

D&D Fiction
Before I Wake
Ari Marmell

I sit, huddled... no, not huddled, hunched, hugging knees to chest like a terrorized child. I sit hunched, as I have for so long that I have lost all sense of time. I sit and I stare from the cave mouth, stare over a landscape that no sane mind could hope to imagine, or ever want to see.

It is a terrain without any living thing, an endless scape of blasted and blackened rock without relief. Mountains reach into a low and heavy sky, holding aloft a ceiling of clouds as thick and inflexible as iron. Crevices delve down into the rough stone, their plunging depths perhaps the equal of even the highest mountain. There is no soil to support growing things, nor water to nourish them. The land is gripped in an ongoing storm, a storm without rain. Deafening thunder shakes the mountains, awesome lightning bridges the earth and the heavens, as regular as a beating heart.

The wind blows hot and fierce across the open ground, horribly moist and cloying. And if this is the breath of this blasted land, so too is it the voice, as it whistles and howls across the cavernous hollows in the mountains.

Hollows such as that in which we shelter.

I have long since surrendered any effort to further converse with Clarke. Even were we not reduced to shouting our throats raw over the banshee winds, we have been here too long to have anything left to tell one another. There is no day or night in this hellish wasteland, merely intervals where the lightning is more or less frequent, making a precise time impossible to determine. It is long enough, however, that the last of our supplies have long gone.

Supplies! Laughable to call them such. Snacks, intended merely to pass the time on our journey, never to maintain a man's survival. We have neither eaten nor drunk in so long, I fear I have forgotten what it is to taste. Worse, I fear that it is a skill I shall never again require, for while I can no longer be certain of the sun's rise, nor that a road I have traveled a dozen times will lead to the same destination on the thirteenth, I have become certain indeed that I must soon die.

And then my soul, which I had thought battered into submission and inured to further horrors, shrivels just that little bit further, as from behind I hear an abominable scream, even over the rushing winds. The voice is unknown to me, though nobody resides within the cave but myself and my two closest friends, for never have I heard either of them make a sound like this I hear now.

Phillips lies dead far back in the cave, his body convulsed in a terrible spasm that must apparently follow him into the grave. Clarke stands above him, his eyes haunted and empty. I do not know how Phillips died, and I fail to ask, for I fear to hear the answer.

We are starving, have long been starving, and we both know what must happen.

We sit with that body behind us, staring again into the blinding lightning and blasted rock, for what might be hours or might be days, until we can make ourselves allow it to happen.

I believe I fall asleep after my first meal in days, and try to forget that the taste upon my tongue is the blood and flesh of a man I knew well. I doze, fitfully, until I am awakened by yet another scream. I look out over the blasted waste, and only in the flicker of the lightning can I see Clarke as he disappears into the shadows of the towering peaks, leaving me forever.

“And then I wake. Truly wake, I mean. Always there and then, Doctor Augustus. Never so much as one moment earlier or later.”

Augustus, a gaunt and hawk-like man, nodded toward me as though that final point had been the most interesting and vital, as though he understood something he had not understood before.

I knew that he could not, not truly, for I had not truly conveyed the horror of my nightmare. No description in words crafted by mortal minds could do it any justice. The bleak and barren wastes, the burning lightningbolts that cooked the air and seemed to seek us out should we dare venture from the caves, the atrocious hot scents in the wet wind that could have been nothing but the breath of the land itself... how to explicate such details to a man who had never experienced them for himself?

Yet whatever the inadequacies of my descriptions, I had communicated enough to pique the doctor’s curiosity. His expression was concerned as he gazed at me over his notes, as any good doctor’s should have been, but he could not hide the light of his interest.

“Indeed, it is a most disturbing dream, Mister Ashton. I cannot imagine it a pleasant thing from which to awaken, particularly if it truly comes upon you every night, as you say. It would be my pleasure to direct what techniques I have available toward your treatment.

