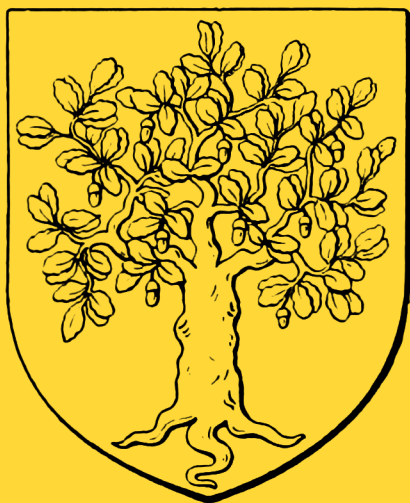


#1



TEN PEOPLE YOU MEET IN THE UNDERGARDEN



**KARI ALDRICH
& SAM MAMELI**

Troika Sphere



Ten People You Meet In The Undergarden

Written and Edited by Kari Aldrich
Collaged by Sam Mameli

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Ten People You Meet In The Undergarden is an independent production by Better Legends and is not affiliated with the Melsonian Arts Council.

Special thanks to all those that donated to the kickstarter and made this possible, you're the best kind of folk and we appreciate the hell out of you.

BETTER LEGENDS



This book is meant to be used with Troika! But I think anyone who decides to back an RPG zine on Kickstarter could hack their way through converting the few mechanical parts to the language of whatever dice-bible they read from on Sundays.

More than anything I wanted to make a game book that could just be enjoyed like a regular book. The kind of thing that doesn't just sit on your shelf until it's time to look up a table, but something that makes you want to bust out your notebook and make something of your own.

Since we made this for Zinequest, I took it as a chance to illustrate everything in collage style. All the images are pulled from free library sources, chopped up and reassembled. It's a skeleton made of lots of folks' bones and I hope nobody minds.

I'm glad that Kari agreed to write this because she has a mind sharper than a poet's knife and cares more about words than she does about dice. She put a lot of life into these pages and it would be less than good without her.

I'm very lucky to be able to make art with a person that I love, and I hope everyone enjoys it.

-Sam (Skullboy)

ANNE FREDD

SHRUB
KNIGHT
OF THE
CHURCH



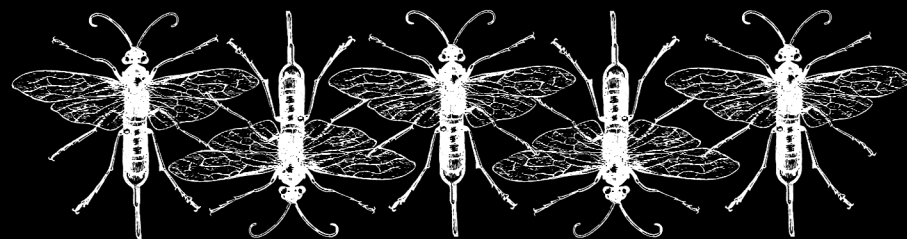
- MIEN**
1. STOIC
 2. WATCHFUL
 3. TIRED
 4. MEDITATIVE
 5. SOMBER
 6. SAD

SKILL 7
STAMINA 7
INITIATIVE 2
ARMOR 1
DAMAGE AS
GREATSWORD

Anne Fredd sits behind the second largest of the hydrangea bushes lining the front entrance of the church, but keeps the largest of the hydrangeas in her line of sight. There's an uncomfortable stone chair, but she's been doing this for ten years now and knows to bring a cushion from home to sit on. There are chairs to her left and her right all along the wall, all empty. This is an old-fashioned thing. No one really does this anymore. She always brings a red leather-bound book with her, the corners of which are worn and ragged; maybe a record of her watch, or maybe containing mementos from those she's lost. She watches everywhere for signs of movement, but most especially she watches where the bushes are rooted to the ground.

If you were to approach her, she would seem to be a statue, perhaps a seated suit of armor, left behind like a symbol of old traditions and of days passed. She looks like the idealized knight you'd see in an illuminated manuscript, though perhaps a little shorter than you'd expect. Her armor shines in the moonlight, and sat next to her is a huge broadsword in an old, ornate golden scabbard, encrusted with gems. Her silver helm covers everything but her eyes, which are so still and placid when she is on guard duty that she looks like she might be made of plaster. She won't look directly at you or move to stand or hail you until you're a few feet from the big wooden church door.

Anne Fredd is not very concerned with the foot traffic of ground beasts and humanoids. This church has a very small congregation, and occasional travelers come for shelter or to pray or make an offering, but in general, there's not a lot of action on the road, or amongst the bushes; so it has been since Anne Fredd took up this sacred duty. Still, she feels quite sure that if she skips a shift, she will regret it.



So each third night, she comes and sits from sundown to sunup, and watches for movement. Usually, if she sees anything, it's a bat flying between the trees beyond, a small shake in the leaves from the wind, or the scuttling of a regular, earthly bug. But she is ready. She checks each of these for the telltale deep-red glint of the alien, insect-like creatures that once made their way out of the earth, up the branches, and commandeered the pastel blooms of the plant, and used them to take her former life away from her.

GERALMINE

A MUSHROOM MERCENARY IN THE CITY OF BROKEN CLOCKS

The mushroom grips the end of her spear in her two small fungal hands, her dark eyes glaring out from below her red spotted cap. She's been patrolling these clockwork ruins for a long time now-- longer, probably, than she should have been.

The person who had hired her for this job must be long dead. It's hard though, she thinks, when you're the only person alive in a place, to find new clients. That was only part of it, though. Her last client had paid well, and if Germalmine was honest with herself, she'd respected them. She may be a mercenary, but she had her own code too, and protecting the resources hiding in these ruins from looters and destroyers felt-- well, like the right thing to do. She figured the least she could do was keep them safe as long as she'd been contracted to.

