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PORTENTOUS DREAMING





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PORTENTOUS DREAMS

Fascinating and mysterious, the world of dreams and nightmare are rarely trod by the average adventurer. But for some, dreams are a potent source of prophecy, direction and warning. Unlocking and interpreting the true meaning of dreams can gift an adventurer great advantages on his quest and provides a valuable tool for a GM seeking to subtly guide his PCs on their quest.

Portentous Dreams provides the tools for a GM to craft exciting and evocative (but maddeningly vague) dreams to guide and/or confound the PCs. Also provided are 18 sample dreams, easily customisable for immediate inclusion in almost any campaign!

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CONTENTS

Dreams	2
Using Dreams in a Campaign.....	3
Random Dreaming	4
Sample Dreams	6
Support Raging Swan Press	8
OGL V1.0A	8

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SYSTEM NEUTRAL EDITION

Welcome to this Raging Swan Press System Neutral Edition. Herein you'll find evocative, inspiring text designed to help you—the busy GM—run better, quicker and easier games.

This book is compatible with most fantasy roleplaying games. It's impossible to create a truly system neutral book, though, and some generic game terms—wizard, fighter, human, elf and so on—may yet lurk within. These generic terms are easily modified to the GM's system of choice.

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DREAMS

Much as they are in literature, dreams can be a powerful storytelling tool in a role-playing game. Dreams are brain activity during sleep, taking a wide variety of forms—emotions, sensations and so on. Everyone in the real world dreams, though dreams are often forgotten upon waking. In a fantasy setting, it is safe to assume all living, intelligent creatures that sleep also dream, though a race known for wisdom and introspection, divinatory ability and/or psionic activity might have developed dream interpretation and lucid dreaming to higher levels. It is also possible other intelligent beings might dream—a vampire might be tortured by nightmares of the faces of her victims through the ages, for instance. Most dreamers are passive observers in their dreams, but rare individuals are lucid dreamers, giving them the ability to actively participate in and exert limited control over a dream's "script."

In general, dreams come in two types—dreams and nightmares. Dreams are usually pleasant, or at least benign, while nightmares are universally unpleasant experiences.

DREAM SOURCES

Portentous dreams can have several different origins—essentially, who or what sent or caused the dream to occur. These origins are described below.

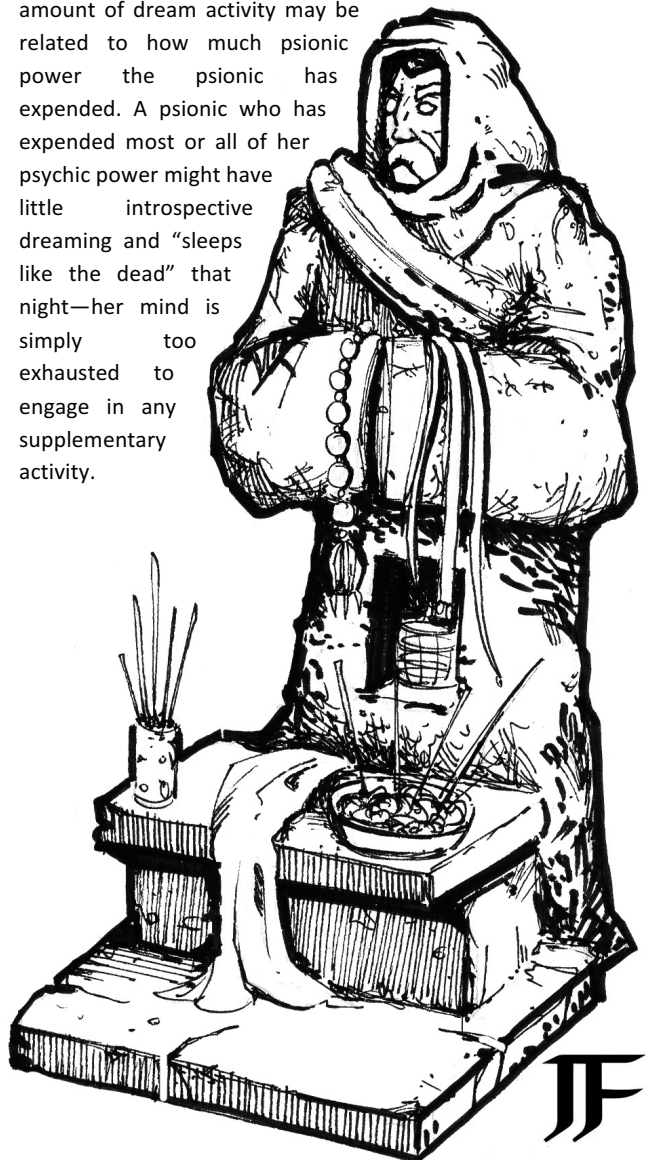
Arcane Dreams: The arcane source of dreaming power tends to be parasitic in nature. While divine dreams come from a deity or her agents, and psionic dreams from the mind of the psionic herself, arcane dream magic tends to steal its energy from both those sources. When beings dream, they free themselves from the confines of reality. Literally *anything* is possible for a dreaming being; thus, in a very real way, a dreamer becomes, for a time at least, a god in her own dream world. This power bleeds into the dreamer's real world. It is a potentially enormous power source, but exceptionally difficult to trap and harness for arcane casters. Those that manage to do so have found it often causes troubled dreams in others for miles around their domains, particularly when harnessed for the mightiest of spells.

