers with something to

hide. I understand the Guardians on the other side have different, technological means of detection, although frankly I have no idea how these so-called ‘metal detectors’ work.

There is a certain amount of trade that makes its way across the Old Bridge, since a few things manufactured in the Mundane world are useful in the world of Magic, and vice versa.

As you already know, in this world, few machines work reliably – or at all. Simple machines like wheels work perfectly, but smaller ones, like wristwatches, will just stop. And your wondrous electronic machines fail immediately – your mobile phones and computers become dead and inert lumps within seconds of crossing the bridge. I hope you have all left such devices at home!

Even so, some machine-made products – like paper and spectacles – are widely used in the world of Magic. And certain items of food and drink are hugely popular – I myself am definitely partial to the occasional glass of your Champagne!

Certain magical items, too, seemed to have some efficacy in your world, particularly where the effect is, shall we say, diffuse and psychological. Stimulants, love potions, good luck charms – all of these have willing takers in the Mundane world – and whether these effects are real or merely in the heads of the customers: well who am I to say?

Tourism is a major reason for Travelling, and more of your people than ever are braving the crossing. I dare say most of you are here today as Visitors to sample the diversions of the world of Magic. If this is your first time, well, an especial welcome to you. You may think at first that you have come to a world where, to your Mundane eyes, society appears to be stuck in a version of the late Middle Ages. But look closer, and those hidden sophistications enabled by Magic will, I feel sure, both charm and delight you.

Of course, tourists Travellers visit your world as well. People from the world of Magic are amazed and astounded by your devices, your technology: instant communications, mobile phones, your skyscrapers and your high-speed transport by road, rail, and air.

There’s also a certain amount of more human-focussed trade from Magic to Mundane. Maids, labourers, gardeners, even prostitutes – many poor people travel to work in Mundane. Even so, few stay for long, despite the considerable wealth that can be earned over there.

These migrant workers often feel that they are living their lives under a severe handicap. At home, they have become so used to performing actions with thaumaturgics – magic just a word or gesture away – they feel an extreme sense of loss at the core of their very being. And think of those poor souls banished from the world of Magic and forever unable to perform their art.

The combination of trade and tourism means that crossing the bridge is often subject to queues and delays. Part of our role is to keep the traffic moving smoothly. And what an incredible variety of transport there is. Wagons drawn by assorted beasts of burden – have you ever seen the centaurs at work? And you will see cars and trucks from the Mundane world fitted with supplementary motive power which works by Magic. These are usually tame daemons, although I'm personally not convinced that the beasts are ever really domesticated.

And therein lies a story. Most magical beasts cannot live in the Mundane world. They instinctively shy away from the crossing, somehow sensing the danger to their very existence. We have very little trouble with them. But certain kinds of creature, certain rather nasty kinds of daemons, can survive over there, although mercifully their capabilities are severely attenuated

So, let me tell about the one of my less boring experiences. It started on a busy summer's day a few years ago.

I was watching a large and ancient Mercedes coupe inch its way down the arch of the bridge towards the magic-side trap. The car had been retrofitted with domesticated fire daemons, whose heads could be seen emerging from the cowlings over the engine, awoken from their slumber as they re-entered this world.

The vehicle was so wide that other traffic was in difficulties manoeuvring around its low bulk. I was concentrating on directing the horse-drawn wagons and the teams of pack unicorns, struggling with separating the streams of traffic while being deafened by a cacophony comprising, in equal parts, the cries of panicky beasts and the oaths of the carters and working-men.

So, I was momentarily confused and distracted. While my back was turned, so to speak, a clutch of wild tree daemons slipped through to the Mundane world. Now some of you may know these creatures as nymphs or perhaps dryads, but these terms are altogether far too

innocent to describe what is really a particularly sneaky and vicious species of vermin.

The daemons were hidden in a shipment of freshly-cut fine timber destined for some specialist cabinet-maker in your world. This kind of luxury item is exported occasionally to Mundane; the resulting caskets prized more for their rarity rather than for any supposed magical properties. The creatures had concealed themselves within the trunks of the cut trees that I had failed to check carefully.

I should have spotted them sooner, but it was too late. I caught a glimpse of them emerging from their hiding places, their scaly heads and curving horns shaking as they freed themselves; their green-and-brown bodies sliding out of the cracks in the bark and the cut surfaces of the solid timber that was roped to the wagon slowly making its way down the arch of the bridge.

I could see that look of malice in their yellow-slitted eyes as they gazed back at me, their gaping mouths filled with brutal teeth seeming to cackle with amusement at my misfortune. The sunlight glistened on ethereal wings which would have allowed them to fly easily in the world of Magic but were shrunken and insignificant in the Mundane world.

The wagon, its driver oblivious to the stowaways behind him, had reached the end of the bridge proper and started along the lengthy causeway towards the coastline of the Mundane world.

The three daemons rose slightly into the air, their wings straining in an environment which is by-and-large anathema to magic. They moved slowly back along the bridge towards me, and I made ready to defend myself with sword and magic.

Then they disappeared – just vanished, before my very eyes.

Daemons have this ability to conceal themselves within the substance that gives them their name – water daemons into streams and rivers, fire daemons into hot solids, and so on. Even our best thinkers cannot entirely explain exactly how they do this, although why is much clearer: it is the ultimate in camouflage, providing concealment until their intended prey is close by.

Tree daemons, as I have already explained, can hide themselves in wood. They need a certain minimum volume of timber to conceal themselves within, so a fully-grown dryad needs the trunk of a mature tree to entirely contain its bulk.

My first thought was that they had returned to the logs they had arrived in. I ran forward, calling out to the waggoner to who had finally realised that there was something happening behind him.