And yeah, it didn't hurt that she'd been well paid.



The looters (she assumed everyone was a looter, which was a much better policy than being an idiot) this time sure were acting like innocent explorers, but the potential for risk was too great. Innocent wasn't really the right word, she thought as she gripped her spear more tightly and furrowed her brow. Ignorant explorers. As soon as they found out about the little spores growing amongst the ruins, they wouldn't be ignorant anymore, and they would never have been innocent. Anyone who knows that they can profit from something, will try to profit from it. That was one of the tenets of the Mushroom Mercenary Code. There's no such thing as goodness; only the purity that results from the absence of knowledge.

So she would say nothing. Keep these looters ignorant. They can move onto another area, steal sterile cogs and springs and shafts to their hearts' content, never knowing that there was a colony of spores living here, just a few months from blooming into new creatures. They'd never know a world where people and beetles and spiders weren't trying to eat them, Germalmine thought grimly, but at least they wouldn't be funneled down the gullet of some rich queen all at once, before they even got the chance to be alive.

No, these looters could keep moving, like the rest of them. She wouldn't kill them unless she had to. She'd find a new job when the summer came. She didn't need the money yet. She could stay a little longer.

MIEN

1. BELLIGERENT
2. PROTECTIVE
3. PUSHY
4. SHORT-TEMPERED
5. PRAGMATIC

SKILL 10
STAMINA 16
INITIATIVE 3
ARMOR 1
DAMAGE
AS SPEAR



EFFUM DUFFEM

A CLOCKWORK ANGLER BY THE POND

Effum is seated by the edge of the pond in the early sunlit hours of the morning, a vision of shining brass and warm glowing chestnut wood. To be accurate, Effum is pretty much always seated in this exact spot, no matter the time of day-- once in a while, Mr. Alpred, the clockmaker from Bietemoupe Village stops here on his way in or out of town to maintain Effum's various parts and mechanics. Mr. Alpred didn't originally make Effum, of course; no, Effum was seated there with fishing rod in hand long before Mr. Alpred was even born. Locals estimate Effum has probably been sitting there, "fishing," for at least 100 years. Everyone in Bietemoupe knows about Effum, and treats the character like an unofficial village mascot; but no one really knows whether Effum is just an art piece or a marvel of technology, or if there is actually something magical within that holds all of the parts together.

When Mr. Alpred first cleaned Effum up and replaced all of the broken parts, he'd tried to suss out what the creator's original purpose might have been. After the machine parts had clicked back into place, Effum's grip tightened around the handle of the fishing pole that seemed to be a shared part of their physical form, and made a motion as if to cast a hook into the pond. Mr. Alpred had reassembled Effum in the wrong direction for this to work, however, and had to roll out of the way to avoid snagging his garments on the glistening hook. As Effum creaked and snapped and slowly reeled his line back in, they spoke in a strange voice like a tiny chime:

"Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after" DING."

Mr. Alpred blinked, startled to hear the creation speak; then he noticed, as Effum was drawing near to the end of the line, a slight motion in the elbow. Mr. Alpred hurriedly turned the creation around, just in time for the line to sail back out over the pond this time, and land with a splash.

"Say! What's your name-- er-- my friend?" he asked. The strange chime-like voice dinged out a reply as the clockwork hands resumed slowing drawing in the fishing line.

"I am here to fish!"

"How did you get here?" Mr. Alpred asked next.

"I live here!" sang Effum.

"Why... er-- why are you fishing?"

"A bad day of fishing is better than a good day of work" CLICK DING!"

Mr. Alpred continued with this line of questioning throughout that afternoon, and discovered that Effum would keep on casting the line, despite the fact that the fish in the pond that were clearly wise to Effum's game. In fact, Mr. Alpred was pretty sure he'd seen a small school of fish scoff at Effum's baitless hook coasting blithely by them at least once or twice. Effum seemed to have local knowledge, and was able to provide fairly accurate directions to nearby natural features (although, Mr. Alpred noticed, the information regarding villages was sorely lacking, or at least out of date), plus identify local species of flora and fauna when Mr. Alpred inquired about them. Any more complicated questions were met with similar fishing aphorisms; and once Mr. Alpred even got Effum started on a big fish story-- and that went on long enough that Mr. Alpred went home for dinner before Effum had finished.

A word to the wise, as you may be approaching the clockwork angler now: Effum will help you if you ask the right questions, but you may be in for quite a story if you ask the wrong ones.

MIEN
1. FOLKSY
2. FOLKSY
3. FOLKSY
4. FOLKSY
5. FOLKSY
6. FOLKSY

SKILL 6
STAMINA 10
INITIATIVE 1
ARMOR 1
DOES NOT
DEAL DAMAGE



FRANÇOIS

A BIRD
THIEF
IN TOWN

“Chirp, chirp!” said the bird with a wink, not even chirping. Just saying the word “chirp.” But the crowd is totally buying it. The tavern patrons that had gathered around the bird laugh heartily; one bold young halfling woman even reaches out a hand to brush his left wing feathers in a friendly gesture. The bird winces, almost imperceptibly, at her touch, but quickly covers it up by throwing his head back and letting out a strange, but strangely adorable, warbling laugh.

With a sprightly leap, the bird hops up onto the bar, knocking over a few tankards with his tail feathers as his long spindly toes find purchase on the bar’s edge. The barkeep, just as enchanted as the rest of the crowd, can’t seem to find their usual gruffness and grumpiness, and instead cracks an easy smile at the sight of the creature bobbing and hopping, miming polite bows and curtsies with the crowd.

“Another ale for this bird, barkeep!” shouts the old smithy with a grin.