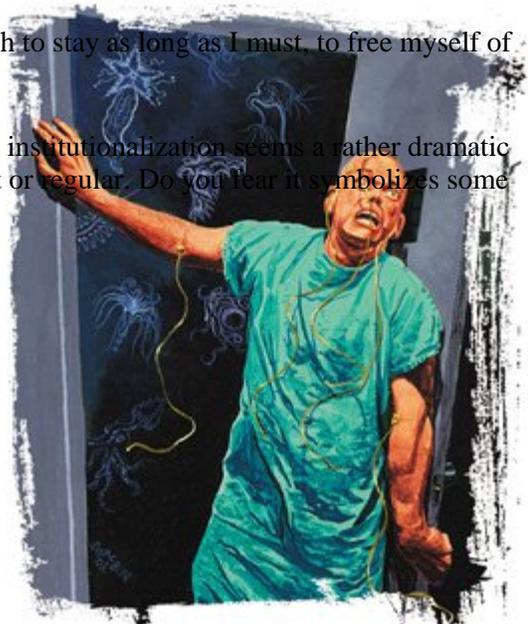
“However,” he persisted as I prepared myself to reply, “I wonder if you have truly considered all the ramifications of what you ask. Though your admission here would be of your own volition, still there is a minimum stay required for treatment. You cannot just wake up in two days, or even a week, having changed your mind, and expect simply to walk through the door.”

“I understand fully,” I assured him, all in earnest. “I wish to stay as long as I must, to free myself of these nightly horrors.”

Augustus nodded yet again. “I must say, Mister Ashton, institutionalization seems a rather dramatic step to rid oneself of a dream, no matter how unpleasant or regular. Do you fear it symbolizes some particular trauma or defect of personality?”

I could not but laugh at him, a reaction that doubtless served to reinforce in his mind that my faculties were not in order.

“Doctor Augustus, you misapprehend me. My dream symbolizes nothing at all. It is no phantom of the mind’s eye, nor any window into my persona or my



soul.

“Two years ago, my closest friends and I set out on what was to be a regular visit to the mills of Nartok, just across the border, to acquire some good Darkonian lumber. It was, you must believe me, a journey that we had made, together and severally, many a time before. Yet on this day, we became lost in a bank of mist that rose in all disregard for the weather, and when we emerged, we found ourselves in no land where reason holds sway. Only I, alone, discovered another bank of mists in later days and blindly groped my way back home.

“My dream, Doctor Augustus, is no tale spun by any part of my mind. It is *memory*, clear and unblemished, of events that *truly happened!*”

“I shall have Nurse Roberts show you to your room,” Augustus said.

She was a pretty thing, Nurse Roberts, short, with dull golden locks and a roundness of features and form that bespoke the best of what femininity had to offer a man such as I. In other circumstances, it would have been I attempting to coax her into my room, rather than her showing me the way. Friendly she was, certainly, an open conversationalist, and possessed of a kind heart. She served in a place like this out of genuine desire to help those troubled by demons of mind and soul.

Yet, other than my insistence that she call me Howard, rather than Mister Ashton, I found myself unable to muster much enthusiasm to engage in my accustomed amorous banter. Under present conditions, and in these dim and dour halls, it seemed to me ill-appropriate.

Had I made my selection of doctor and institution based on appearances, my shadow would never have darkened the vestibule of Dharlaeth Asylum. The building was of heavy brick, whatever color they might once have boasted long since leached from the stone by years of pounding sun and rain and wind. Demonic visages and inhuman forms hunched above the eaves, glaring angrily at all who dared pass. It had once been a cathedral, this asylum, or so I'd been given to understand. Doctor Augustus and his staff had scarcely proved able to afford the property, and thus had done little to render it any more attractive or suitable for the comfort of patients. All appearances aside, however, Augustus had a wide-ranging reputation, from Lamordia to Darkon, for competency and skill at his healer's arts.

And so here I had come, when the dreams and memories finally weighed too heavily on my mind for me to continue life as I had known it, when it became clear that the oblivion of hemlock or the noose might soon become more enticing to me than another waking dawn.

