

RHAPSODY OF BLOOD

TERRA INCOGNITA

JAY ILES

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**BY JAY ILES
JULY 2019**

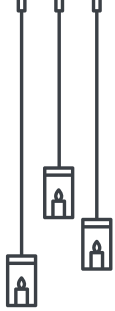
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So, you're embarking on a quest to fight a great evil or whatever, and have broken into their nightmarish castle. Standard *Rhapsody of Blood* play, right? But maybe you want to map out the castle beforehand, instead of letting the **Travel the Labyrinth** move guide your exploration. Or maybe you're making a fortress for another tabletop RPG, or even want to make your own Metroidvania? If any of that sounds good, here's your guide to building a castle well worth raiding.

Q: WHAT IS A CASTLE?

A: A MISERABLE PILE OF WARDS.

To start, you need to work out what the **complexity** of your castle is. This will define how many wards it has - wards are the building blocks your castle is made of, each serving its own discrete function and ruled by its own boss. 3 wards is the most simple, likely to take 1 or 2 sessions to play through. 6 wards is the most complex I'd recommend going, likely to sustain a campaign of 10-12 sessions.

TOWER OR ESTATE?

The next thing to decide is the format of your map:

- A **tower** is a side-on view of the castle as it rises up into the heavens and plunges deep beneath the earth. Imagine the maps from *Castlevania* or *Hollow Knight*.
- An **estate** is a top-down view of the castle as it sprawls across the landscape. Imagine the maps of *The Legend of Zelda* or *Hyper Light Drifter*.

You shouldn't feel imprisoned by your choice, however - if you want to give your **Estate** underground wards, or let your **Tower** infiltrate other planes of existence, go ahead! Graphics software that lets you draw on different layers is perfect for this.

REPLACING TRAVEL THE LABYRINTH

With this new mode of dungeon exploration, the old move doesn't make a lot of sense. Instead, replace it with this one:

Commune with the Labyrinth

When you submerge your mind into the castle around you, roll +Contamination marked (max +3). On a hit, say what you understand better about the ward, and the GM will reveal (or draw) a map of the ward around you - including every room you've been in and the rooms they're connected to. On a 10+, pick one:

- *The GM will also mark down hidden passages and treasures you missed.*
- *You know what direction to go in to confront this ward's Acolyte.*

BUILDING THE WARD

To actually make your map, you'll need a shuffled deck of poker cards, including jokers. Don't shuffle it between wards, unless otherwise instructed.

AMBIANCE

Decide on an ambiance for your ward:

- Industrial:** The ward makes things, and is filled with labour and machinery.
- Palatial:** The ward is opulent and vast.
- Sepulchral:** The ward is a tomb, holding dead things and relics.
- Reverential:** The ward is religious, filled with chants and incense and twisted holy symbols.
- Natural:** The ward is a field, a forest, a desert; it is unshaped by human hands.
- Cthonic:** The ward is deep underground, dark and damp.
- Eldritch:** Reality is strange here, and visitors contact something not of this world.
- Custodial:** The ward houses maintenance workers, secret tunnels, repair facilities and more.
- Gleeful:** The ward is a constant party, with music and dancers everywhere.
- Scholarly:** Scribes, libraries and filing archives fill the rooms of the ward.

Let this ambiance guide you as you decide the details of its rooms.

Alternatively, you can just build the ward and decide what ambiance it has once you're done.



ROOM BY ROOM

Draw four cards from your deck. If more than half are the same suit, shuffle them back in and draw again. One by one, play them on your ward to add a new room to it, using the card to guide your depiction of it.

SUIT

The suit tells you how connected the room is to the rest of the ward.

Heart: Dead end.

Spade: A passage linking one room to another.

Club: A nexus where many rooms meet.

Diamond: A connection from this ward into somewhere else - the outside world or another ward. You don't need to decide where it connects to yet.