“Oh thank you, oh but I mustn’t... oh well, if you insist!” Each of the bird’s words peals from his beak like the sound of giggling bells. He pokes his beak into the fresh ale tankard and after a moment, pulls it back out and squawks loudly, in a perfect imitation of a parrot.

“Awwwk! It’s going straight to my head, straight to my head!”

More eruptions of laughter as he blinks his shining eyes and cocks his small head over and over in a strange robotic fashion. Despite his brilliantly colored feathers and the many glittering adornments he’s wearing on them, he looks not unlike a common sparrow-- just much bigger. He’s a bit larger than a hen, which isn’t a comparison this crowd would take too kindly to.



You better believe if that was some regular chicken up there, dancing around on the bar and wasting perfectly good ale, the barkeep would have thrown it out the door or chopped off its head (or both) before you could say “coq au vin.”

Not Franc, though-- no one would do that to Franc. One hour from now, he’d be crooning an old sparrow love song, watching their eyes fill up with tears from the sad tale and the beauty of his voice. Then he’d make them laugh again, and tell them wonderful stories to make their boring lives sparkle for just one night. It was a service he was doing, really-- why shouldn’t he get paid?

AIR XXXVIII: Pudding and Pies.



MIEN
1. FLIRTATIOUS
2. CHIPPER
3. BRASH
4. MAUDLIN
5. ARROGANT
6. SNIPPY

SKILL 12
STAMINA 8
INITIATIVE 3
ARMOR 0
DAMAGE AS
KNIFE

By the next morning, François would be merrily on his way to the next town, whistling the sun up over her horizon. He’d stash the blue and purple and green feathers in a grotto somewhere, and stow the glittering beads he’d used to decorate them at the bottom of his pack underneath the rest of the loot, and then he’d be just another wandering sparrow with dusty feathers, minding his business, happy to share a song or two with a fellow traveler.

“Leave ‘em wanting more, that’s showbiz,” he’d say, hopping away from a village that would be just waking up to find their jewelry missing, their pockets picked, and their larders in disarray.



MARCOT EGGLET

A SPIDER ARCHER ON THE BRIDGE

“AYE, WHO GOEZ THERE?”

There’s a light rustling, and a shadow draws closer on the left side of the bridge. You can’t quite make out the shape in the dark, but it’s moving quickly towards you. It looks almost like a rogue umbrella, bent out of shape and caught in the wind. It stops four or five yards away, and you hear a new sound; the creak of a bowstring.

Then, the creak of a second bowstring.

“I SHAID... who GOEZ THERE?”

This time, when the... entity... speaks, you hear whistling and clicking sounds accompanying each word, almost as if the speaker has stones between their teeth. You squint and peer through the darkness, trying to get a glimpse as you answer. There’s something shining in the middle of the shape, like a dandelion glistening with fresh dew, or like an orb covered with mirrors like the ones you once saw at that bangin’ fey dance party.

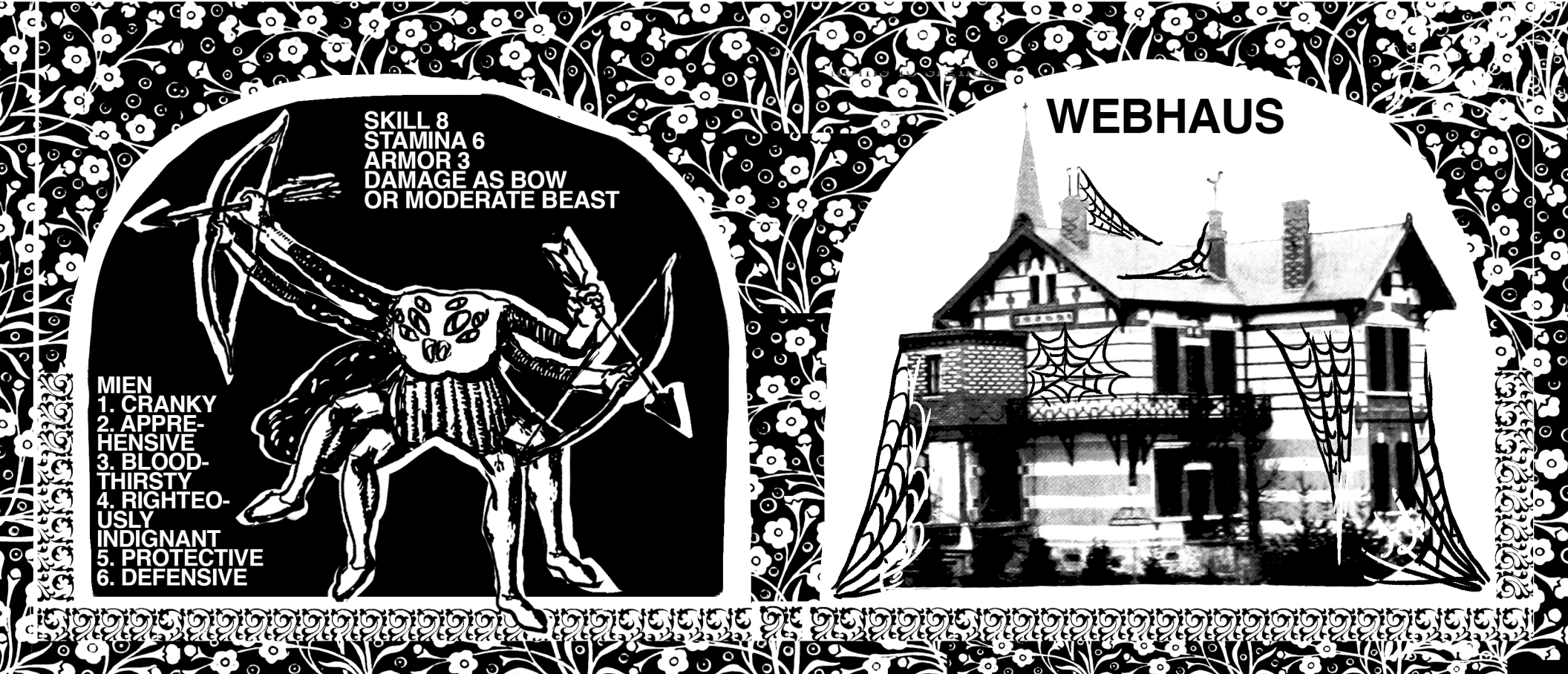
A few of the glistening bulbs blink.