Long I continue to watch, one hand raised to shade my eyes from the sporadic blinding flash of the lightning, though Clarke has utterly vanished into the shadowed valleys and nigh-bottomless crevices of the wasteland. I stand in the cave's open maw, a morsel of food not yet chewed and digested. I grow stale, clammy, sticky, as my own perspiration and the hot wetness of the gale sit upon my skin.

Then, though I scarcely know where it is I intend to go, or even why I have chosen to set foot beyond the meager shelter, I step out across the blasted stone.

Heavily as I perspired in the dream, I am certain I did so at least as heavily when speaking with Doctor Augustus the following morn.

For over a week, we had met for many hours every morning, and I had consumed a specially prepared meal, along with a cocktail of calming herbs, every evening. These, it was explained to me, were intended to permit me to face the imagery of my dream with composure, studying it via the lens of reason rather than that of emotion, fear, revulsion, guilt. I was, Augustus told me, to study not the events themselves, traumatic as they had been, but the associated reactions. How did I feel about having consumed the flesh of my dead friend? How could I make sense of a world where such a place could exist, or where I could suddenly find myself stranded without ever straying from roads I knew? To understand and answer these, he instructed me, was the initial step to overcoming whatever derangement of the mind caused me to continue reliving the instigating events night after night.

It seemed to me a waste of time and effort, for surely I had already considered all such possibilities in the years since my waking nightmare. Still, the next stage of treatment were this to fail involved all manner of unpleasant medications, mesmerism, even electrical shock, none of which I was in any hurry to experience.

For over a week, as I say, this went on, with no change to either my emotional or mental states. And then, that night....

“Extraordinary,” Augustus remarked, and for a moment I could happily have throttled the man. To reduce this experience to an interesting exercise....

“Did you not tell me,” he continued, scribbling fiercely with his quill upon the topmost of a stack of papers, “that the dream was ever the same? That, in fact, it precisely relayed and repeated a series of very specific events?”

“Indeed, it always had!” I was ashamed at the quaver in my voice, but I must confess that I was terrified, more so than ever I had been since I escaped the hellish territory of which I dreamed. “But now it has changed! For the first time *ever*, Doctor, it has changed!”

“And the events you dream of now, Mister Ashton? These are not, perhaps, memories as well? Perhaps images of a sojourn you made from the cave that you had since forgotten?”

I could only shake my head. “I am certain, Doctor, that I never once departed that cave, until the day I saw the mists rising once more behind the nearest rise. I never followed Clarke into the wasteland. Never.”

“Then it seems your dreams are, indeed, more than mere memories, my friend.” Augustus rose and paced the room before me, scratching at the thin beard that clung, moss-like, to his chin. “Else they are indeed true memories, and you have fully and deeply repressed the remainder of your experience.

“In either event, Mister Ashton, I believe the time has come to attempt more vigorous avenues of treatment.”

I clamber across the unyielding rock, over rises and down from ledges, across crevasses that threaten to swallow me whole, along slopes whose angles threaten to send me tumbling. My palms are chapped and bloodied, like raw sausage, and my ankles threaten to turn with every step, yet I persevere. The wind blows harsh but brings no relief from the sweltering miasma, serving only to sting my eyes and chafe at my face, yet I persevere. I know not where I go, struggling directly into the face of the gale only to offer my mind some sense of direction. I flinch at every clap of thunder, at every stroke of lightning, for it seems they draw ever nearer to me, the arrows of an archer honing in upon his prey.

Yet I persevere.

And finally, finally, I crest a vicious rise, a hummock laden with razor-sharp protuberances of slender, fragile rock. The agony of my lacerated flesh is enough to drive me onward, upward, forward, those last lingering few feet that stretch before me. The lightning flashes yet again, as though in premeditated effort to illuminate my view, and below me, so terribly far below, I see a fearsome crevice, greater than any I have heretofore encountered. It gapes open, the earth's own maw, and it is hungry. The wind, the terrible breathing wind against which I have so continuously struggled comes not from across the open valley, but from deep within that crevice itself!