VALUE

The value gives a feel of the room's purpose or mood:

Ace: Isolation	6: Purification	J: Sparring
2: Revelry	7: Collection	Q: Worship
3: Preparation	8: Lore	K: Mortality
4: Beauty	9: Creation	
5: Pain	10: Imprisonment	

KEEP ON BUILDING

After playing all four cards, look at your ward. Does it feel complete? If not, draw another four cards and keep going. If it does, go through these final steps:

- Pick a room to be the lair of this ward's Acolyte. Decide what passageways are blocked until the Acolyte's defeat, and mark them on your map.
- **If this is your first ward:** Pick one of the connections out of this ward (i.e. Diamond rooms) to be the entrance to this ward from the outside world. If there aren't any, pick a room to be breach point the characters have forced open.

JOKERS

Jokers are special! *When you draw a joker*, that's a **Warp Room**. It's a dead-end room, with whatever mood you desire; mark it down as a warp room and note the colour of joker (red or black), then shuffle the joker back into the draw pile.

When you draw the joker again, link those rooms and then discard the joker.

In play, characters can work a ritual here to move to its counterpart room.

If you finish making your map without finding the joker again, the room is instead a portal to the void the castle came from. Characters *can* travel there, but they'd better have a good reason for doing so...

THE NEXT WARD

Start your next ward, picking an Ambiance as above. Decide one:

- Start building this ward out from a Diamond room in an existing ward.
- Build this ward out as a separate structure - another entrance from the mundane world into the Castle.

Keep going until you've built all the wards you decided in the **complexity** step.

FINISHING YOUR CASTLE

Once you've built your map up, there's a few final steps to go:

1. **Place down the Castle's heart** - the place the Regent resides. Link it to one or two wards, preferably ones that aren't directly accessible from the mundane world. This is where the explorers must go for their final showdown.
2. **Join up Diamond rooms.**
 - 2.1. If there's a corridor you can draw from one ward to another, great!
 - 2.2. If not, work out if there's some conveyance you want to put in (teleporter, elevator, riding a giant bug, etc) to elide the actual travel. You can make these conveyances specific from one place to another, or generic such that they allow travel to anywhere so linked.
 - 2.3. Make sure you have at least one connection to the outside world. Having multiple ways in risks reducing the navigating fun of the game; consider making others exit-only (e.g. a steep drop down to the castle's entrance).
 - 2.4. If you feel you have enough links, you can just break the connections exiting the remaining Diamond rooms. Cave-ins, busted machinery, rusted gantries, etc.
3. **Decide on a story for the castle.** Now that you know what it looks like, think of why it looks like this. What's the Regent's plan? What does each ward mean to them? What did this used to be, before it was claimed by evil?

And you're done!

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

If you want a few more details, try out these options. I'd only really recommend them for more complex castles, or when you're a few generations into your game.

GATES AND KEYS

A classic part of Metroidvania gameplay is finding new ways to navigate your environment. Look below for some options. To add this into your map, first place the **key** somewhere important or meaningful - maybe in an Acolyte's lair, or a dead-end room that's somewhat difficult to reach? Then place the matching gates around your castle, but **remember**: it's important that they do not cut the players off from the key, or make travelling through the castle obnoxious.

GATE TYPE

A barrier you can't pass through.

A gate, an energy wall, an illusory maze.

A blockage you can't destroy.

A cave-in, a metal wall, regrowing vines.

A feat you can't perform.

A sheer wall to climb, a long gap to jump.

An enemy you can't defeat.

*Perpetually-resurrecting undead,
unbreakable armour, vast bulk.*

KEY

A physical key, or a transformation that lets you pass through it.

A weapon able to devastate it.

A new form of movement.

A means of granting the enemy mortality.

Notice that the keys often grant the characters new capabilities, beyond just unlocking the gate.

*In a game of **Rhapsody of Blood**, it might be cool to write a custom move to give it special prominence - or else, it can just be used as a power evoked through **Drink Deep**.*

HAVENS

It's sometimes nice to have a break from all the horror. Havens are a place for the characters to catch their breath, tend to their wounds, and care for each other.