“My family iz beyond thish bridge. We have already losht many to poizonz, and other gamez of brutality from paper-wielderz like you. Why should I, the great Marcot Egklet, rishk letting you enter our garden?”

You take a closer look at the whole shape, and finally it comes into focus; the spider guard has two bows, each with a nocked arrow pointed your way, and four-- maybe five-- of her eight eyes are glaring at you from her midsection, while the rest scan your surroundings. No wonder she caught sight of you so quick. You also notice that her four back legs and her pinchers are both shining with a strange silver light in the moonlight-- advance a few steps, and you can see that they are actually armored with some kind of metal. Advancing those few steps, of course, might land you with a spider’s arrow, unless, of course, you can convince Marcot that you mean no harm to her kind in the gardens on the other side of this bridge.

Or... you could try coming back in the daytime. Spiders are nocturnal, right?

You could always ask.



MRS. HEDGEMAZE

A

HEDGEMAZE.

Don't enter the hedge maze lightly.

That's what you were told. Looking at the maze from up here on the hill, it doesn't look too bad. This seems to be one of the parts of the Undergarden where the canopy, or cloud cover, or whatever it is, is heavy enough that it feels like perpetual twilight. You can understand the dread of getting lost in a maze in this kind of light, but it really doesn't look too large. You have plenty of supplies. If you keep your wits about you, you should be able to make it through without trouble. Maybe even find the treasure that's supposedly hidden within.

You aren't counting on finding the treasure. A small part of you suspects that that particular legend is designed to keep people lost in the maze. To what end, who knows. The point is: if you find treasure, great. If you don't, at least you'll have made it to the other side.

And who's really afraid of a hedge maze?

Once you're inside though, it's hard not to feel anxious. It's even darker in here than out on the hillside. There are parts of the maze that are completely covered by hedge above your head. You find yourself wondering aimlessly, not for the first time, who maintains this maze.

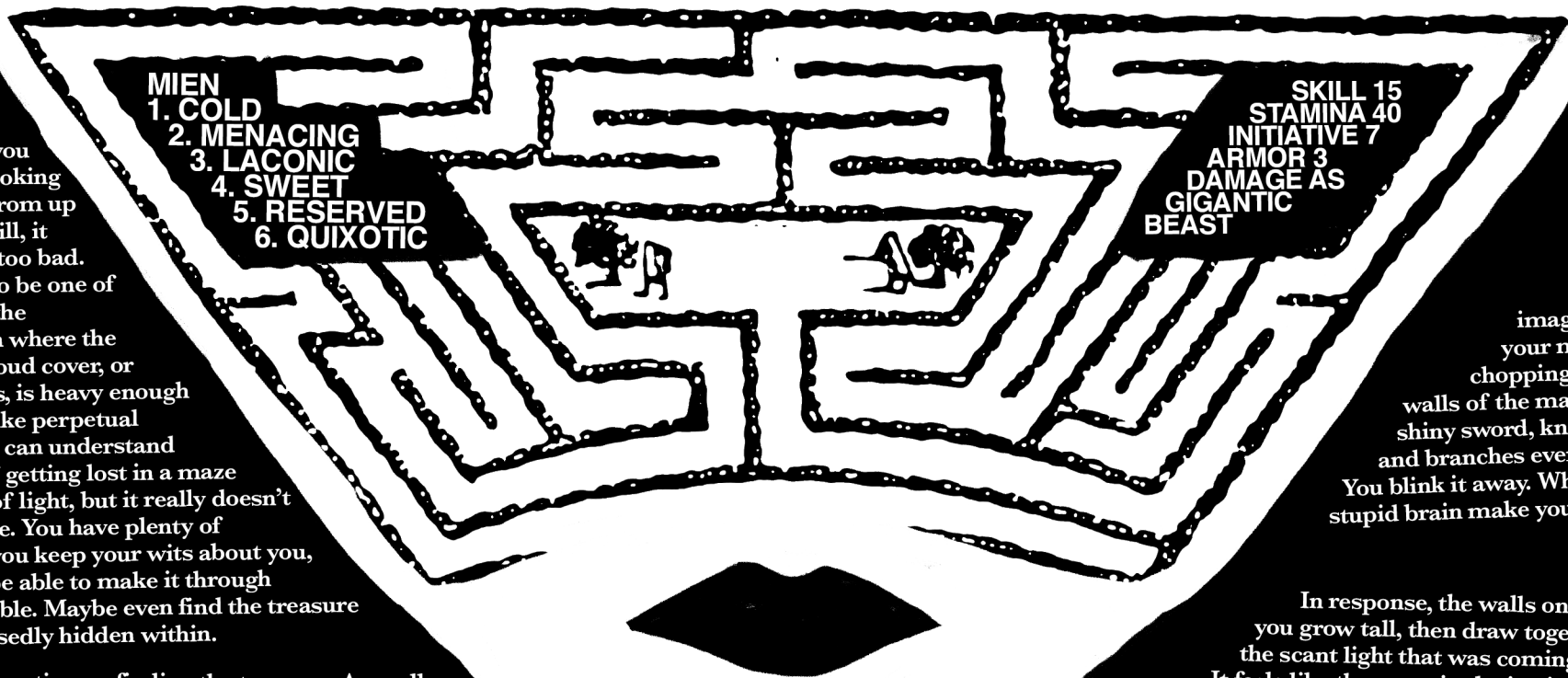
"No one, dearie. Just me."

