

DWARVES OF DEATH

NECRODWARVES, GEAR, PETS, AND FOES

DESIGNED FOR

B/X DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

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RUNIC NECROMANCY

Dwarven culture focuses on ancestor worship. For deviant dwarves that embrace necromancy, that culture is backwards—the dead should help the living, not be venerated by those who have their own lives to live. The ancestors had their chance. Now, tombs shall be fortresses, the revered dead shall be slaves to the dark thirsts of the present, and those who think to dominate shall taste death.

Detractors call this hideous, vile practice “meatsmithing.” The runes are printed on living flesh, rather than on cold steel. This necromancy is a disturbing, fleshy, corrupted practice to dwarves accustomed to working stone and metal.

Cost to Impart Rune

A dwarf with the Empty Rune can thereafter create runes for other dwarves. Each rune costs experience to implant, from the one who bestows the rune rather than from the one receiving the rune.

- Lesser runes cost 1,000 experience.
- Greater runes cost 3,000 experience.
- Master runes cost 5,000 experience.

Cost to Receive Rune

Dwarves receiving runes are damaged by the print of necromantic energy.

- Lesser runes cost 1 point of Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma.
- Greater runes cost 1 point of Strength, Dexterity, or Constitution.
 - Losing 1 Constitution means the dwarf loses 1 hit point per level from permanent total.
- Master runes cost 1 point as a lesser rune, and 1 point as a greater rune.

While lone dwarven necromancers can be a problem, more often they are in packs. A ruthless leader will arrange for an underling to take several runes, even if they are ruinous to the underling. Even if an underling cannot walk and is in a palanquin, borne into battle like a relic, the effects remain and can shift the tide of battle.

Location of Rune

- Lesser runes can be printed anywhere on the body. They are about the size of the dwarf’s palm, black with glittering nitrous silver—a broken, gummy glimpse of the endless night sky twisted into flesh.
- Greater runes must be printed on the torso, they are twice the size of a lesser rune.
- The Empty Rune must be placed over the dwarf’s heart.
 - Some ambitious dwarves force their students to get lesser or greater runes over the heart, to assure that they can never ascend to receive the Empty Rune. Others understand the crucial needs of leadership development for the spread of the cult.

Lesser Runes

Dwarves receiving lesser runes gain the title “Corpsesmith.” These runes appear to be leering twisted parodies of the runes that dwarven mastersmiths stamp into their formidable weapons.

- **Breathless.** The dwarf does not need to breathe, and is immune to gas attacks or drowning.
- **Charm Undeath.** This rune grants a number of protections against the undead.
 - Encountering undead of equal or higher hit dice than the dwarf’s level, the dwarf is +3 on a reaction test.

- Undead of a lower hit die than the dwarf's level will not attack the dwarf unless compelled by a greater force than the dwarf.
 - If asked for help, the undead may roll on "Retainer Reactions" on B21 to see how they respond.
 - A dwarf may have up to [character level] hit dice of "retainer" undead.
- Undead of hit die half the dwarf's level will actively seek to help the dwarf.
 - They count as "offer accepted" on Retainer Reactions, and count against the total hit dice of undead retainers the dwarf may have.
- **Chill.** The dwarf is comfortable in frigid conditions. Cold based attacks do half damage. The rune does not bring with it greater vulnerability, only extending comfort and safety dealing with cold.
- **Death Armor.** The dwarf takes 1 round and loses 1 hit point per each -1 on the target's current armor class. The target's armor class improves by 2 for 1 turn.
 - This can only be done to self, or to friendly undead.
- **Drink Life.** In a ritual taking 1 turn, the dwarf can drink the life blood of a living humanoid, draining the humanoid to death. The dwarf regains 1d4 hit points per the sacrifice's hit dice.
 - This works on humans, dwarves, halflings, goblins, orcs, hobgoblins, lizardfolk, kobolds, and other similar creatures.
 - This does not work on elves or those with elvish or fey blood.
- **Impart Undeath.** Using this rune costs 1 full turn, freedom to use hands, and to speak in at least a mutter. The dwarf must have corpses or ashes on hand.
 - The dwarf can choose to lose up to 20 hit points. Each hit point lost is +1 on a d20 roll. If the dwarf is successful on the d20 roll by rolling equal to or below the number of hit points sacrificed, then the dwarf can animate available remains.
 - The dwarf creates 1 hit die of undead per 2 full levels. (A +1 or * counts as an extra hit die.)
- **Question the Dead.** The ritual takes 1 turn, and the skull of the dead must be present. The dwarf tests monster reaction (B24). Each question asked lowers the reaction rating by one. A hostile skull will not be helpful, but may still answer questions. The skull can no longer speak when below 2 reaction.
 - This ritual does not guarantee truthfulness, helpfulness, or knowledge on the skull's part.
- **Resist Death.** Once per day, the dwarf can take a full turn of meditation and regain 1 hit point per Constitution point. Excess hit points are lost. Also, when the dwarf's hit points are gone, the dwarf may roll 1d20—rolling under the dwarf's Constitution, the dwarf has 1 hit point left but is incapacitated until healing at least 1 more hit point.
- **Restore Undead.** In a ritual taking 1 turn, the dwarf can sacrifice living creatures to restore hit points to undead. The dwarf kills the creature, and either all undead within 15 feet regain 1 hit point per sacrificed creature's hit dice, or one undead receives 1d4 hit points per sacrifice's hit dice.
- **Share Death.** The dwarf can sacrifice up to [1 hit point per level] before attacking with a melee weapon. If the attack hits, each sacrificed hit point is added to the damage inflicted on the target.
- **Slay.** The dwarf can give up 1 hit point per the target's hit dice (instinctively known upon committing to undertake this action) and attack at -2 to hit. Upon touching the target, the target must Save vs. Death Ray or let out a shriek and keel over dead and rigid. The hit points are lost when the attack is attempted, whether it hits or not. This only works on truly living targets that are not plants or constructs.
- **Untorn Essence.** The dwarf becomes immune to level-draining attacks of undead, and also immune to paralysis effects from undead.

Greater Runes

Dwarves receiving Greater Runes receive the title "Master Meatsmith."

