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A Bogey of the Mind

**Author(s):**

Jonathan H Smith, MD<sup>1</sup>

**Corresponding Author:**

Jonathan H Smith, [jhsm226@gmail.com](mailto:jhsm226@gmail.com)

**Affiliation Information for All Authors:** 1. Neurologist, Chicago, IL

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The daemon Belial, descendant of Magoth, hid in the shadow of the ventilator.

Over the tubes and cords, wires and electrodes, the sheets obscured the patient's form, like all that remained were the tools to keep her alive. But Belial knew better. Her heart was ticking, which meant he still had work to do. Visiting hours would end soon.

It could be so easy: breathe an icy breath and she'd be on her way. Belial recalled Mrs. Dwight's light-handed indiscretions, beginning even as a little girl. Though kindness had consumed her later years, her fate in the underworld had long been woven.

But easy was boring. Where was the *fire* that had inspired him as a young daemon? He needed more. He was tired. Exhausted. The souls he was condemning barely had names anymore; they were mere objects for which he was a courier. What a disservice he was doing to his sacred oath of damnation. Sure, he put on his best face (which meant his worst), but even just showing up seemed a lot to ask these days.

While he waited for the proper moment, he became intrigued by the physicians' work, particularly the rites of the neurologists.

With the tap of a hammer, Mrs. Dwight's leg kicked on command. He had seen an elder perform a similar reanimation once, but had no idea that humans had such knowledge. Even more, one of the doctors touched her raw eyeball with a cloth and another dug a metal hammer into her nail bed. *Now this is something*, Belial thought, and a strange idea blossomed.

That evening, when the corridors fell quiet and the sting of bleach filled the air, Belial approached Mrs. Dwight's bed.

He dug his bony long-claw into her big toe, and just the same as that morning, she didn't grimace. He found it wholly unsatisfying but had just been so curious to try it himself.

Next, he gripped her ankle to shake her leg, just as the neurologist had done. The leg felt lifeless, which was strange, as he knew she kept her soul.

*Remarkable*, he thought. He really needed a break. So, after wrapping up his duties with Mrs. Dwight, he approached Eurynomos in the ninth rung of Hades.

"Absolutely not," Eurynomos said through his bloodied teeth.

"My Lord, please just grant me one Englysh month. Allow me to walk as one of them. There is so much to be learn't from them that may benefit our work." It was Belial's best pitch for some time off — a chance to get out of his slump.

Eurynomos finally nodded in agreement. “Don’t forget, no matter how *human* (he snarled at the word) you might appear, you will always be a daemon. Take care to not reveal yourself—.”

#

Belial resurfaced with the tag, “Robert Cantwell, MSIII,” pinned to the lapel of his short white coat. His pitted skin was now smooth. The ends of his lips could now turn upwards, and he delighted that he could shape them into a smile.

“Welcome to the team!” said Olivia, a neurology resident. “Why don’t you come round with me?”

As they walked the corridors, Robert was eager to learn all he could. He hadn’t realized that there were so many patients in the hospital who *weren’t* dying. He had never had cause to visit those rooms before. In one, there was a woman whose headache had been so painful, she recoiled from the light, and even vomited from her pain. Robert scribbled in his notepad. *Eurynomos will be pleased to learn of this...*

In another ward, the doctors purposefully withheld seizure medications from a man so they could watch him convulse. Robert was caught off guard when Olivia asked him his thoughts on the management—

“For starters, you could flush the rest of the pills down the toilet,” he nearly said, but luckily snapped back into character: “Should we increase his dose?”

Next was a woman in the ICU on a ventilator, who had been afflicted with Guillain-Barré syndrome. Thanks to Olivia, he finally learned the meaning of striking the limbs with a hammer.

She pressed her thumb over the patient’s eye to demonstrate the oculocardiac reflex. “It can be

quite pronounced in GBS,” she explained.

The patient’s heart rate fell predictably: 94, 71, 59, 37. *How nice!* She then released to allow it to quicken: 32, 38, 56, 75, but Robert’s excitement was consuming. Olivia’s hand was *drawn* back to the woman’s temple — her thumb a loaded revolver aimed at the orbit. The nursing alarm rang as the heart rate plummeted. Robert’s eyes widened —

*I must be oozing with the stain of evil,* he realized.

“Olivia —,” he startled. “The heart rate!”

She released her hand with a gasp. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what became of me,” she said.

*I must be more mindful of my influence.*

As the days went by, he increasingly noticed the impact of his presence. One resident would sigh when her pager vibrated, and another would type louder than could ever be necessary to write his notes.

For others, the signs were even more overt — omissions from the daily orders, in-fighting on rounds, and an anemic pat on the back to a grieving spouse.

A dark veil hung over the team. Their movements slowed, and hearts sank amongst the clutter of their white coat pockets.

Then one day, Olivia put a label on what they all had been feeling: “I’m so damn burned out.”

Robert’s month rotation as a human was coming to an end. He had come ostensibly to bring home learnings from the mortal world which might serve Hades, but the evil he held inside was infectious. His darkness was ruining those around him, and now he knew its name: *burnout*.

“Olivia, I want you to know I understand,” Robert said.

He embraced her, but it was a selfish hug to quell his own sadness, for it only brought her closer to his icy core.

#

When Belial reported all he had learned, Eurynomos' ashen flesh blistered in delight.

"We may walk among the humans unnoticed, but I can attest, it is not without ill effect, my Lord. We are drowning them in our gloom. They even have a name for it --."

Belial took a deep breath; he wanted to confess to Eurynomos that he had also recognized those same feelings in himself. In fact, it was what drove him to want the time on earth to begin with. But as a swarm of bloody-eyed rats scampered across the tarry ground, he held his tongue. Talking about it was not an option: *not in this place, not with this daemon.*

"It's contagious, you know? That dark feeling," Eurynomos said, conjuring a window to view the hospital. Olivia was presenting on rounds. A thin, mustard vapor sprayed from her mouth as she spoke, which her co-residents unknowingly inhaled.

"It's contagious," Eurynomos repeated. "Before long, it will be everywhere, and it started with you."

Belial tensed. He knew he couldn't deceive Eurynomos. "I should have told you, my Lord. I was ashamed."

"Don't worry, Belial. Look at where you are. Evil is all of our strengths and our weaknesses."

Belial smiled, crookedly.

"It's not the first time, Belial, and it won't be the last. These things tend to run their course."

Belial kneeled. "Thank you, my Lord. I don't know what to say."

"Listen. I'd like to get you involved with something new. I'd love to see what direction you'd suggest for an important project. You probably know every fifty years or so we sneak new versions

of the bible up to earth. We only change a few words here and there, but over thousands of years --”

“I’d love to do it,” Belial interjected with hope in his eyes.

The two of them spoke for a long time that afternoon. Eurynomos listened to everything Belial had to say, and in turn, shared more than he had anticipated he would. It healed them both. Before long, their laughter rang down into the darkest recesses, where the most desperate souls slavered at a forgotten sound.

END.

Author’s Note: For the interested reader, the character names are taken from historical demonology lore. Eurynomos was first mentioned in Greek mythology as a corpse-eating demon, hence the allusion in the story to the fates of near-death patients, as well as the description of his “bloodied teeth.” Reference to the name Belial is found in biblical texts as a personified version of the devil. The etymology of the name Belial directly translates to the concept of “lacking worth,” which alludes, in turn, to the construct of burnout.

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