Divine Dreams: These dreams are the most common. Fiction is filled with tales of god-fearing heroes receiving guidance, instruction and warnings through dreams sent by a divine agent or even their god. Such dreams are sent almost exclusively to advance a deity's goals or objectives—though being a divine power, a deity's ultimate aims and reasons might remain an enigma to the dreamer for a very long time.

Servants dedicated to a divine power—clerics, druids and paladins, and the most pious of other classes—are the most likely recipients of such dreams. They are also the most likely to receive dire and ominous dreams should they stray from their god's teachings or beliefs. Foremost amongst such dreamers are

those clerics of a deity whose portfolio includes sleep and dreams. These divine servants can learn to enter trance states and "dream" while conscious. The burning of sacred incense and resting in an area sanctified to the deity of the dreamer might lead to a greater chance of useful dreams. On the other hand, a holy priest trying to rest inside a damned temple might find her dreams to be unpleasant ones indeed...

Psionic Dreams: These dreams are part and parcel of psionic creatures. With their increased and specialized brain activity, many psionic creatures have regular, vivid dreams. Many psionic creatures often make use of the "down time" sleep offers to contemplate important subjects and organize their plans—some of the most fiendish plots of psionic villains have been hatched while they slept. At the GM's option, the depth of sleep and the amount of dream activity may be related to how much psionic power the psionic has expended. A psionic who has expended most or all of her psychic power might have little introspective dreaming and "sleeps like the dead" that night—her mind is simply too exhausted to engage in any supplementary activity.



USING DREAMS IN A CAMPAIGN

Use these notes to guide your use of dreams as a foreshadowing device in your campaign.

GUIDE, DON'T EXPECT

As GM, you speak for all the campaign's NPCs, including the gods themselves. And while all-powerful, as a GM you cannot predict your players' actions. All GMs learn they can't predict what their players will do—don't base the dreams around something you're expecting your players to do. Instead, guide them to where you want them to go and what you want them to do.

For example, the characters are passing by ruins that hold an artifact of importance to your campaign you want them to recover. You've had several PCs dream about the artifact and its importance to the world, but the players walk right by the ruins and don't go in. A better approach would be to have a dream that attaches importance to the ruins—perhaps the dream shows the city before it was ruined, but with some distinctive feature (say, a great obelisk) in the city recognizable by the PCs when they pass the ruins. This allows them to make the connection and acts as an incentive to explore the ruins further.

BE VAGUE... BUT NOT TOO VAGUE

As mentioned above, a GM can't predict what players will do. It's easy for your carefully constructed dream sequence to be invalidated by players doing something unexpected. Always keep your dreams unclear, with multiple possible meanings that you might utilize should your favoured result be invalidated by unexpected player action.