- **Accept Sacrifice.** In 1 round, undead within 5 feet of the dwarf may volunteer up to all their hit points, to heal the dwarf's injuries. Every 2 hit points sacrificed heals 1 hit point.
- **Deadly Focus.** Mind-altering effects that allow a saving throw cannot affect the dwarf. This includes sleep, cause fear, and charm.
- **Death Shriek.** Instead of attacking, the dwarf may scream a death cry. The dwarf loses 1 hit point per [hit dice of the toughest foe]. This acts as "Cause Fear."
- **Defy Gods.** All undead within 21 feet are more difficult to turn. If a cleric successfully turns them, the dwarf may save vs. Paralysis or Turn to Stone. If the dwarf succeeds, the undead are *not* turned.
- **Touch of Death.** The dwarf can trade 1 hit point per target's level or hit dice and strike with level drain as a wight (B44).
- **Undead Vitality.** All undead within 21 feet can only be hit by silvered or magic weapons.
 - Those who normally can only be hit by silvered or magic weapons ignore 1 hit point of damage per hit die.

Master Runes

Dwarves achieving this distinction gain the title "Lord Meatsmith."

- **Master of the Dead.** Skull, crown, and scepter formed of a knotwork of interlaced runes.
 - Rituals taking 1 turn take 1 round. Rituals taking 1 round can be done instantly.
 - Grants +3 to all reaction and retainer tests with undead.
 - Every 3 levels gives undead within 21 feet +1 to hit and damage from morale.
- **Conduit of Death.** Nightmarish image of the broken Gates of the Dead, layered rune patterns.
 - Grants the dwarf 1 free hit point to "spend" per Constitution, using lesser or greater runes.
 - Doubles the experience or hit dice of sacrifices benefiting the undead.
 - Doubles range of necromantic effects.
- **Undying.** Hideous skeletal phoenix tearing down from its ashes in a cascade of rune progression.
 - Can "borrow" hit points equal to Constitution from necromantic energy. Within the next 24 hours, those hit points of damage will be accepted. Temporarily, the dwarf can stay up.
 - Saving vs. Paralysis or Turn to Stone, the dwarf ignores all damage from an attack involving cold, fear, death energy, or magic spells.
 - The dwarf can prepare a cauldron of blood that is frozen solid. Upon the dwarf's death, the cauldron will begin to thaw, then warm; in 7d4 days, it will heat all the way to boiling, and the dwarf will emerge reborn. This costs the dwarf 1 Constitution each time it is done.

The Empty Rune

Only rulers of clans of necrodwarves may receive the Empty Rune. They gain the title, "Thane of [suitably impressive abstraction involving death]." Examples include: Corpses, Slaughter, The Void, Urathi Heights, etc.

The Empty Rune does not lower ability scores, or cause any other degrading of the character.

This rune is somehow both hideous and thoroughly abstract. Eyes that see it sting and water. It is always placed above the dwarf's heart. It grants two abilities.

- The dwarf can now tattoo other dwarves with runic necromancy. (Except the Empty Rune.)
- The dwarf can take 1 turn to conduct a sacrifice of a sentient, as described in "Drink Life."
 - The dwarf gains 500 experience per hit die/level sacrificed. This experience does not contribute towards leveling, but instead grants experience to be spent on tattooing other dwarves with runic necromancy.

The Empty Rune is bestowed by the Silencer of Stars, a dwarven mask for the great looming god of death. Only in desecrating a deep, profoundly significant tomb of a thane can a necrodwarf who is already seared with a Master Rune possibly come to the attention of the Silencer of Stars. If successful, the necrodwarf will sense something at the edge of dreams, then imbibe hideous concoctions designed to imitate death. After several weeks of coma, the necrodwarf will either die horribly screaming, or wake with a print that the Godshadow seared into his or her flesh—the Empty Rune. At that point, the necrodwarf founds a new order of necrodwarves, and the contagion spreads.

VENGEANCE GUSTERS

Vengeance gusters are an unholy combination of technology and necromancy. Dwarves who worship the God of Death jealously guard the secret of their construction. The gusters are hefty backpacks with a tank and some mechanical equipment, connected to a tube that ends in a nozzle with a sturdy grip.

Using a guster counts as a ranged attack in the round. It functions like a breath weapon; those in the line of fire can save vs. Dragon Breath to take half damage. The gust that comes from the pack is deadly chill, packed with negative energy and the hate of the dead for the living. Except for the supernatural element and the cold, it looks and acts like a flamethrower. The gusts are noxious and stinking of acrid death.

USERS ROLL 1d6:	Description	Dwarf	Human	Halfling	Elf	1-2 HD undead	3+ HD undead
Critical Success	5' wide and 60' long 2d10 hit points damage	5-6	6	6	5-6		6
Basic Success	5' wide and 30' long 2d6 hit points damage	2-4	2-5	3-5	3-4	4-6	3-5
Malfunction	Varies. Consult table.	1	1	1-2	1-2	1-3	1-2

Malfunction

1. **Explosion.** 2d10 hit points damage in a 15' radius, double damage to the wearer.
2. **Blowback.** The user takes ½ damage. 1-3, the guster is fused. 4-6, the guster is jammed.
3. **Fusion.** The guster is destroyed, but does not explode.
4. **Jam.** Requires 1d4 rounds of effort to prepare it to fire again, and it is +2 malfunction chance until 1d4 hours are spent by an expert repairing the guster.
5. **Clog.** Functions as a basic success, but will be -1 on the d6 roll for subsequent use until 1d4 hours are spent by an expert repairing the guster. A negative result on 1d6 is a malfunction.
6. **Gush.** Counts as a critical success this round, but the tank is empty and the guster cannot be reloaded until 1d4 hours are spent by an expert repairing it.

Racial Variables

- *Infravision.* Infravision helps aim the unholy fire. Dwarves and elves are more likely to get critical successes.
- *Shape.* Elves and halflings lack the sturdy frames to wear the equipment properly, increasing the chance of malfunction.
- *Fey Hate.* The supernatural flame hates elves, and is more likely to malfunction in their hands.
- *Undead Operators.* The flame gets quirky wielded by the restless dead. Low HD undead lack the reflexes and intelligence to get the best results from the equipment.
- *Substitutions.* (If wielded by a race not listed here, choose the race that is closest, and use those numbers.)

Guster Traits

- The guster only does half damage to non-living targets, including stone, wood, constructs, etc.
- Gusters have 300 coins encumbrance. A second tank has 150 coins encumbrance.
- One tank fuels 6 shots.
- Foes under 4 hit dice that are subject to morale tests must test each time the guster is fired towards them.