I look above, and though the clouds are low and the lightning bright, still for the first time I can see the stars. They gaze malevolently upon this terrible land, and they are not sparkles of guiding light, but rents in the sky, holes to places that never were. Colors never before glimpsed by any man leak from them, and they make me ill to look upon for long.

From within the gasping crevice, I hear the low hum of voices, far and faint. Despite the wiser angels of my nature, I find myself beginning the long climb downward....

“Bluetspur.”

This was all that Doctor Augustus's mesmerism could draw from me. Just this, this nonsensical, meaningless word, no matter how deep the trance, how pliant my mind became beneath his unfathomable words and gestures. It held no connotation for him, and for a time it hadn't any for me, either. But with each session it recurred, forming around my throat and tongue, and each time it burrowed ever deeper into my psyche as well, until finally I felt I understood its meaning.

Bluetspur. It was nothing less than the name of the nightmare realm itself, the blasted land in which I saw the last of my two dearest friends, the dreamscape which my mind continued to visit with every death of the sun's light.

Augustus, of course, had grievous doubts, wondering at the source of that knowledge, or how it should just suddenly come to me. Yet as he had no alternate definition to ascribe to the term, he accepted my explanation, at least for the nonce.

If breakthrough it was, however, it proved disappointingly insignificant. Possession of that name did nothing to change the nature of my dreams, and the many sessions of mesmerism offered neither of us any further insight into the events in question. Finally, after days of such attempts, my dreams had

changed again, and I conveyed just that to Doctor Augustus.

That, and more.

“I’ve begun to fear, Doctor,” I confided in him, after telling him of my latest dream. “I feel a terror in my chest in all my waking hours, like a lump of ice that refuses to thaw.”

“And what is it you fear, Mister Ashton?”

“What if I am still there, Doctor?” I shuddered merely at the thought, and felt myself grasping at the arms of the chair. “With each change in my dream, I move that bit further into that empty hell—into this Bluetspur—yet I know, as surely as I know my own name, that I never did any such thing! What if I am there still, driven by desperation to explore, and it is my time here, with you, with Nurse Roberts, that is the dream?”

Augustus assured me over and over again that such was not the case, but his assertions served to ease my worries only slightly. As all those who know fear can attest, even though their terrors be of far lesser magnitude than my own, worry and anxiety rarely see defeat at the hands of logical and reasoned argument.

When it became clear that I was too distraught to be easily assuaged, Doctor Augustus leaned forward and put a calming hand upon my shoulder.

“I’ll not lie to you, Howard,” he said softly, and I could not but view his use of my first name as a poor omen indeed. “While we have spent only a few weeks on your treatment as of yet, and thus could not expect any sort of *substantial* improvements, I must confess that I’m rather dismayed at our lack of progress. While I would still dearly love to understand the emotional underpinnings of your troubles, and believe that doing so would be helpful and healthy for you, I must concede that this appears not to be your road to recovery.”

I shook off his comforting grasp and stood, that I might pace away at least a modicum of my agitation. “What do you propose, Doctor?”

“If we cannot rid you of your dreams through understanding,” he told me, “the next logical step is to find a means of encouraging your mind to shy away from the most troubling images. This should, at minimum, provide you some distance and time from the initial event so that you might heal.”

I almost wept at the mere thought of it. A means of preventing myself from experiencing these dreams? A chance, however brief, to *forget*? I was as a lonely sinner suddenly granted a vision of some backdoor into Heaven.

Perhaps alarmed by the sudden elation in my countenance, Doctor Augustus raised a cautionary hand. “Understand, Howard, that what I propose is no easy thing. There are dangers, some significant indeed, inherent to either method.”

He explained to me that he saw two possible means of ridding me of my night terrors. The first he dubbed “shock-aversion therapy.” I would be strapped, he told me, to a great steel mechanism, bound so that I could not harm myself through spasm and movement. I would be bombarded with a series of stimuli, visual imagery, ambient sounds, even artificial scents produced via alchemical wonders I

could not begin to comprehend. Should any such image trigger a memory of my dreams, I was to indicate thus with a switch beneath my thumb, resulting in a painful electrical shock. Should I fail to cooperate, perhaps out of fear of the agony, the doctor would take it upon himself to decide which images seemed related, though he believed it would work better if I did so myself.