On the other hand, it's possible to make the meaning of your dreams so murky the players simply shrug their shoulders and ignore it. This puts you in a difficult position. You could have another "clarifying" dream, but this might make the players feel you're pushing them along a predetermined track—and you are, but as a GM you should avoid making the players feel, or even recognize, you're doing so. However, if you simply leave the dream not understood, the players are less likely to care about any additional dreams you sprinkle into the campaign.

Characters with divination magic can be a boon to you here; they can cast such spells to ask questions about the dream and its meaning. If the dream is critical to the plot, and the players haven't gleaned its importance, consider being more generous than normal with the information granted by the spell to better frame your dream and its significance to the plot.

LESS IS MORE

Unless you are building a campaign around dreams, or your campaign is a truly broad and epic one, dreams should be used sparingly. As noted above, too many dreams lead to a sense that the players are being "railroaded" into a predetermined course of action (and most players hate being railroaded). Use them only to guide critical plot points. A single dream might be sufficient for a small campaign's story arc, while in a grand epic more might be appropriate. As an example of the latter, assume a campaign based around the recovery of four powerful elemental orbs. A dream associated with each leg of the quest would be appropriate, assuming they are being done in a specific order. So Dream A leads to the water orb, then after its recovery, Dream B guides to the fire orb and so on.

Times might arise when you need to supplement a dream with a second. Perhaps the campaign's focus shifts, the PCs do something unexpected, or you need to clarify a dream that was too vague. For example, your plot involves the PCs finding a lost prince and putting him back on the throne as its rightful heir, replacing the usurper whose rule is bringing ruin to the kingdom. The prince was taken away as an infant as he has no idea as to his true identity. Thus, one of the PCs has the following dream:

"A black lion sits at the highest point in his den, looking down upon you with an imperious gaze. All around him and below, the rest of the pride is starving."

The PCs find the prince amongst a group of prisoners they free from slavers, but they miss a critical clue or miss a detail and don't realize the young boy is the rightful heir to the throne. Since the boy was a baby when he was taken, he doesn't know he's the prince, either. Assuming that they have no divination magic available, it's clear that the dream needs a second part, with a bit more specificity, to nudge the PCs in the right direction. So the next dream might be:

"The black lion still sits at the highest point of the den, but now casts his gaze down upon a white-furred cub not seen in your first dream. Despite his age and strength, the cub's presence disturbs him."



RANDOM DREAMING

The following tables enable a GM to quickly generate the outlines of a dream. Randomly generated dreams might be useful when you are looking for a red herring to add to your plot, or for a nightmare a character might have that isn't related directly to the plot. And of course, the majority of dreams are just random—after all, as Freud noted, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” Note, however, if you choose to detail random dreams that have no relevance to the plot, you make it more likely that your players might ignore a portentous dream you wish to be important to your game.

In all cases, the GM should substitute personal choice where a random result makes no sense.

TABLE 1: TONE

Determine whether the dream is a nightmare or not.

D10	
1-5	Benign dream
6-10	Nightmare

On this table, an odd-number roll indicates a dream in colour, otherwise the dream is limited to shades of black, white and grey. The latter result removes the need to roll on Table 7.

TABLE 2: LOCALE

Determine the dream's general setting.

D10	
1	Battlefield
2	Cave or monster lair
3	Dungeon
4	Forest
5	Hill
6	Jungle
7	Mountain/pass
8	Plains/prairie
9	Vague or indeterminate location
10	Urban (Sub-table I.)

TABLE 2.I: URBAN

In an urban environment, determine the type of structure in the dream.

D10	
1	Alehouse/tavern
2	Bordello/feast-hall/other place of pleasure
3	Castle/ palace
4	Catacombs/cemetery/ crypt/mausoleum
5	Inn
6	Library
7	Ruins
8	Sewer
9	Temple
10	Tower

TABLE 3: ENVIRONMENT

Determine the weather; weather is an important indicator of mood in dreams.