The voice sounds sort of like it came from just over your shoulder. It also sounds a little like it came from inside your head. Did you wonder that thought out loud?

"Ho ho, no no. But I heard it anyway."

The voice is soft, soothing, slow. And terrifying.

"There's no need to be frightened. I wouldn't hurt someone like you, unless you intended to hurt me."



MIEN
1. COLD
2. MENACING
3. LACONIC
4. SWEET
5. RESERVED
6. QUIXOTIC

SKILL 15
STAMINA 40
INITIATIVE 7
ARMOR 3
DAMAGE AS
GIGANTIC
BEAST

An unbidden image comes into your mind; it's you, chopping wildly at the walls of the maze with a big, shiny sword, knocking leaves and branches every which way. You blink it away. Why would your stupid brain make you think of that right now?

In response, the walls on either side of you grow tall, then draw together, blocking the scant light that was coming in overhead. It feels like the maze is closing in, surrounding you, branches pressing against your arms and legs and the back of your head. The path that lay ahead is now completely obscured with dark green.

"Yes. Like that." The voice comes again, icily. You nod silently, trying to block any similar thoughts from even entering the stage of your mind. In a blink, the maze is back to normal. You whip your head around. The path is clear on either side.

"Who are you?" you manage to croak, in a half-whisper. "You will not understand my name, but you may call me Mrs. Hedgemaze."

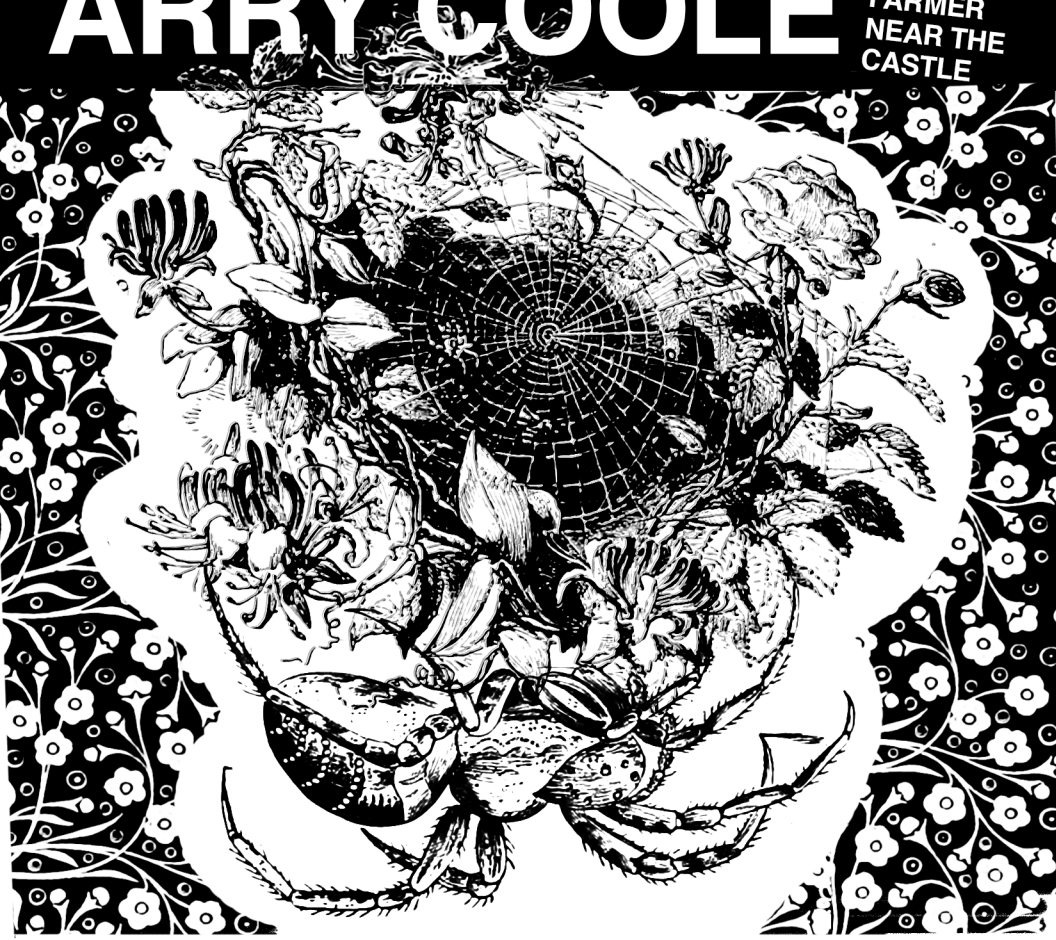
A small white flower extends itself from the wall of leaves next to you. You wonder for a moment if you should pluck it, but thinking better of it, you instead take it in your hand and gently shake it as if it is someone's hand.

"It's nice to meet you," you stammer.

"It's nice to meet you too, dear," Mrs. Hedgemaze says sweetly, inside your head.

ARRY COOLE

A SPIDER
FARMER
NEAR THE
CASTLE



“Can I help yuh?” You hear a voice, slightly cracked with age, coming from behind you. Not angry or harsh, but the speaker sounds a bit wary. You turn around. They have long sandy hair, pulled to the sides in two long, thick braids, and the weatherworn face of one who has spent many seasons outside. They are looking at you apprehensively, and holding quite a long wooden pole with a net at the end. You think you’d probably better explain.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize I’d wandered into someone’s land.” You look around you; it’s true, there’s a huge stone castle in some disrepair looming in the distance, but around you here are wild, untamed-looking bushes and low trees. The person in front of you looks decidedly farmerly -- perhaps it’s the overalls, or the straw hat, or just something about their demeanor-- but you see no crops to be cultivated here, or even anything that looks like it has been tended at all.