This technique, he explained, would take many sessions, until my mind instinctively associated the images and the pain, and thus should, by his theorem, refrain from revisiting those memories. It meant many days of torment, and though the shock was relatively light, still there was danger of damage to muscles, or even to the brain, the heart, and other organs.

Alternatively, he might offer me a medicine of his own invention, one intended to stop the mind from germinating dreams entirely. It meant no pain, no days of effort before I might see results.

Yet this medicine carried its own risks, risks that Augustus could not elucidate so well as he had those of his shock treatment. It had seen its use before, this medicine, and safely enough, but only in light dosages, used to calm a restless sleeper's nightmares for a single evening. I would be the first man ever to subject himself to its effects for multiple consecutive nights, and in necessarily higher quantities as well.

Long I pondered this dreadful choice, until nearly time for supper. I thought for a time about accepting neither treatment, for both seemed ghastly, but the thought of living forever with these dreams was ghastlier still.

In the end I selected the machine, as I think the doctor hoped I would. I have never been a coward, for all that I had spent the prior two years in relentless fear, and was unafraid of physical pain. It seemed a safer gamble than the unknown poisons of ill-tested medicine.

The process was, if anything, far more brutal even than Doctor Augustus had implied. By the conclusion of my first session, I had to be all but carried to my room. Nurse Roberts was to occupy the chamber beside mine for the night, with the curtains drawn from the intervening window, that she might observe me as I slept. Ostensibly her mandate was to ensure that I had no ill reactions to the treatment, but I believe Doctor Augustus was more interested in having an observer present to determine whether or not I dreamt.

They seem almost designed for climbing by some higher being (or lower), the walls of this great gaping chasm, with many a niche or ledge on which to rest one's weary weight. With gashed and bleeding hands, with sore and aching feet, I make my way, a clumsy spider, down the gullet of the earthen maw. The humid wind rushes past me, upward and over me, until finally I feel solid stone once more beneath my soles. Somehow, here at the base, the air has ceased to move, no longer a rushing wind but a miasma that squats, bloated and reeking like something long dead.

As I had stumbled my way here across a nigh-featureless landscape, so too do I find a path, all unwittingly, through the twisted passageways below. Again I cannot but think of a spider, for had the tunnels been the strands of some arachnid's spun web, they could not be any more ornate, complex. And still, on I walk, on I stagger, on I crawl when the height of the claustrophobic ceilings or exhaustion of my limbs demand it. On and on.

How I can find my way through these caverns and catacombs I know not, for I should certainly be

groping about blindly in wretched darkness. Yet always there remains just enough ambient light to guide my steps, its source hidden from any effort I might make to find it.

Ahead of me, now, the light brightens. Ahead the voices grow louder. I know that I should turn, that I should flee, return to my sheltered cave, starve to death if that is to be my fate, rather than to continue one further step. I continue nonetheless.

The passage twists upward, narrow, ungainly. I struggle to reach its culmination, only to stand on a ledge, a tiny tongue of rock, overlooking....

Ah, gods! Would that I stood upon the precipice of Hell, for even that must be less terrible than this!

The cavern stretches wide, so vast it seems that it must swallow the world entire. Above, a gap in the stone, a festering wound that admits the poisonous light of the stars to dribble down into the inner dark.

Below, I stare deep into... something, something almost fluid, something with the scent of brine, the consistency of drool. It roils and burbles in a pool of stone, and within a horrid shape pulses and beats like some monstrous heart. I cannot see its form, for it defies shape itself... a pulpy, fibrous mass delighting in its own vile excretion, the afterbirth of things never born... a horror not of flesh, nor of organs, nor of bone, a repulsive sac of substances beyond any man's capacity to imagine. I can see no more of it, for my eyes are obstructed by the viscous substance in which it bides, by the shadows that grow thick between my vantage and the tableau below, and for both I am pathetically grateful.