To place your Havens, grab a handful of 6-sided dice - at least one per ward, and probably not more than two per ward. Hold them above your map, and drop them. Each room with a dice on top of it is a haven, with an aspect according to the number showing on the dice:

1. The haven provides **healing**, getting rid of the character's harm and wounds.
2. The haven provides **information**, telling you more about this ward and the Regent's plans.
3. The haven provides a **vendor**, willing to trade valuables for trinkets gathered from the castle.
4. The haven provides a **vista**, letting you see the scope of the castle - and the state of the world outside.
5. The haven provides **social interaction** - this is a place where some castle denizens have sentience and peace, and will share their struggles with the explorers.
6. The haven provides a **forge**, or **transmutation**, or similar method for the characters to change their armaments.

Whatever its aspect, the haven should contain no hostile elements. It's a place of peace and contemplation.

In Rhapsody of Blood, these Havens are potential sites for Bloodlines to claim as Forward Bases.



EXAMPLE OF CASTLE CREATION

To demonstrate this technique, I built the castle on the facing page - a Complexity 3 Estate. Here's a step-by-step breakdown of how it was made:

WARD 1: HUNTING GROUND, NATURAL

For my first hand, I drew 9 6 10 5 . The 6 went down first: a beautiful natural glade with a deep pond fed by waterfalls, creating a sense of **purification** [1]. Next, the 9 - a dead end themed around **creation**, here a cramped nest of insectile eggs [2]. Leading off the glade was a cleft in the rocks, 10 , where rotting skeletons are **imprisoned** in hard-to-reach crevices [3]. At the end of a crevice, the 5 makes a deep pit, down which sacrifices met a **painful** end on stone spikes [4].

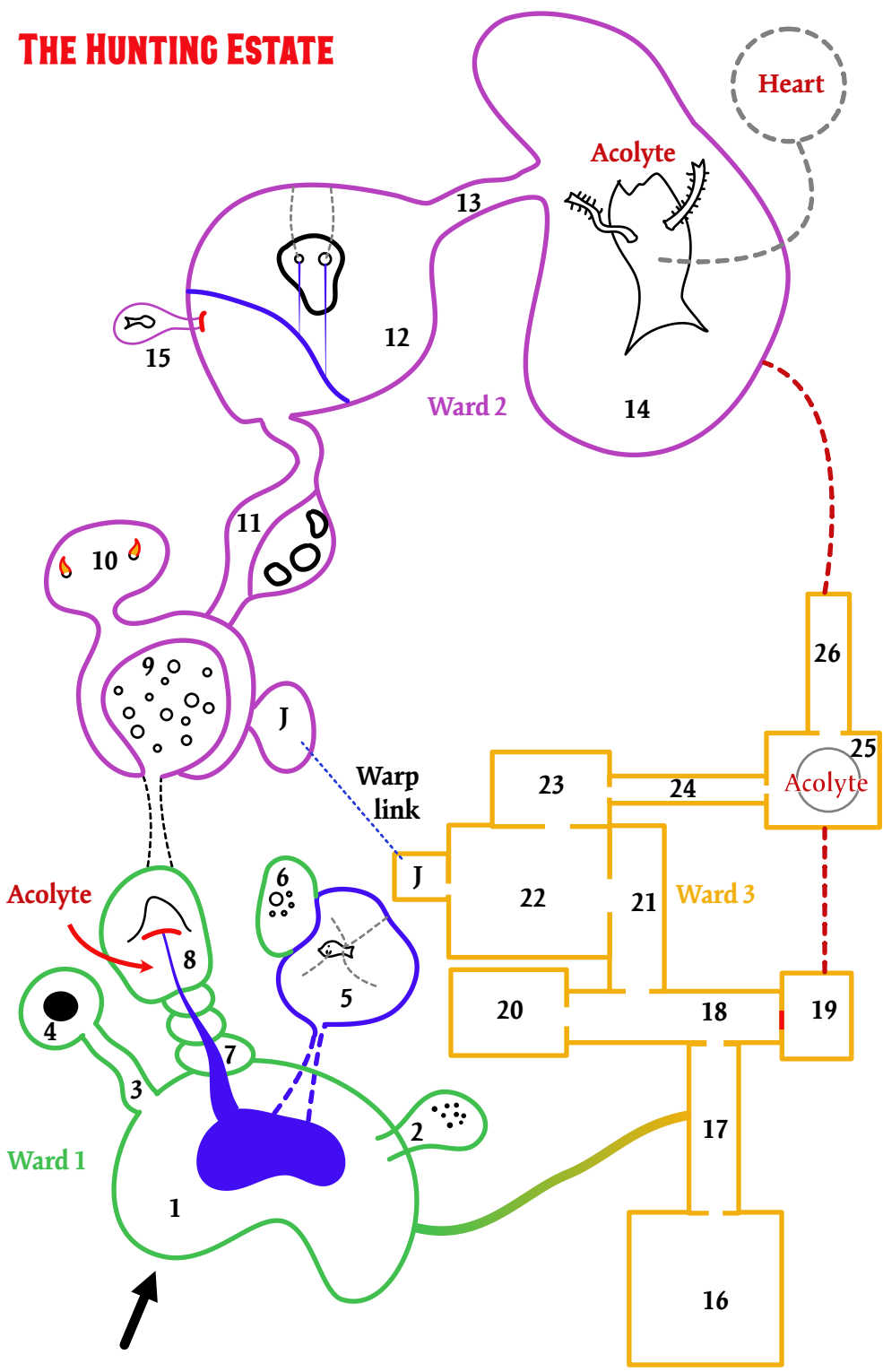
For my second hand, I drew 10 6 7 4 . First up, I played 10 to draw an underwater passage from that pond to an underwater cavern [5], in which a giant fish-spirit is **chained**. Coming off that cavern is a shrine made with 6 , fed with air through tiny passages, where visitors to the fish-spirit used to be purified [6]. Coming off the starting pond thanks to 7 is a rising series of small pools, tracing the waterfall [7], and each pool's bed is covered with a **collection** of animal skulls - and as the explorers ascend the skulls become larger and more fearsome. Finally, at the apex of the climb thanks to 4 is an extraordinarily beautiful mountain spring, surrounded by blossoming trees [8].