Background

Gusters are the invention of the Chill Claw cult of necrodwarves. They are the only ones with the needed expertise to build, repair, and maintain the horrifying vengeance gusters. A character needing to gain this knowledge would need to be accepted into their ranks and then train with them for a year.

The Chill Claw closely guard the secret of brewing guster fuel. It involves liquefaction of the corpses of various races in a certain order and ratio, combined with nitre, and with the rotten blood of the earth, in a process that takes considerable time and precision and possibly sensitivities that only dwarves possess. The dwarves apply their unique persnickety engineering expertise to an organic process vulnerable to randomness and the flaws of flesh. They consider their patience amply rewarded each time a siege corridor full of their foes die horribly in screaming agony.

The God of Death manages the void of space, endlessly dark and cold and brutal, with an unquenchable thirst. The cold burning of the stars is gifted into this weapon for use against the foes of the undying.

FUND OF SECRETS

Legend speaks of large ravens that hate all life. They disdain the world, and their nests are between the stars—they never sleep when they are in this dimension.

They look like regular large ravens, with an 18 inch body and a 4 foot wingspan.

Upon closer inspection, their eyes are pure white, yellowing around the edges, the precise shade of aging bone. Their iridescent black wings are finely printed with blasphemous runic patterns in the shimmer of darkness, resembling more advanced runes in the same family as runic necromancy. Their beaks and talons resemble bone, and what at first appear to be scratches seem to form patterns; maps between stars? The etchings on the Gates of the Dead? Spells in a dead language? No one knows.

Collectively, these ravens are called the Fund of Secrets. Individually, each is a deposit. The only living things they choose to consort with are the necromantic dwarves bound through sorcery and blood to the Empty Rune, which is possibly a depiction of their home.

Deposits have a number of special traits.

- AC: 6. HD: ½, 2 hit points. Move: 9' (3'), fly, 150' (40'). 1 attack for 0-1 hit point. Save as Halfling 1. Morale 10. Treasure: Nil. Alignment: Chaotic.
- *Clever*. They have the equivalent of a 10 Intelligence.
- *Whispering*. They can whisper a croaking corruption of dwarven, heavily accented but understandable to those who speak dwarven.
- *Whisper to the Dead*. They are able to speak to the recently dead as though they had the lesser rune "Question the Dead."
- *Whisper Hideous Secrets*. If a sentient foe is hovering between life and death, deposits take great pleasure in whispering to them so only they can hear. After 1d4 rounds, the victim contorts, horror and madness twisting its features, and dies painfully with broken sanity as something looms up in death and claims the victim. The deposit then perches on the corpse, very self-satisfied, and plucks out the corpse's eyes as though they had some unique and pleasing flavor. (These corpses cannot be resurrected, but can be used as undead.)

When a necrodwarf is undertaking a task important to the God of Death, often a deposit will arrive to assist. Also, a deposit is a sign of favor from the God of Death, adding prestige among the necrodwarves. If a lucky necrodwarf gains a deposit as a long-term ally, that deposit counts as 1 hit die undead against the necrodwarf's undead retainer total (even though it is not itself undead.)

More than just a symbol, the deposit is helpful. It is eager to assist in the corrupting of the world, and to that end it will eavesdrop, whisper unhelpful secrets in the dark to those desperate to hear them, question corpses, carry messages, intimidate the weak-minded, and anything else that the deposit and the necrodwarf can agree will be useful.

RUNIC NECROMANCY MAGIC ITEMS

Necrodwarves become more terrifying when they are armed and armored with runic equipment that is designed to amplify their natural powers. This gear is not common, and it is not easy to make. However, those wielding it relish the cost and celebrate the gruesome result.

- Gear with runic necromantic power will only respond as magic when worn or wielded by a necrodwarf connected to the Empty Rune through a tattooed rune on their flesh.
- Weapons only grant their effect if held in a hand. Armor only grants its effect if it is worn. Rings, amulets, and belt buckles only grant their effects if worn.
- Gear printed with runic necromantic power allows a necrodwarf to use the runes in question as though they were tattooed on. Unless otherwise noted, the runic gear grants no other advantage.
- If a necrodwarf knows the history of a runic weapon, the necrodwarf gets a +1 to hit and +1 damage morale bonus while using it.
- If a necrodwarf knows the history of runic armor, the necrodwarf gets a -1 Armor Class morale bonus while wearing it.
- If a necrodwarf knows the history of runic objects, the necrodwarf gets +2 level adjustment using it, or adjusts a roll by 2.

CREATING GEAR WITH RUNIC NECROMANTIC POWER

Lesser Runes—Weapons

The Empty Rune is willing to share its power with a non-meat weapon only when a Lord (printed with one or more Master Runes) sacks the stronghold of a hated enemy, or ritually sacrifices a major enemy.

In the case of sacking a stronghold, at least 100 prisoners must be taken, and at least 150 hit dice of sacrifices must be represented. A pit is then constructed, with bellows (made of sacrifices) and a forge at the bottom of the pit. It must have sloping sides, generally about 45 degrees.

Then at least three necrodwarves man the forge, and as they work on the weapon tirelessly night and day for a full week, their minions ritualistically sacrifice the prisoners, spraying their blood over the forge scene, the blood gushing down into the pit (which often gets knee deep or waist deep during the sacrifices and forging—the pits are built with that expectation.) The smiths chant ancient chilling dirges and praises to death, ceaseless as they work.

The new weapon is cooled in the blood of sacrifices, and one of the necrodwarves gives up a rune. That rune then sears into the weapon as it hisses in gore, cooling suddenly in connecting to the depths of space.

In the case of a sacrifice, only a dwarf of name level who opposes the necrodwarves will do, unless an oracle borne by the Fund of Secrets identifies another target to the deadly Lord. In the case of a sacrifice, the ritual takes 12 days of torture, degradation, and brutality in a refined ritual that ends with the target's irrevocable death, slain by the weapon that was forged during the torture, and interlaced with it—hot metal, flaying, tearing out teeth and bone to decorate the weapon or embed within it, etc.

The weapon becomes a symbol of the potent lordship of death and cold. The site of its creation, or the sacrifice it celebrates, is stitched deep in the blade. This history is only visible when a necrodwarf holds it

and gives up 1 hit point per century since it was created—then the runic history glows to life in the depths of the weapon. If the necrodwarf can piece together the entire history from when the weapon was created to when it came into the dwarf's possession, everafter the dwarf is +1 to hit and +1 damage using it, for morale purposes.