D6	
1	Day, bright sun
2	Day, overcast
3	Day, rain
4	Day, thunder/lightning or other precipitation type (snow/sleet/hail)
5	Day, dawn/dusk
6	Night (roll 1d4; 1 = full moon, 2 = waxing, 3 = waning, 4-6 = new moon, unseen, or obscured)

TABLE 5: EVENT

Determine what happens during the dream.

D8	
1	A warning
2	An injury
3	A betrayal
4	A revelation
5	A reversal
6	A death
7	A birth
8	A change

TABLE 4: SUBJECT

Determine the dream's subject.

D20	
1	PC (trapped in other body)
2	PC (dreamer)
3	PC (other)
4	NPC (significant to dreamer such as family, romantic interest, rival, etc.)
5	NPC (stranger)
6	Creature—minor (orc, kobold, goblin etc.)
7	Creature—significant (troll, mummy, ogre etc.)
8	Creature—major (beholder, giant, vampire etc.)
9	Creature—awesome (arch-devil, deity, demon prince, divine avatar, dragon etc.)
10	Animal
11	Plant (tree, flower)
12	Landscape
13	A political event (a coronation, election or speech)
14	A social event (a dance, bal or play)
15	A minor past historic event (a skirmish in a battle, the birth of a future king etc.)
16	A significant past historic event (a significant battle, the death of a beloved monarch etc.)
17	A major past historic event (a battle that ended a war, coronation of an emperor etc.)
18	A seemingly minor future event that has great repercussions
19	A major future event (a battle, hero's or villain's death etc.)
20	Roll twice, ignoring further 20s

TABLE 6: OBJECTS

Often dreams focus on a particular type of item. In this table, listed items are merely suggestions; substitute other suitable items as desired.

D10	
1	Arcane (spellbook, staff, wand)
2	Chivalric (lance, tabard, warhorse)
3	Deceitful (hooded cloak, mask, envenomed knife)
4	Divinatory (crystal ball, revealed code)
5	Martial (armour, bow, shield, sword)
6	Psionic (head circlet, medallion imprinted with the likeness of a psionic creature e.g. couatl, kirin, etc.; re-roll if you do not use psionics)
7	Revelatory (box being opened, curtains being opened)
8	Religious (altar, holy symbol, deity statue)
9	Royal (crown, sceptre)
10	Social (actors, ball gowns, banquet/feast, bard)

TABLE 7: PROMINENT COLOURS

Only use this table, if you rolled an odd number on Table 1.

Colours are another powerful determiner of a dream's mood.

Black and grey are negative colours and should only occur in nightmares and dreams dealing with sinister events while white should only occur in dreams of positive aspect.

D20	
1	Beige (neutrality, superficiality, earth, simplicity)
2	Black (unknown, death, dark feelings, night)
3	Blue (cold, sky, wisdom, creativity)
4	Brown (earth, domesticity)
5	Burgundy (riches, commercial power)
6	Gold (spirituality, material wealth)
7	Grey (illness, despair, fright)

8	Green (growth, forests, fertility, healing, succour, luck)
9	Orange (friendliness, hope, autumn)
10	Purple (devotion, royalty)
11	Red (war, blood, aggression, flame, power)
12	Silver (law, purity, protection, justice, material wealth)
13	White (purity, innocence, cold)
14	Yellow (energy, sun, harmony, deceit, cowardice, jaundiced sickness)
15	Two colours, disregard further rolls of 15+
16-20	No colours of prominence



SAMPLE DREAMS

Below find a collection of sample dreams, divided by type. The dreams are deliberately general in nature, and the GM is encouraged to customize them to suit his players and campaign.