“A-yuh.” They seem to relax; their shoulders fall a little and they stop fixing you with that worried look, instead aiming their head down at the branches around their boots. “Probably should have thought.” They glance up at you again, appraising. “Yuh don’t look too much like one of them bug-killers, and you sure don’t look to me like a thief.”

The farmer extends a calloused hand to you. “Name’s Arry. This is my land, and believe it or not, I am a farmer. But what I farm is up there.” Arry gestures up with the long-handled net, and you look up to see a huge network of webs stretching between the tops of the trees and bushes surrounding you. They were invisible in the misty afternoon sun, but in the growing pale light of the moon, you can see that there are thousands of strands.

“...why?” You gasp, before you have a chance to think better of it. Arry chuckles.

“These here are moon spiders. Build their nests high up, and particularly like this kinda shrubbery. Me and mine, we make sure conditions are ideal for their nesting, make sure they stay nice and comfortable. Always try to be sustainable about it too, when we take silk or eggs.” You can see, despite the darkness, Arry frowns a little at this. “Some spider farmers, they don’t seem to care about the little fellers. Breed ‘em bigger than they ought to, then kill ‘em for meat and destroy the whole ecosystem.”

A pause, then a sigh in the darkness.

“I’m sorry, runnin’ away with myself. What’s’y’re name, and what can I do to help yuh?”

SKILL 8
STAMINA 10
INITIATIVE 1

ARMOR 0
DAMAGE AS
UNARMED

MIEN
1. WARY
2. ATTENTIVE
3. HOSPITABLE

4. TIRED
5. PATIENT
6. PREACHY



MR. WHISKERS

A CAT MERCHANT ON THE ROAD

“Oh HELLO. I’m not in your WAY am I?”

The ginger cat winks at you, like you’re in on the joke, except you’re the one who’s got a big orange bottle-brush tail in your face. He pulls his wide-brimmed hat down over his eyebrow-like whiskers so they protrude rudely outwards. You can see his left ear resisting the hat band, squashed down against his fur. It looks uncomfortable, but Mr. Whiskers is nonplussed. He switches his enormous tail, little minute muscular movements, but you can feel the fur tickling your face.

You think you may sneeze.



“Well, while you’re just staaaaaanding there...” Mr. Whiskers slouches his patchwork bag off of one shoulder and bends down to rifle through it. “Mew look... Meeeeeew look...” His tail twitches but still blocks your path, and you notice that he’s maneuvered one nether paw outward so as to trip you if you started moving forward unwittingly.

“Like mew could use... like you could MEWse...” he looks up, one fang hanging out of his mouth and his whiskers turned up in a grin. He turns back to the satchel, one furry leg now stretched out and fully blocking your path. Now his legs are in a full split and he’s flapping his tail like an overgrown orange squirrel, nodding his head as he rummages so the feather in his cap follows the pattern of his tail. He looks ridiculous. Suddenly, he snaps back up dramatically.

“Ahhh--one of THESE!” His eyes (and, you can’t help noticing, his teeth) glitter in the sunshine as he holds up a delicate steel frame, twisted into a U-shape. Along this frame, like a tiny train on tracks, are two spinning glass wheels. They roll back and forth as Mr. Whiskers waggles his paw-- his claws, nearly retracted, seem to be expertly sharp. You look up to his yellow eyes, the pupils of which dilate slightly, despite the brightness of the noonday sun.

A few minutes later, you’re back on your way, the shadow behind you waving a friendly farewell paw in the air before dropping to all fours and trotting off in the other direction. In your bag, you hear steel and glass clinking against your other necessities. Highway robbery, but all the same, you feel a little relieved that you’re walking again with your whole skin intact.

SKILL 7
STAMINA 12
INITIATIVE 2
ARMOR 0
DAMAGE AS
LARGE BEAST

MIEN
1. TESTY
2. PLAYFUL
3. BORED
4. CURIOUS
5. HUNGRY
6. AFFECTIONATE

BROOS GREENSHOE

A BUG CLERIC IN THE CASTLE

“Hullo!” A voice peals out across the dank and mossy stone corridor. A clacking, almost plasticky skittering sound follows. In the shadows ahead, you can make out a small, barrel-shaped creature. In what little pale sunlight filters in from the notch-like windows above, you can see a greenish blue iridescent shine off of the little form. It waves a spindly looking arm at you. It seems to be beckoning.

“Come in, come in; please, if you would be so kind.”

You oblige, and move along the hallway, which looks like it opens into a larger chamber up ahead-- one that looks a little bit better lit. The cozy scent of a fire mingles with the smell of damp earth and stone as you get closer. The little form scurries back into the room it came from, and has taken a seat in an old wooden chair with patches of threadbare red upholstery still clinging to a few places. You can see now that it looks like some kind of dung beetle, but huge; it sits at least two feet tall in the chair, as it shuffles papers on the table in front of it with four of its spindly, crooked arms.

“Ah! Here we are!” The beetle seems to find something it was looking for-- a wide, floppy book full of lines of handwriting. “If you would be so kind to sign in here, please!”