The weapon counts as magic in the hands of a necrodwarf, for purposes of hitting creatures immune to non-magic weapons.

Available runes: Death Armor, Impart Undeath, Resist Death, Restore Undead, Share Death, Slay.

Lesser Runes—Armor

The Empty Rune is willing to share its power with non-meat armor only when a Lord (printed with one or more Master Runes) builds a foul forge in the tomb of a name level dwarf, desecrating it for all time. Celebrating the desecrating forge, the Lord can forge an article of armor with a lesser rune to commemorate the occasion. Only metal armor can be forged in this way, not leather (though the straps and such on the armor are most decidedly... necromantic.)

Rarely, the Fund of Secrets will bear an oracle to a Lord, identifying a potential alternative site to host a desecrating tomb.

At least 100 sacrifices, and at least 150 hit dice of sacrifices, must be offered to thoroughly desecrate the site. The methods of sacrifice often involve gladiatorial combat with the dead, driving sacrifices insane so they mewl and beg for death and are given puny weapons to slowly kill themselves, poisoning sacrifices so they have horrific hallucinations as they slip away through a coma, and other vile practices outlined in the lore books of the necrodwarves. This period of desecration may not be rushed faster than six months.

The forge is then built out of sacred statues and stones of the tomb, the bellows from the remains of the victims, and again it is crucial to quench the forged armor in sacrificial gore. Ancient powerful chants of the chill emptiness must resound through the entire process, deepening the chill that penetrates into the living earth.

One piece of armor is forged, and it bears the rune and the power. Often other pieces that match will be created, and approximations of the rune scattered over the armor. The single piece carries the power. This is often a helm, or a breastplate, occasionally a gauntlet or greave. When full armor is worn, the rune stitches it all together mystically and invisibly in a glittering frigid net of death.

The armor becomes a symbol of the potent lordship of death and cold. The site of its creation is stitched deep in the metal. This history is only visible when a necrodwarf wears it and gives up 1 hit point per century since it was created—then the runic history glows to life in the depths of the armor. If the necrodwarf can piece together the entire history from when the armor was created to when it came into the dwarf's possession, everafter the dwarf is -1 armor class using it, for morale purposes.

The armor counts as magic when strapped onto a necrodwarf.

Available runes: Breathless, Charm Undeath, Chill, Death Armor, Impart Undeath, Resist Death, Untorn Essence.

Lesser Runes—Objects

The Empty Rune is willing to share its power with non-meat objects only when a Lord (printed with one or more Master Runes) completes a quest set by the Fund of Secrets, personally delivered to the Lord. Upon completion of the quest, the Lord may choose to lose 1,000 experience to set one of the Lord's runes into an object that has sentimental value to the Lord, or was instrumental in the quest.

Objects are typically beard clasps, finger rings, bracelets, masks, belt buckles, prosthetics, or gems.

Five Lords must gather to celebrate the achievement of the sixth Lord, and each one must be willing to give up 500 experience (except for the 1,000 of the quester.) While the travel, obeisance, and loss of vitality are irksome to the powerful Lords, they are also keenly aware that they may someday require the same, and that their refusal to recognize a peer may displease their chilly master. Also, the Thane over them may be watching, pondering who may receive further runes.

Over the course of one week, the six Lords must sacrifice a minimum of 100 people, minimum 150 hit dice. They read sonorously from the dark tomes of their hideous faith as the crunch and gurgles of death, or the slow drip of dissolution, or the shrieks of emotion punctuate their prayers to the outer darkness. (Generally, each participating Lord is expected to bring a share of the sacrifices.)

The object becomes a symbol of the inexorable will of death and cold. The site of its creation is stitched deep in the metal, as is a cryptic summary of the quest. This history is only visible when a necrodwarf wears it and gives up 1 hit point per century since it was created—then the runic history glows to life in the depths of the object.

These objects are the most cryptic and difficult to research. If the necrodwarf can piece together the quest that inspired the object, and entire history from when the object was created to when it came into the dwarf's possession, then the necrodwarf counts as +2 levels for purposes of using the rune in the object, or is +2 on a roll if that's more appropriate.

Available runes: Charm Undeath (levels), Drink Life (+2 to total), Impart Undeath (levels), Question the Dead (to roll), Resist Death (to Constitution).

Greater Runes

This enchantment is extraordinarily rare, and desperately coveted by Thanes because of the prestige and power it imparts to its owners. Greater Runes can be printed on weapons, armor, and objects. Armor must be a breastplate or crown helm, objects must be scepters, scythes, or belts. The Master Rune may be printed on any kind of hand weapon or two handed weapon. The only smaller weapon that may accept a Greater Rune is a superbly crafted gauntlet.

Master Runes may be planted in objects when one Thane ritualistically sacrifices another Thane. The reasons are not important, but often involve competition for assignments from the Empty Rune, concluding a schism war within a cult, or punishing betrayal.

Over the course of the two week sacrificial period, the sacrificer tears a Greater Rune from the sacrifice, so the dark energies of the Empty Rune will live on past the destruction of their host, celebrating the conclusion of what was likely a bitter struggle.

The object becomes a symbol of the ruthless, pragmatic justice of death and cold. The site of its creation is stitched deep in the metal, as is a cryptic summary of the motive, and the names of the Thanes

involved. This history is only visible when a necrodwarf wears it and gives up 1 hit point per century since it was created—then the runic history glows to life in the depths of the object.

These objects are cryptic, and bear within them the malice of suffering beyond death. If the necrodwarf can piece together the story that led to the object's creation, and entire history from when the object was created to when it came into the dwarf's possession, then the necrodwarf will receive a quest from the Empty Rune soon after the necrodwarf becomes eligible.

Available runes: Accept Sacrifice, Deadly Focus, Death Shriek, Defy Gods, Touch of Death, Undead Vitality.

Master Runes

Objects printed with a Master Rune cannot be created by mortals. Legend among the necrodwarves is that one of each exists at any given time, and if they are all brought together, a gate to the Empty Rune opens and the world is flooded with death energy. Whether these objects exist or not, all Thanes will eagerly pursue rumor of one.