Now, searching for magical creatures in the Mundane world is worryingly hard. The spells and incantations I would have used as a matter of course in the world of Magic were useless over there and, unsurprisingly, there are few technological devices which are effective in the detection of part-Magic animals.

Nevertheless, there are some techniques – tricks of the trade, you might say – which we are trained to use. But I could locate no sign that the daemons were within the logs, or indeed concealing themselves in the wood of the cart itself

To be doubly sure, I insisted that the wagon was turned around immediately and returned to our world. This was finally achieved with some noisy complaining from the carter, and much struggling with the confused carthorse being forced to back up on the narrow causeway. But it was all to no avail. My charms and invocations revealed nothing hidden in the wagon and its load other than a small cache of gold coins which the driver swore he had lost only yesterday.

In my experience, these daemons do not usually travel far from the crossing, somehow, I think, finding the proximity of the world of Magic a comfort. So I was pretty certain that the creatures had not gone very far.

I set about searching farther afield with the aid of a couple of my colleagues, as well as a small group of Guardians from your world. We must have inspected every wooden vehicle and baulk of driftwood for miles around, but without success. I was beginning to get very worried indeed.

Now, daemons of all kinds are meat-eaters and pack-hunters, and they have a voracious appetite. Over here, these dangerous pests are generally hunted and driven out of populated areas, but every now-and-then a pack finds its way to a farm. They can cause serious losses to livestock. However, they tend to avoid humans, having learned that people are likely to be armed with steel and magic, both of which are – usually – more than a match for teeth and claws.

Visitors to your world are at a serious disadvantage in dealing with wild daemons. We strongly discourage Travellers from taking edged weapons with them into the Mundane world – your civil authorities take a very dim view of strangers wandering the streets armed with

swords and daggers, for some reason. And, of course, the thaumaturgical defences which would be child's play in the world of Magic are unavailable over there.

I suppose I might have hoped that the daemons had died, or perhaps made their way to some uninhabited region to live on wild deer. If so, then I was sadly mistaken, especially after the first reports of attacks came in.

The daemons started preying on lone Travellers on the causeway on the Mundane side of the crossing early in the morning or late at night. They seemed particularly fond of those poor people who had travelled to your world to seek their fortune in menial work and were returning, richer but often weary, to their family and friends in the world of Magic.

At dusk or dawn, the bodies of returning Visitors would be found dead on the causeway, their faces always twisted in horror and their corpses partially eaten. Other people just disappeared completely – we never found any remains, any sign of what had happened to them. The beasts themselves were never seen. There were no sightings, no reports of unexplained happenings or strange creatures crawling out of the woodwork.

Not surprisingly, traffic on the causeway and bridge started to drop off noticeably. People began to stay away from the crossing, and both trade and tourism suffered badly.

People even began to try other ways to cross between the worlds, despite the well-known dangers from sea and sky. On a couple of occasions, overloaded rowing boats got into difficulties and were the subject of daring rescues by Guardians from both worlds. I was not involved myself, but they were the talk of the Guardhouse afterwards – Guardians are the worst gossips in both worlds, I'm sure of it.

Anyway, I was returning across the causeway one evening, rather later than I had hoped, after another fruitless meeting with the Mundane Guardians hoping to track down the missing dryads.

It was getting quite late in the evening. The sun was low on the horizon, and there were few Travellers about – just a straggling group of walkers, and a couple of horse-and-centaur-drawn wagons returning with their last load of the day.

I had just reached the point where the causeway where the stonework just begins to rise up and segue into the first of the arches of

the bridge proper. Somehow I got a sudden impression of something moving behind me. I span around. All three of the daemons had appeared behind me, almost breathing down my neck in their desire to make me their next meal.

The daemons had been hiding in the massive timbers that formed the floor over the Mundane trap. I mentally kicked myself for overlooking this possibility, and I had always known that the worn timbers were easily mistaken for stonework. Thinking back, the point where the dryads had disappeared was right over the centre of the trap.

The creatures seemed to have grown in size since I last saw them and were now the largest daemons I have ever seen – they had evidently been well-fed over the last few weeks. I drew my sword, although it seemed like a toothpick compared to the overgrown man-eaters I was facing.

I'm a firm believer that discretion is the better part of valour. I backed away, waving my sword to keep them at a distance, then turned and ran, shouting at the Travellers to warn them. The people and the smarter kind of working animals scattered immediately, the dumber creatures being dragged or whipped into rapid movement.

An idea flashed through my mind. I dashed towards the magic trap on the other side of the arches of the Old Bridge, desperately trying to remember the precise series of incantations which would trigger its demolition, incantations I never seriously expected to use in earnest. The daemons followed closely, moving alarmingly quickly despite their atrophied wings.

As I rushed over the flowing orange sprites of the Magic trap, I began to shout out the syllables which activated the transition. My timing had to be perfect, so that I was clear of the area while the daemons were still close to the centre of the trap.

There was a soft *whump* and a roar of wind as the trap was sprung. I fell to the ground, clinging desperately to the flagstones with my fingernails in an effort not to be dragged into the vortex I had created behind me. My trusty sword had fallen at my side, and was sucked clanking into the hole in space I had opened up.

The activated trap acts as a kind of drain into nothingness – a 'suction pump', a 'Hoover', as previous Visitors have described it. The frightful creatures were ensnared, drawn howling into the whirlpool of magic, never to be seen again.

So, now the crossing is safe once more. We no longer allow motorised vehicles or other large transport on the causeway, and we are much more careful with screening goods in transit. You will have seen that we have re-instated the Magic trap, as you passed over it on your walk across the bridge.

Have a good day, and enjoy the rest of your visit to the world of Magic.

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