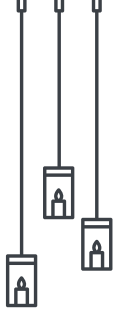
I'll end the ward here. I decide that the acolyte resides in [8] - they're a great beast, chained and collared, here to defend the spring. As such, the explorers cannot travel deeper into the mountain before they defeat the acolyte. Finally, I need to pick a room to be the entrance to the mundane world, and so I select [1].

WARD 2: DEFILED DEPTHS, CTHONIC

So, where's next? I have two rooms to start from, but I'm interested in finding out what's in the mountain, so I'll start coming off [8]. My first draw is Q 5 9 - and the black Joker! I'd like my first room to have a few different exits, so I play the 5 . I decide that the explorers wade into the spring, following the water deep into the heart of the mountain, until they emerged in a deep underground lake [9]. This room is **painful** - so I return to the motif from [4] of people impaled on stone spikes. The spikes rise up out of the water, with one or more corpses impaled on each. Perhaps as the character's heads break the water another victim falls from above and is impaled? With Q a ladder coming out of the pool leads up to a platform overlooking the plunge [10], with **worshipful** carvings making it clear this impalement is a willing act of devotion. I put 9 down as a river [11] feeding

THE HUNTING ESTATE





into the lake at [9] and decide that – in keeping with the card theme of **creation** – there's some huts by the river bank where strange hermits use the river's water for their alchemical experiments. Finally, the **black joker** is placed by [9], but I'll decide what it actually represents once the castle is done.

For my second hand, I draw 8 **A** **J** **K** . The end of that river sounds like a good place for another crossroads, so I place 8 to build a large cavern [12]. This room's theme is **lore**, so I want to show a clue to what's going on with the whole castle. I decide to pick up the thread of that imprisoned fish-spirit in [5]. I put the skull of a much bigger fish-spirit in this room, suspended from the ceiling with chains, with an endless river of water running from its eye sockets. Coming off this cavern is a great tunnel, covered in scrapes and gouges [13], built with the **J** . With the theme of **sparring**, I think a lot of these gouges are fresher than others. And what's at the end? With a **K** , it's a grand chamber themed around **mortality** [14] – the rest of the great fish spirit's corpse. This colossal carcass writhes with infestation - giant centipede-like scavengers, that left the marks in [13] with their sharp claws. I reckon these are the acolyte of this ward, and killing them will stop the flow of water from the skull in [12] - revealing the room I make with my final card (**A**), a holy pond where a tiny spirit-fish waits in **isolation** [15]. Will the explorers rescue it from this underground prison?