You walk up to the table, and the bug offers you a quill. You take it, your fingers brushing the spiny hairs protruding from the claw-like hand. You sign your name on the list. There’s a column for time signed in, and another following for time signed out, but all of the previous signers have left these columns blank. You do the same-- you know it’s some time in the morning, but that’s about as specific as you can get. You look around the room, and notice that it was once probably a formal entrance for the castle. There’s the passage back to the main door, and several similar passages leading off in other directions: to other areas of the castle, most likely. The bug seems to have converted this room into an all-purpose home space though, and you have to admit it’s fairly cozy; there is in fact a small fire in the hearth, and a small sleeping area, but most of the room is taken up with piles and piles of books. The walls are papered with sketchy maps and charts, along with the odd crude drawing.



- MIEN
1. HOSPITABLE
 2. NEUROTIC
 3. DISTRACTED
 4. FRIENDLY
 5. FRAZZLED
 6. PUSHY

SKILL 9 INITIATIVE 1
STAMINA 11 ARMOR 2 DAMAGE AS SMALL BEAST

“Thank you very much! Allow me to introduce myself: I am Broos Greenshoe, Cleric of this Castle. How may I guide your research today?”

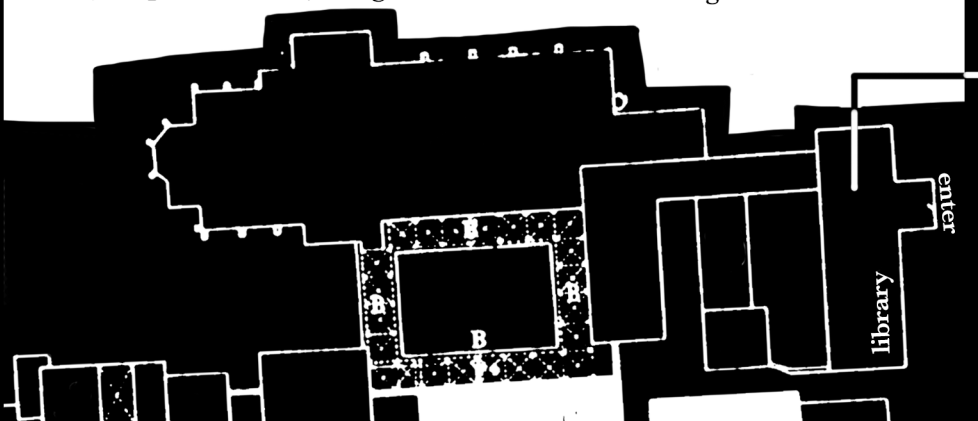
You look at the bug, who has hopped down off of the chair, and is now cocking its flat head at you inquisitively.

“My research?”

“Yes, yes! I can only assume that research is the purpose of your visit to the academic center of the Undergarden, my impressive and highly organized collection!” Broos Greenshoe gestures in six directions at once as their voice squeaks proudly across the small chamber. “Perhaps you would like to study the Classics! Or maybe your interest is more Agrarian; many folks find themselves in a position these days to relearn the old ways of farming, you know. Or perhaps you are a fan of Fiction! Tales of the strange and mysterious lands above the Canopy. Or perhaps you have a contribution to my collection.”

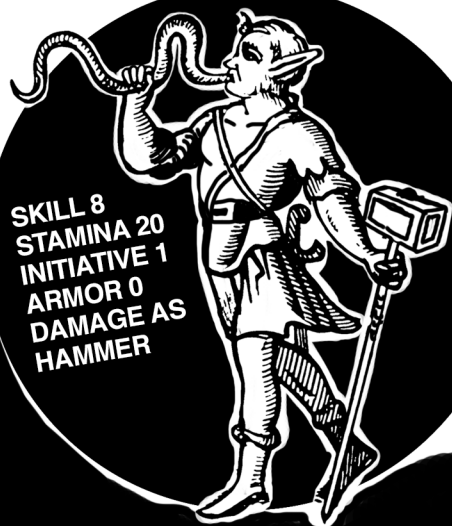
Broos scuttles closer, looking up and down, presumably to see if you have a book stashed somewhere that they hadn’t noticed before.

“Is that it?! Have you brought a new volume? What is its subject? What is its title? I shall alphabetize it immediately! Well? Have you a new book? If so, produce it, please!”