BETRAYAL

- You sit in the court of some unknown noble. Before you, a pair of acrobats—a brother and sister—performs an elaborate acrobatic dance. They work in close tandem and breath-taking symmetry. The routine is punctuated by the man throwing his partner skyward, ever higher, catching her when she falls. As the music reaches a crescendo he throws her higher than ever before but makes no attempt to catch her. She falls to the ground and snaps her neck on the hall's grey flagstones. Her brother walks out of the hall and does not look back.
- You find yourself in a swirling barroom brawl. You and a trusted companion stand back-to-back, fighting the drunken rowdies attempting to overwhelm you. Punches and kicks are thrown, mugs are hurled and even a small cask sails out of the melee. You are laughing, and having a good time, until you feel a searing pain in your back. You cast a glance over your shoulder, and see your friend's dagger buried up to the hilt in your back. You look for your enemy, but the hooligans have disappeared, and you and your friend are alone in the empty tavern. He eyes you curiously, head cocked, as you fall to your knees, slipping into death's realm

BIRTH & RENEWAL

- You are watching a hunter stalk through a verdant forest. The hunter pauses and spies a buck. The animal is old, with white fur around its mouth and sips from a clear, flowing stream. The hunter creeps closer, bow drawn. The animal turns its head slowly, seeing him, but to the hunter's surprise the animal goes back to drinking. The face of its pursuer softens, and he returns his arrow to its quiver. The animal drinks a bit longer before kneeling in the grass, closing its eyes and falling over. The hunter comes forward, and as he does he sees a foal stand up on trembling legs from behind its mother's body.
- You are striding through a mountain pass. The snow creaks under your footsteps but the sun's glare, rather than being blinding, feels warm and soothing. Still, the trek is difficult. You stop to rest and catch your breath. When you glance over your shoulder, you are surprised to see that each one of your boot prints has melted the snow, revealing a patch of thick, lustrous green grass.

DEATH (NATURAL)

- The snake is old. Its eyes are milky and clouded, its teeth blunted and yellowed. You see the animal begin to moult, brushing its body slowly against a moss-covered rock to slough off dead scales. But as the old scales fall away, rather than seeing fresh scales beneath, you see the snake's delicate, supple rib bones. The snake becomes ever more necrotic, until it is a serpentine skeleton beside a pile of old scales. The snake ceases to move, and a sense of calm and inevitability settles over the scene.
- You are standing next to a bed within a small room whose features are indistinct. While the elderly man lying in your bed is unfamiliar to you, you know that within this dream he is a beloved family member. His face is ashen, and his breathing laboured. Still, he seems peaceful and content. He motions for you to lean forward, and whispers something in your ear. The words are too faint to discern, but when you pull away you see he has passed away peacefully, a serene smile upon his face.

MURDER

- Two oak trees stand alone in a copse. One is tall and powerful, clearly the king of the forest. The companion tree beside it is twisted and stunted, half the size and far less grandeur than the first. A great storm blows in, with peals of thunder and flashes of lightning illuminating the night sky. A mist becomes drizzle, which becomes rain, which becomes a torrent. The greater tree is unmoved by the tumult, but the lesser sways and rocks. The smaller tree finally tears loose at the roots and topples forward to smash into the larger one. Unnaturally, the impact shatters the mighty giant at the thickest part of the trunk and sends it down with a crash. The smaller tree rocks in place, settling back into its original position, now alone.
- A grand feast is the centre of the scene. At the head of the table sits a grizzled old lord; surrounding him are all manner of gaily and regally dressed nobles. They are celebrating and cheering and smashing their cups down on the table in time to a merry tune played by a bard. The bard sings and capers, and as the flagons rise and fall some of the earthy brown beer within sloshes onto the table. The song ends, and a new one begins. But this time, the bard is playing something slow and ominous, a funeral dirge. As he plays, the faces of the nobles contort and turn blue, then ashen. Lord and lady alike topple forward face-first onto the table, tongues lolling from their bloated faces. Their cups fall and the ale, now a black, viscous fluid, oozes onto the floor. The bard finishes his song, but no one remains alive to applaud.