Possession of an object printed with a Master Rune is enough legitimacy to propel a Thane of the necrodwarves to become Lord Thane, rightful recipient of the fealty of the other Thanes. This is not only something the Thanes are ambivalent about, it is an absolutely horrifying prospect for those that oppose them. If the clans were to unite, they would be capable of breathtaking military and religious conquest.

BEARD LEECHES

These monsters are simple and horrible. Necrodwarves create them by feeding regular leeches on the undead remains they have animated. After a few generations, the “beardleeches” are ready for service.

A beardleech can drain 1 hit point a minute from a living, sentient target—anything that would serve as a sacrifice for the necrodwarf. The beardleech can hold up to 4 hit points, growing from something the size of a pinky finger to something the size of a banana.

A necrodwarf can devour a beardleech in 1 round. (The details of how this looks, sounds, smells, etc.—that’s up to the DM...) The necrodwarf gains 1 hit point per hit point stored in the beardleech.

Beardleeches are so named because some necrodwarves will hang them from armor behind the protection of the beard, out of sight and ready for quick consumption.

Even necrodwarves have limits to what they can bear. A necrodwarf can only consume 1 beardleech per hit die/level in a day.

Trying to eat a beardleech does not help a character or monster who has not been printed with runic necromancy.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS IN YOUR GAME?

The “Dwarves of Death” systems are pretty gruesome. Why go into detailing the horrific obscenities of the necrodwarves? If players are not encouraged to play these monsters, and if player characters cannot use their magic gear or pets, why outline them at all?

The two main answers—help DMs make cinematic backgrounds, and provide dozens of hooks for adventures.

Consider the motives the system creates for necrodwarves—actions that can trigger player character reactions. There are conventions and formulas for fighting necromancers, and the DM should have solid reasons to set up scenarios that echo those formulas and conventions!

- *Lore.* The rune object system encourages the necrodwarves to know the history of things, so they have a vested interest in getting at obscure lore regarding their items. Stealing books, infiltrating libraries, capturing loremasters, etc.
- *Sacrifices.* The whole rune system is built to take advantage of sacrifices great and small. To fuel some of these operations, the necrodwarves need a lot of sacrifices. Whole villages, caravans, all kinds of prisoner populations. As they seek slaves, they are made vulnerable: they risk infiltration, they grab people the characters care about, they disrupt the landscape enough to attract military response. More cinematically, the characters are heroic as they race to stop a sacrifice—of individuals that matter to them, or large scale slaughter. You’ve got necrodwarves chanting, wielding knives, overacting and generally announcing they are the bad guy that needs to get stomped right now.
- *Desecration.* Necrodwarves are motivated to get into the best guarded dwarven holy places. This leads to both very cinematic dungeon dressing and comfortably formulaic scenes of conflict, and also to very understandable conflicts with the dwarves charged with protecting their culture, religion, history, and boundaries.
- *The Nature of Evil.* Evil destroys itself in the end, so if the situation looks bleak, introduce two necrodwarves of similar stature competing to get the site for their dark master. As they weaken each other, they create opportunities for the characters.
- *Quest Inversion.* Normally the heroes embark on a mighty quest, and the villains try to stop them. In this version, the villain may have a quest from his or her dark god, and the characters may be the ones trying to stop the quest from reaching its completion.

Following is one possible story arc that is clearly motivated in terms outlined by the material on necrodwarves. The arc could be a campaign (scalable for the power level of the party) and/or each point within the arc could provide a single scenario.

Even if the player characters are not directly involved, knowing the mountain kingdom next door is struggling with this threat adds flavor to the world and motivates others who are directly confronting the necrodwarves, possibly giving them reasons to interact with the player characters in different ways (such as hiring them, chasing them away from sensitive areas, asking for their help disposing of corpses, etc.)

FALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING

A dwarven city in the mountains has been severely weakened. (Civil war, invasion, plague, natural disaster, etc.) As their strength wanes, the necrodwarves make their move.

Phase I. Prepare the Way. Led by a Master Meatsmith.

- Necrodwarves go recruiting, capturing dwarves and torturing them until they lose all hope and join the cult, now open to the possibility of being tattooed in the future.
- Necrodwarves go recruiting, sneaking mobs of workers to potter's fields, mass graves, and other ready sources of bodies. Their raiding is distasteful and unsettling to settlements so violated, but the graverobbers avoid confrontation as they are conserving their strength.
- Necrodwarves clear a beachhead in striking distance of the beleaguered dwarf nation, rousting other threats or rearguards to fortify unpleasantly close.
- Necrodwarves hire, intimidate, or pact with other local chaotic forces to form alliances of mutual defense and to gain shock troops.

Phase II. Confound Foes. Led by a Lord Meatsmith.

- Hire, bribe, subvert, or blackmail agents to begin setting local forces of law on edge and against each other.
- Arrange for plentiful slaves/sacrifices/corpses. Work it out with slavers, prisons, chaotic raiders, or whatever local power is appropriate; begin showing force on their behalf in exchange, keeping them in line and offering them a real service while further intimidating local forces of law.
- Choose a local threat and bolster it, so it draws attention of the forces of law and pulls focus away from the activities of the now-quieter necrodwarves.
- Isolate the dwarves by imitating them and perpetrating atrocities on their allies and neighbors. If possible, trigger conflict to weaken the dwarves and other forces of law and to create hard feelings.
- Set up multiple safe houses in appropriate locations. Install undead defenders.
- Scout out the defenses, layout, and locations in the suffering dwarven city. Locate a suitable holy tomb of a past Thane, the more impressive the better.

Phase III. Strike! Led by a Thane.

- Choose a moment (or create one) where local militaries have their hands full. Ideally this includes the dwarven nation defending their surface gates, or gates to another underground territory. Apply overwhelming force against a select few positions to destroy the dwarven rearguard while they're distracted.
- Conduct counter-intelligence operations to baffle the dwarves as to the true strength, location, and purpose of the necrodwarves as they close in on the Thane's sanctified tomb.
- Once the tomb is secure, assign underlings to creating rune armor there, and strike at the harried flanks of the dwarven undercity.
- Upon trapping the hapless dwarves between their former allies and the implacable undead threat, arrange for a mass sacrifice in the Thane's throne room, celebrating victory and creating a rune weapon to commemorate the victory.
- If possible, capture the Thane, and sacrifice the Thane to create yet another runic weapon!

Phase IV. Endgame. Led by a Lord Meatsmith.