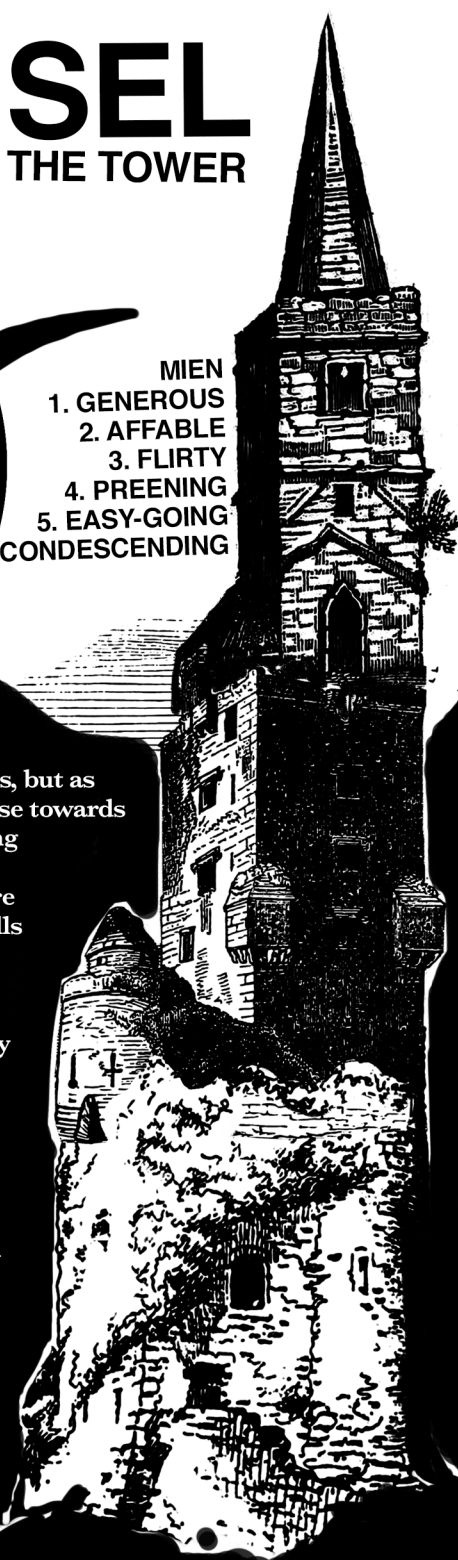
HOM TINSEL

AN ELVEN CARPENTER IN THE TOWER



SKILL 8
STAMINA 20
INITIATIVE 1
ARMOR 0
DAMAGE AS
HAMMER

MIEN
1. GENEROUS
2. AFFABLE
3. FLIRTY
4. PREENING
5. EASY-GOING
6. CONDESCENDING



The tower is not in great shape. It still stands, but as you begin climbing the rickety spiral staircase towards the top, you feel a little bit as if you are taking your life in your hands. Here and there are handholds built into the tower walls, but here and there are also holes where the stony walls seem to have crumbled into dust. Some of these are small enough not to be disconcerting; some provide larger-than-comfortable views of the gloomy valley that spreads out below. Through some you can see what looks like a field of solid, immovable fog; almost like an enormous cocoon or spider-silk cavern. Through others, there's nothing but a sea of dark greenish shapes, interrupted by small splashes of brown and blue. The sunlight is stronger up here; still fairly milky and reminiscent of the indirect rays of an early winter morning, but you can see a little more of the shapes of the land below you. You are climbing pretty high now; it's a little uncomfortable to think about how far you'd fall if some part of the stone crumbled beneath you.

As you keep climbing, you hear a ringing sound: soft at first, then a bit more resonant as you get higher. There is someone up here after all, maybe. A few more careful steps, and there's a sudden bellowing from below.

"HAAWH-M!" calls a deep, rich voice. You pause for a moment. There's no response from above, just the consistent chiming. You hadn't seen anyone around the base of the tower, but perhaps this voice belongs to a new castle visitor. You keep climbing.

There are signs of construction, new supports built into the tower, that you notice as you climb. It looks like the original stonework is very damaged up here, but the stairs are relatively sturdy, and most of the holes in the walls have been repaired or at least boarded up. At the top of the tower, you finally discover the source of the ringing, which has become sharper and stronger along the way. There's an elf up here, using an ornate, shiny silver hammer on the roof of the structure. There's a pile of brilliantly colored building materials sitting next to the tower window. It looks like he's reshingling. The elf notices your arrival, and leaps from where he was seated in the window.

"HAM. Ah-- no, I'm sorry! You are not who I was expecting!" He has a clear, strong voice, but he speaks with a comforting softness. He has his long golden hair tied back in a ponytail that reaches almost to the back of his knees, and he's not wearing a shirt.

"My name is Hom. Are you... on the crew?" His expression is kind, but you can't help but feel a little like he's judging you. There's something in his voice that makes him sound dubious. You tell him you aren't on any crew, and his face clears right away. He laughs, a sound like a bright churchbell.

"Oh boy! I didn't think so! Ham must have lost his mind, I thought-- er, no offense. This kind of job is better for some elves than others, you know?" He sighs happily, twirls his hammer, and stretches and flexes for a minute. It's a little much.

He hangs the hammer in a holster on his belt, and opens a small chest sat on the floor next to the pile of colorful shingles.

"Time for a little break, I think. So if you don't work for Ham, what brings you up here? Wait, don't tell me: little dude in the castle sent you so you could check out the view?" While he talks, his voice somehow both piercing and melodic, he extracts a small snake from the chest, stretches it out into a straight line, and places his mouth over the snake's head. He keeps his eyes on you expectantly while he does this, awaiting the answer to his query. After several seconds holding this position, he removes the snake from his lips, sighs contentedly as if he's just gulped a refreshing beverage, and tosses the snake back into the chest.

"Well?" he says, "am I right?"

The first time I played a tabletop RPG was when I was in high school, and I absolutely wanted to play because my fun new friends were all going to play, and I wanted to be included, dammit. We were playing D&D 3.5 and I made a half-elf rogue named Redde who was tough and cool and also had a tough and cool backstory. I had a great time eating donuts and pizza with the aforementioned new friends, but Redde was kind of a nonstarter. It turns out it wasn't that fun for me to play someone who was just supposed to be a tougher, cooler, more grown-up fantasy version of myself. Inspired by one of these new friends, who was playing a straight-up bonkers weirdo with oodles of personal rules and motives, I swore that I'd be someone more interesting in my next game.

I've stuck to that pledge in pretty much any game I've played since. I've played an ineffectual self-styled pick-up artist, a druid that got stuck as a non-verbal cat, a crab that eventually turned into sort-of-Barbarella, a coward that is always hiding behind a bush, a pansexual trance music-loving elf who throws dope parties, and a sailor called Fishmael. Somewhere along the way, I realized that as much fun as I could have playing the game, creating the characters themselves was way, way more fun for me.

With the encouragement of some of my pals, I wrote and ran a few sessions of my own game, in a world of my own invention, populated by my own awesome weirdos. Well, I think they were awesome. I really like it when NPCs are just as rich and compelling and potentially bizarre as player characters. When Sam suggested collaborating on this book for ZineQuest, I got to create a whole new crew of characters to fit into the Undergarden setting; and, as it turns out, cooperatively building a world with your partner rules. I'm pretty proud of these folks we created, and I'd be honored if they found their way into some of your games in whatever capacity suits you best.

-Kari

BETTER LEGENDS



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