GOOD FORTUNE

- You stand atop a mighty alabaster tower. As you gaze at the setting sun, you slip and fall. As you plummet towards your seemingly inevitable death, you strike a series of green hanging banners before landing in a cart filled with soft hay. While you are unharmed, you wince in discomfort as you have landed on something hard in the hay. Brushing away the hay, you discover a diamond the size of your fist.
- You and a number of other people are seated around a round table in a smoke-filled tavern. Each of you has a number of face-down cards before you and the same icy calm look upon your face. Slowly, each of the players nods to you, throws in their cards and pushes a stack of golden coins towards you. The last player takes the longest to do so, and as you reach forward to collect your winnings, he seizes your wrist. When he does, all of the cards flip over of their own accord. Every single card of your opponents is an ace, while yours are nothing but low cards.

ILL FORTUNE

- Your parents have passed away, and you have been bequeathed a small box. It is a lovely thing of teak with a clasp and hinges made of silver. You open the box and find the velvet-lined interior contains a knife. The blade's handle is of silver and the blade is obsidian. This relic is surely enchanted and worth a small fortune! As you admire the weapon, you bobble the box in your hands. The weapon drops to the ground point-down and you watch, horrified, as the blade transfixes your foot. The sharp but delicate blade cracks when the point strikes the floor, ruining it.
- You are in a great city with a wide, but empty, avenue lined with shops and houses. A street urchin with tattered, threadbare clothes is walking towards you. He stops and glances down, and his eyes widen. In the street is a fat platinum coin. His face bursts into a wide smile, and he leans down to pick it up. As he does, a dark carriage pulled by a team of black horses thunders down the avenue and crushes him beneath its wheels.

UPHEAVAL

- The anthill is a perfect cone, and the ants within move with quiet unification and organization. The workers bring food into the nest while others leave to find more. Time passes rapidly. Torrential rains drive the ants into the hill but do not topple it. Mighty winds bend the nearby trees nearly to breaking but do not bother the hill. A stroke of lightning splits a tree down the middle, but both flaming halves fall beside the hill, not striking it. It is then a scowling child stomps by and with a single cruel kick destroys the hill.
- You are the spectator of an intense game of chess (or some similar game). You know these two players are the best for

generations. Each move is perfect, and each response perfectly counters the previous move. The game drags on for hours, with each player a perfect foil for the other. Standing beside the table is a figure in formal black and dark grey clothing. Without warning or provocation, the figure bursts into motion, face contorted in rage and hate, and brings his fist down on the table with a wood-splintering crash. The elegant board and the perfectly organized pieces fly in all directions.

WAR

- Two children play in a village square. They are roughhousing, and one becomes overzealous and strikes the other a blow with her hand. The first child cries and carries on, bringing their parents. An argument ensues between the two parents, each blaming the other's child, and before long the adults come to blows. Family and friends of each come to aid one or the other of the parents and before long the village square has become a great swirling melee. The two children can be seen at the periphery of the violence, holding each other, united as friends in their mutual fear of the violence.
- You left the village as a boy, and now you return as a man. You have seen much, travelled the world and learned wisdom at the feet of great masters. You are ascending the final hill, where you will look down on your beloved home. You are eager to spin the tales of all you have seen and done, but something is wrong. A foul smell hangs in the air, and the air is thick with smoke. As you crest the hill, you see your home is in ruins. Thick smoke hangs around it, and most of the structures are smashed. Sitting at the centre of the ruins is a small army, flying a blood-red banner.

WARNING

- You are standing at the wheel of a crewless ship caught in the middle of some great storm, and you know you are lost. You squint, your eyes trying to catch sight of something—anything—to orient you in the black-on-black of the dark skies and furious waves. Abruptly, a single white beam of light cuts through the darkness, and you spy jagged rocks off your starboard side. You violently wrench the wheel away with such force your shoulders ache from the effort. You narrowly avoid the rocks, and catch a fleeting glimpse of the lighthouse that warned you before the darkness engulfs you again.
- You have been standing guard on the castle wall for hours, bleary eyes straining to peer through the darkness, looking for the approach of the enemy army. You are fighting hard to stay awake. You first pinch yourself, and a while later poke your palms with a dagger to rouse yourself. But finally, it is too much, and your chin drops to your chest. A moment later, the wail of a rooster jolts you from your slumber. The cock-crow has come just in time for you to see the enemy army reach the castle walls.

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