- If the forces of law are powerful, or the dwarves prepared to continue fighting, consider pulling out altogether; leave traps, pockets of undead, desecration, and dwarf-haters in the wake of an orderly retreat from an untenable position.
- If the forces of law are distracted, pull back and use a sub-set of the dwarven city as a hidden base to continue operations, harrying the forces of law and continuing to gather sacrifices.
- If the forces of law are weak, fortify the position, summon kin, raise armies, and prepare to expand from a position of strength.

Best case scenario for the necrodwarves: they have a desecrated forge and a piece of rune armor, they have shattered the strength of a dwarven nation and created one rune weapon for the conquest and another for sacrificing their Thane, and they have new fortified areas from which to continue making mischief.

After a victory on that scale, it is likely another Thane would emerge.

Still, some of the plans are quite tenuous; intentionally or otherwise, a group of player characters could ruin everything. Disrupting grave robberies, rescuing slaves, turning allies against the necrodwarves, bolstering dwarven defenses, striking at leaders of the invasion... they could be quite troublesome.

Which is what adventures are made of.

THE ORIGIN OF THE NECRODWARVES

The Tcholiark could build runes in anything. Their city was a mountain peak warmed by the depths of the earth. They were ringed around by the fortifications of the Circle of Khalart, lesser settlements, paths, and battlements protecting the mountain. Freed from imminent danger, they experimented with the craft of rune smithing, elevating the craft to a religion that stood side by side with their worship of Dolvatch and Mekk. It could not stand there forever.

In the Deep Winter x years ago, Lord Morniarak, Thane of the Crisp Height, was excited. His Lord Runesmith Ghertian had begun experimenting with binding runic energies to dwarves, rather than to their nonliving gear. As he demonstrated some success, Morniarak allowed his Thaneguard to volunteer to receive these runes, to better carry out their duties under the banner of prestige and power the runes would impart.

And so over the next century, the Thaneguard were gifted with glittering golden runes that gave them power and glory. Morniarak's trust of Lord Runesmith Ghertian was absolute, and well-placed. Ghertian would not last forever, though. As he groomed his successor, a runesmith of tremendous talent, Ghertian's vigilance lapsed.

Unknown to Ghertian, his nephew Fariak was intensely jealous of his breakthroughs and prestige—other runesmiths were contemplating creating a new position of prestige to recognize the greatest runesmith of the age, and while they could not stop praising Ghertian, they paid no heed to Fariak in his shadow.

Though he initially showed great promise, Fariak struggled with the runes for the Thaneguard. They would not respond to him. His jealousy and rage had poisoned him so that the pure energies that Ghertian mastered were beyond Fariak's reach—and it was only a matter of time until that truth emerged. Desperate and enraged to the point of insanity, Fariak turned to Zomok, the Bargaining God. Fariak asked to be able to craft flesh runes with far more power and glory than what Ghertian had managed. Zomok agreed, and the price was Ghertian's death.

Fariak did not even hesitate. Ghertian died screaming of a rare, virulent poison, and the sorrowing Thane suspended all runecraft for a decade to honor his loss. Meanwhile, Fariak chafed at the respect and restriction, still feeling overshadowed. Energized by Zomok's promise, he practiced his craft in secret, gathering sympathizers to his cause.

Fariak was shocked, almost to his senses, when he realized his runes were black and streaked with the silver of deep space. For Zomok had connected the mad runesmith with a god more sympathetic to his efforts. The God of Death now fueled the energies Fariak bound to the living, changing them irrevocably.

In an unrelated series of political and military events, the Dracolithic Empire finally reached the borders of the Circle of Khalart, and required tribute from the Thane. Ancient and proud, eyes misting with time and reflection of a thousand glories, the Thane contemptuously dismissed the Dracolithic diplomats. So the dragons came, and the armies behind them.

After a decade of shockingly disastrous war, the beleaguered dwarves were pressed all the way back to Tcholiark, their defenses a smoking ruin that surrounded them and dimmed the sun with slaughter and despair. Many of the Dracolithic dragons and spellcasters were slain, and whole armies had been ground to gory corpses by the redoubtable dwarven defenders. Still, the Dracolithic Empire was mighty, and had many allies and profound wealth. Underground reserves of water and vast fungus crops remained in

Tcholiark, the mountain itself shielded and fought for the dwindling number of defenders. The outcome was not certain.

Trembling with age and horror at the losses the Thanedom sustained, the Thane turned to his new Master Runesmith Fariak, looking for solutions. Fariak refused to bother further with the Thaneguard—but he revealed his work, bringing it out of secrecy and onto the battlefields.

The Night of Descent changed everything. The necrodwarves marched forth, undead dragons screaming at their command. They lay waste to the invading Dracolithic army, taking prisoners by the thousand, and sacrificing them to their new, dark god. Nuzagoth descended from the starry void wreathed in the incense of an inferno of sacrificed dragons, trickling down through Tcholiark and into the depths of the earth's darkness, pushing life back as the cackling necrodwarves raised gory pulsing rune weapons and shrieked praises to the darkness of the uncaring sky.

This outcome was not exactly what Thane Morniarak had expected.

In winning the war, the Thane lost everything. Accompanied by the Thaneguard, the royal families that remained uncorrupted fled. Their reaction surprised Fariak, who expected he would have to push them out of power to legitimately assume the throne. Rather than pursuing them, the corrupted Master Runesmith simply shrugged and took over, enslaving the populace, sacrificing those who were of no use as slaves or converts, and eyeing territories that were previously protected by the Dracolithic armies he had just dispatched.

Morniarak retreated from the mountains, to an outpost that was once used to trade with the Sea People. He was numb and weary beyond all feeling, his grief too profound within him for his life force to shift it aside. Dolvatch, god of the Stone Ancestors, was grim and silent, the ancestors murdered in their graves. In his prayer and communion with the gods, Morniarak came to understand the depths of what his wicked Runesmith had done.

Fariak had twisted the very stuff of life, Mekk. Fariak had taken the Pure (Mekk life energy, usually constructs) to fuel the Blended (life from mixing sources, usually sex) in creating the Remains (the undead). This final blasphemy shocked Morniarak loose of his sanity, a refugee emperor gone mad with loss.

Dying of sorrow, he too pled with Zomok, begging that his lineage and the dream of what Tcholiark once represented would burn on undying in the face of the ravages of death. Zomok heard him, and responded. Indeed, he would have all he asked for, to seal the tragedy for all time.