WARD 3: THE LODGE, PALATIAL

For my final ward, I'm looking to make something a bit different, and so I decide I'll start this elsewhere and work out how it connects together later. First, I take the **black joker** I set aside and shuffle it back in, and then draw my first hand: 3 **J** 3 **A** . I've decided that this ward is a hunting lodge where the nobles that killed the great fish-spirit, chained its children and exploited the natural world spend their days partying. So our first card – 3 – is the entrance hall of the lodge [16], a place of **preparation** where the everyday clothes of the outside world are put aside and the regalia of the hunt is donned. Following it is **J** , a long hallway [17] defined by **sparring**. It's here that the nobles practice their martial skills against each other. 3 creates another room of **preparation**, a gallery [18] lined with mirrors and officious servants here to help the nobles with their cosmetics. And finally, **A** creates a small room at the end of this corridor [19], a locked (but ornate) door behind which constant weeping can be heard.

I'm not done with this place, so I draw again: 8 2 2 **Q** . 8 becomes a room at the end of the gallery [20] dedicated to the **lore** of this place – a series of paintings of the masters and mistresses of the lodge, culminating in a grand depiction of the regent whose unholy eyes have burned holes in the canvas. 2 becomes another exit

from the gallery [21]- fitting the theme of revelry, this is an elegant soiree where masked butlers offer canapes and flutes of champagne. That genteel tone gives way in [22], where 2 creates a sprawling feasthall. Here, the lodge's patrons cast aside their masks of decorum and feast on the slain quarry, throwing gnawed bones onto a growing pile in the room's centre. Finally, Q is played to build a small ossuary off the side of the feasthall [23], where the best bones are cleaned and reverentially placed in elaborate sculptures as an act of **worship**.

I think there's still more to flesh out here, so I draw another hand of cards - 4 J 5 and the **black joker**! That joker is first up, and I'll place it off the feasthall. Knowing what we know about this passage's other end, I'll say that this is where the drinks are kept; a pool is constantly replenished with the divine water of the mountain's depths for the noble's refreshment, and the explorers can easily swim through the passage to travel between those areas. A 4 makes a corridor out of the ossuary [24], its **beauty** reflected in glorious stained glass windows displaying the lodge's triumph over nature. The J is placed at the end of this corridor, and here's another **sparring** room [25] - but this isn't a sporting arena as in [17], but a simple ring in a dirt-floored room where blood is spilled in battles to the death. My final card - 5 - is placed off this room, and it's the home of the losers [26]. Their withered bodies, drained but still alive, writhe in **pain** here. The explorers might notice that many of these undying wretches were the past leaders of the lodge depicted in room [20], having been defeated by their replacement in the ring of battle.

That'll do it for this ward. I think the Acolyte here is the head butler, charged with maintaining this eternal feast by the Regent. They can be found throughout the lodge, but will retreat from a fight with the explorers until they arrive at room [26]. Once they're defeated, their key-rings will unlock a secret passage from [26] to [19] - if any of the explorers was motivated by a kidnapped contact, they can be found here, or else the weeping prisoner is an avatar of Nature herself bound by the regent. The keys also unlock passage from [27] down into the great fish-spirit's corpse in [14].

FINAL TOUCHES

I place the castle's Heart inside the fish-spirit's corpse. Where else for the Regent to place the seat of their power? Making links, I connect [17] to [4], and block off the connections coming out of [15] and [11] - I think we have enough links.

So that's our castle - a hunting lodge where nobles have chained the divinities of a holy mountain to cement their dominion over nature, with a Regent working to expand this dominion over the entire world.