Around the pool, a thousand dancing horrors, and again I am saved only by the feeble light and the flickering shadows. I can apprehend only the most vague of details, and even these are loathsome to behold. Tendrils I can see, reaching from the darkness, reaching from maws and orifices that were never sculpted by any god of man's. And lying at their feet as they parade about their monstrous sire, the shapes of a dozen men and women, two dozen, three.... It is from them the voices come, voices without words, the endless cry of maddened minds, broken by contemplation of their coming fate. I know Clarke lies among them, though I cannot possibly hear or see him. And I see those tendrils reaching for these poor prone souls, sliding almost gracefully into succulent flesh....

And even what little I can perceive has become too much, and I have run screaming into the darkness of the catacombs.

Roberts was already at my side, for apparently I had thrashed and tossed about long before the dream grew fierce enough to haul me from my slumber. Others had heard my screams as well, and it was but moments before Doctor Augustus, clad in robe and slippers, hurried through my door.

“The medicine!” I am certain that I must have shouted, and certain too that I sounded, at that moment, as mad as any lunatic that ever he had treated. “By all the gods, give me the medicine!”

The doctor spent much of the following day questioning me on the content of my dream, but I refused utterly to speak of it. Merely reflecting on it sent me into such a terror, I feared I might truly perish of heart stroke or apoplexy if I dared dwell on what I had seen, or imagined I had seen. To speak of it was utterly unthinkable.

He agreed, finally, as night drew near once more and my agitation only swelled, to permit me to try this last, desperate remedy. He insisted, however, that Nurse Roberts again spend the night in observing me.

I cared not a whit, one way or another, so long as he granted me his medicine.

I have no words for the following night, for no words exist in any language to describe such emotions. How can you, you who have never been troubled as I have been troubled, haunted as I have been haunted, comprehend the profundity, the glorious wonderment, of a night’s sleep uninterrupted and unmarred by dreams?

Yet I cannot say my slumber was *completely* unmarred. I remember feeling, in that drowsy state of half-sleep, that some weight had finally withdrawn. Or rather, relented.

I woke this morning, blinked open my eyes, and only then it dawned on me that the night had passed. I literally wept with joy, true and unbridled joy.

And then... oh, gods, and then I raised myself up and turned my gaze toward the intervening window, toward Nurse Roberts, with whom I wished to share my newfound delight.

It was shattered, that window, the glass all burst inward from my room to hers. It lay glittering across the floor, a constellation of tiny reflective stars. Roberts herself sat upright, one might almost have said stiffly formal, in the room’s most comfortable chair. She sat turned away from me, facing into the far corner.

A corner painted with darkening crimson, a corner that I could see clearly, for the entire back of her head was absent, and there was nothing within the cavity of her skull to block my view of the far wall, a view through the three gaping hollows of her eyes and mouth!

I have had long hours to think on what has occurred as I sit here, strapped to this bed, awaiting the authorities to come and take me away for this abominable crime. Perhaps I may yet convince them of my innocence, perhaps I may not. In truth, it matters little enough.

For I understand now, I think, what happened to me on that long ago day, in that tiny sheltering cave that overlooked an impossible world. Those terrible things to which necessity drove us, Clarke and I,

more than any sane mind could bear. I died a bit that day, I think. I left behind a part of myself, a part of my soul, in the high peaks of Bluetspur.

And took a part of Bluetspur with me in its stead.

It is vile, this unholy, indescribable thing. It is monstrous. But it is trapped, trapped within me, unable to escape....

But only so long as I remain trapped with it.

Tonight, I may lay myself down to sleep in another asylum, one far less friendly than this. I may lay myself down to sleep in a foul dungeon. I know not.

All I know is this: I will lay myself down to sleep.

And though I know they can bring me nothing but unimaginable horrors that must slowly consume what remains of my rational mind, I will fervently pray for dreams.

About the Author

Ari Marmell has been shirking homework in favor of playing **D&D** since he was nine years old. Thankfully, he now works in the industry, since shirking work for gaming tends to wreak havoc with the bills.