Morniarak's corpse was burned, the final indignity that protected him from what may happen if Fariak discovered his resting place. Morniarak's great grandson, Kreftimar, was ironically crowned Thane of the Living Dead (referring to his people, robbed of home and history but yet living). Grim, formed by the hideous reversal his people had endured in the last thirty years, he swore a mighty oath he would restore the dream of Tcholiark.

Kreftimar was popular with the Thaneguard, for he had led them in former times of glory. Leading those still printed with the golden energies crafted from Ghertian's wisdom, he founded Retribution Delve. Runesmiths from all the Stone People's redoubts were invited to study Ghertian's work on the aging Thaneguard, and see if they could duplicate the effects within Kreftimar's watchful and cautious boundaries.

Retribution Delve was hidden carefully, and word traveled only by word of mouth between bonded allies, strong in faith in Dolvatch or Mekk. The runesmiths came, and for a century they grimly focused on Ghertian's art, as in the background Tcholiark cackled and unleashed conquest upon the massively weakened nearby provinces of the Dracolithic Empire.

After a century, the runesmiths had reclaimed some of the healthy work Ghertian left on breathing weapons, the surviving runically marked Thaneguard. However, many of the Thaneguard fell.

Grief and rage polluted their runes, with the death of the Thane and the loss of all they were to protect. As despair gripped them, some of the Thaneguard were corrupted. Runes darkened to the runic necromancy that had desecrated their homes; some became mad constructs of undeath, freshly powerful with their repurposed sigils. Others went mad and joined their tormentors, champions in Tcholiark again regardless the cost.

The Council of Retribution Delve met in (year). They determined that only a single flesh rune would be permitted, and the two subsets it governed. It was simply too dangerous to continue the experimentation that Ghertian's wisdom nurtured, for Fariak's jealous ambition would always be in the shadow. Still, the inherent beauty of the art, combined with Kreftimar's steady rage, and the runesmith's awe of the craftsmanship, denied the possibility the flesh runes would be lost forever.

Three Master Runesmiths were selected. Responding to the woe of Fariak's jealousy, they renounced name and clan and became effectively faceless in the dwarven culture, so they would not be tempted by glory. They each took 1/3 of the surviving Thaneguard and their families, and traveled to find hiding places so they could continue the work with the precious lore that survived. The Thane of the Living Dead, Kreftimar, retained Retribution Delve as his home as he plotted the destruction of Tcholiark and the mad Fariak, Thane of the Dark Column.

Less than a year after the Council of Retribution Delve, the Delve was under siege. While the Thane of the Living Dead was prepared to repel the undead forces of the Thane of the Dark Column, he was caught totally by surprise as an unexpected attacker crashed into his defenses.

In the distant mists of Skydeep, the Thane of Clouds had heard about what happened at Tcholiark in a predictably garbled way. Sending a spy network and trusted agents, it took him decades to determine the broad outlines of what really happened, and to track the surviving rulers. Seeing the profound damage done to dwarven history, culture, ancestors, reputation, strength, morale, and so forth, the Thane of Clouds decided that Morniarak's legacy must be ended.

By now other tragedies in the wider world had disheartened the dwarves. The entire dwarven race teetered on the edge of madness from grief and guilt, and the Thane of Clouds knew they needed a symbol, some hope, *something*.

When the army descended upon Retribution Delve, the Thane of the Living Dead found his greeting dying in his mouth as the kinslaying dwarves began their grim work of burying the last of what Morniarak's misplaced trust had allowed. The Delve was not built to repel a determined dwarven army; instead, it relied upon concealment. The main entrance could not hold forever, especially with siege tunnels burrowing in from the surface. The Thane of the Living Dead made a difficult decision.

He took one of the three Living Runesmiths, and all his Thaneguard, and tasked them with continuing the work. The Delve site had been selected in part for its access to an underground lake that stretched for

miles, with dozens of entrances. So in stealth the sorrowing Runesmith and this Thaneguard prepared to leave as the stalwart defenders of the Delve held off the sweeping intrusions of the kinslaying army.

The Living Runesmith named the exchange the Lake Parting; in it, the Thaneguard were changed forever to the Runeguard, charged with protecting the Living Rune and bringing about the end of the blasphemy wrought in Tcholiark's salvation from the Dracolithic Empire. Two Thaneguard remained with the Thane, and several runesmiths, each disguised as the Living Runesmith.

And so the Living Runesmith and the Runeguard sailed in darkness, and the Thane of the Living Dead and his last two Thaneguard met the invading army with all the forces at his disposal. That battle was not one they intended to win; even facing destruction, they had no heart to slaughter loyal dwarves.

Adurmik, Master of Forces, tarried in the dark of the Retribution Delve. He entombed the noble Thane of the Living Dead and his two Thaneguard, and those who fell in defense of the Delve. Then he withdrew, sealing the Delve so that its combined secrecy and sealing would protect it from those who would rouse the unpleasant memories of a dark, dark time.

Morniarak had pled with Zomok to allow his lineage and dream of Tcholiark's former glory to burn undying in the ravages of death. In response, Zomok's power flowed; the founding of the Dolviak created investigators within the dwarven culture that would be ever vigilant and prepared to murder to protect dwarves from the experimentation that could destroy a pillar of dwarven strength in a mere century or two. Tcholiark's glory served as a grim reminder that any place could fall. Those in Morniarak's royal family were also burnished golden; they were doomed to forever hunt the necrodwarves, or join them, for the Dolviak founded by the Thane of Clouds saw to it they could never really leave the tragedy of Tcholiark behind them and find a new home among dwarves.

RUNEGUARD

In the wake of the horror of Tcholiark's fall, the Thane of the Living Dead authorized and pursued research for a more stable form of runic power for those who had once been the Thaneguard and were now to be the Runeguard. Only one main rune and its supporting rune sets were considered safe to develop and use.

Gaining the Golden Rune

First, the dwarf must become a trusted agent of a Thane who has one of the three Living Runesmiths at his disposal. This generally takes at least a century of continuous service.

Once chosen (volunteers are not selected, and only the Living Runesmith may choose candidates) the potential Runeguard is given a quest. Upon completing the quest and returning, the potential Runeguard is considered carefully by the Living Runesmith for a year.

If the Living Runesmith decides the potential Runeguard is worth the risk, the candidate's beard is shaved, and the candidate is given a week of meditation, prayer, fasting, and physical punishment to purify and prepare for a commitment that can never be shirked.

On the Day of Branding, the candidate is brought to the sacred forge of the Living Runesmith. Instead of the more free-form tattoo forms of the necrodwarves, the Golden Rune is not a tattoo at all but instead an elaborate burn scar—a brand. A cauldron is heated, with scented oils, secret unguents, and blood—some from the Living Runesmith, and some from the potential Runeguard. The cauldron reaches a boiling point, and molten silver is poured into it. As the cauldron grows red hot, the potential Runeguard grips it to his chest, lifting it from its resting place and placing it on the ground.

The Golden Rune is on the side of the cauldron, with connecting runes on the “handles” where the wrists help lift the pot. The Runeguard is branded on the chest, and the wrists. The Runeguard loses 1 point from each physical attribute (Strength, Dexterity, Constitution [and 1 permanent hit point per level]) and gains the Golden Rune. It takes a week to properly heal and cure the golden rune. Then, the Runeguard begins service.

Upon gripping the cauldron, the potential Rune Guard must save vs. petrification. Upon failing, the ritual goes wrong, the Runeguard failed student still takes the ability damage (but the Golden Rune is not clear enough to be used) and the dwarf takes 3d6 x 10 hit points of damage from the boiling cauldron contents. Survivors tend to be badly scarred.

Golden Rune Morale Effects

The Runeguard is immune to level drain, as well as Sleep, Fear, and Charm spells.

Any undead damaged by the Golden Rune effects must test morale at -2, even if normally immune to morale tests. Those that fail, flee.

Golden Rune Damage Effects

The Runeguard can focus for a single round and send out a scintillating burst of half-visible energy in a 21 foot radius. All undead within that radius take damage based on their hit dice.

Runeguard Level	Damage to undead per undead's hit die
2	1
4	1d4
6	1d6
8	1d8
10	1d10
12	1d12

Undead take 1 automatic damage per * and 2 automatic damage per +1 on their hit dice.

Activating this power costs the Runeguard 1 hit point per hit die of undead affected. There is no limit to how often the Runeguard can use the Golden Rune.

The Runeguard can also channel this attack through a Runeguard weapon or through a touch attack. In that case, the damage only affects a single undead, but the damage from the life rune is doubled. The Runeguard still takes 1 hit point of damage per hit die affected. There is no limit to how many times per day the Runeguard can use this ability.

Runeguard Weapon

Weapons may be forged by runesmiths that have a detail from the living Golden Rune emblem seared into a Runeguard. These weapons allow the life energy attack to be channeled through them as though they were a touch attack (but also doing weapon damage) and they also count as magic weapons when used by a Runeguard.

This weapon is usually forged by the Living Runesmith while evaluating a potential Runeguard, presented upon the completion of the Branding Ritual.

Grim Control

Each Runeguard created with a Branding Cauldron has his name inscribed on it. If the Living Runesmith (and only the Living Runesmith) obliterates that name, the Runeguard immediately dies.

PENITENTS

Dwarves who are cast out of their society, or who lose the cultural markers of home, ancestor, and Thane, find it difficult to find a new place in their culture. When a dwarfhold has been disrupted, the clanless “orphans” may lose all sense of place and purpose and waste away into death.

One option available to the clanless is to become Penitents. This is especially encouraged for those who have lost their homes to necrodwarf depredations. Penitents connect their life energy to that of the Golden Rune, though they are not Runeguard. They give their lives in service to the Golden Rune, again fighting for dwarves and striking against the undead, again given purpose that transcends their clanless shame.

Gaining the Golden Rune

Penitents must swear an oath of service, surrendering claim to reward. They swear that if by their lives or deaths they can further the power of the Golden Rune and combat the Empty Rune, they will do it.

Then, the Living Runesmith burns them with a sub-pattern of the Golden Rune, on their backs. The sub-rune is keyed to a specific Runebearer (Runeguard or Living Runesmith), but the Living Runesmith can change which Runebearer it is, as needed, in a ritual that lasts a week.

- Gaining the Golden Rune subrune costs the Penitent 1 permanent hit point per level, both for levels gained so far and upon gaining further levels.
- If a Penitent’s Runebearer dies, the Penitent loses 1 from Strength or Dexterity.

Expectations of a Penitent

The Penitent is assigned to a Runebearer. Generally, the Penitent makes travel arrangements, handles finances, shoos off undesirables, and makes the Runebearer’s journeying and fighting as painless as possible. Penitents may grumble, but they dare not openly complain. They live out a sacred trust to help their Runebearer stay focused.

A Runebearer can have up to 1 Penitent per 3 levels. (1 at level 3, 2 at 6, 3 at 9, 4 at 12)

Golden Rune Morale Effects

The Penitent is +2 to save against level drain, as well as Sleep, Fear, and Charm spells.

Penitents each have a shield scripted with runic prayers, as a symbol of office. If they have that shield and can chant the cold and ruthless prayers thereon during battle, they receive a +2 morale bonus, and share that bonus with all dwarves within 21 feet.

When the Penitent is in combat with the undead, the undead are -2 to morale tests. They must test for morale even if they are normally immune.

Golden Rune Damage Effects

If the Penitent is within 21 feet of their Runeguard, they can accept any hit points of damage dealt to the Runeguard by the Golden Rune.

- This is the only kind of hit point damage they can sustain on the Runeguard's behalf.
- The damage cannot be split. Either the Penitent takes it all, or none of it, for each of the Runeguard's activations of the Golden Rune.
 - If the Penitent has 1 hit point left and the Runeguard triggers the Golden Rune for 12 damage, the Penitent can take all the damage and die horribly, consumed in golden energy, but the Runeguard fights on.
- It takes no actions for this transfer of damage, for either the Runeguard or the Penitent.

The Penitent can also make an offering of hit points to the Runeguard. The Penitent takes 1 round and offers up to 2 hit points per level; the Runeguard receives half the offered hit points.

- They must be within 21 feet of each other to do this.
- It does not take 1 round for the Runeguard, only the Penitent.
- This does not work for Living Runesmiths or Runepainters.

Retirement

If a Penitent has offered faithful service for over a century, and they are weary, their Runeguard dead, the Living Runesmith could theoretically allow them to retire and not assign a new Runeguard. So far, a Penitent has never lived to "retirement age" but theoretically such a thing is possible.