

Ardor Online

~The Immersive Action MMO~

Pandion

Chapter 2: Party Finder

Flashing light warning: The following chapter includes embedded links to Nimja, an hypnotic visualizer. Photosensitive readers should treat these links with due caution.

“Please let me know when you are ready to finalize Character Creation. As a reminder, you may freely edit your character for the first two hours of playtime, and for a nominal fee thereafter at Beauty Salons located around Arda.”

“Don’t rush me! Perfection takes time! What’s Arda?” the avatar called Galatea adjusted her hair. AO had a nice pixie cut, but it wasn’t really what she was after. Next.

“Arda is the largest settlement in the world of Ardor Online. Almost all businesses in Arda are owned and operated by players, from equipment merchants to personal banks, as well as the mail service.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“Other, smaller settlements exist, offering players who desire a particular aesthetic or backdrop for their roleplaying to establish communities of their own, away from Arda’s cultural mixing bowl.”

“Also pretty cool.”

“Please let me know when you are ready to finalize Character Creation. As a remind—”

“Can you relax? Geez, you’d think they’d program you to be a bit more patient. It’s not like I’m the only player *ever* to take her time in CC. It’s an MMO! A VRMMO! If I don’t look amazing, what am I even doing? And perfection takes time.”

Perfection. That’s what she was after. Galatea wasn’t a name for show—she didn’t *want* to have to tweak her appearance later, and wouldn’t. She was the kind of player to get attached to her avatar—she had e-quaintances who were total cosmetic junkies, remaking their characters every month to reflect whatever their current brainrot was, posting screenshots on all

their social media for weeks, or maybe even a full month before developing a new brainrot and starting all over again. She had other friends who created an entire stable of distinct characters, each with their own elaborate backstory and with imagined relationships to the other characters. She could respect either approach, really, so long as you were having fun with it, but she knew how she worked: She made a character and she *stuck* with that character. She'd get attached to the way they looked and her imagined personality for them, and she'd love them too much to redesign them or make an alt character.

So she needed to get this done right, right here and now. She had to make Galatea *perfect*. Or as perfect as she could get with what were surely semi-limited character creation options used to funnel her into the microtransaction money-loop every MMO had tucked away, bleeding-edge virtual reality game or not. If anything, it'd make more sense for a VRMMO to go all-in on cosmetic MTX, because when would players be more prone to vanity than when they literally embodied their avatars?

But different hair styles, colors, makeup, etc., those she wouldn't have a problem incorporating into Galatea's identity later on. What mattered right now was nailing her physical build, her face, and her sense of style.

She had to admit that she was, just a little bit, self-inserting with Galatea's design. Character Creation took place in front of an ornate silver mirror with a crazy embellished frame, and she blamed her reflection for how much Galatea resembled an idealized version of herself.

In real life she had a cushy job, lots of standing around and sitting around and the heaviest lifting she did was a stack of papers, this resulting in what she considered a *pleasantly soft, comfortable* physique. She wasn't out of shape! Maybe just a little bit *more shaped* than she should be. But only just a bit, and people were into that nowadays, she'd rather be a little bit big than a skinny-ass skeleton, if she had to choose her gamer bod archetype.

But for Galatea she could choose whatever she wanted—though the tutorial elf had advised her not to deviate *too* far from her real-world self as a first time Deep Dropper. Her mind still had to acclimate to the whole full-immersion VR thing, so having a body *roughly* the same size as she was IRL would keep her from the worst of the new-player nausea she had read so much about.

Buuuuut there was probably no real harm cheating up a few (or a dozen) inches, *everyone* probably did that, so Galatea measured a nice clean six feet vertical, hopefully to help her stand out from the crowd, and also because she was just curious to know how it'd feel to actually be

tall. She'd get used to it, and whatever nausea she experienced would just have to be the price she paid for the extra foot. Or so.

She went with simple, broad strokes for Galatea's body. Again, maybe just a little bit her real self but idealized—kinda but not too curvy, nothing *crazy*, not by MMO standards, but leaning on the **heavier** end of the spectrum, because she had never really vibed with super-skinny video game girls (did they *ever* eat?). So Galatea appeared, like her, **comfortably plush**. Again, nothing too much, AO was an MMO and she knew enough about MMOs to know that reasonably emphasized curves would drown in a sea of maxed-out body sliders. No one would find Galatea's plushness worthy of comment.

She figured.

She worried much more about her face. Galatea's face, not hers, though Galatea's was based on hers in a way that made her feel a little bit inferior to her digital replica, but that was what happened when you modeled your first VR character after yourself, professor dumbass. Galatea had her eyes (but slightly wider, they made her look innocent and approachable), her nose (but a little bit smaller, a little upturned, a nice cute button), her cheeks (though a little more full and girlish), her jaw (tweaked *just* a bit so the lines were perfect), and her mouth.

She didn't really have to tweak Galatea's mouth at all—*that* was something she could be, and was, proud of. Her factory settings came with perfect bow lips—from her dad's side, actually, because her mom had a snaky mouth. Full lips and pronounced canines gave her a kinda “gamer goblin” look her peers would kill her for—if she ever let them know, but she didn't.

Just hopping on voice calls was too much for her, she'd die of embarrassment before turning her webcam on. To most of her friends, she existed as text on their screen, and that worked for her and that worked for them. As for her day job—nobody there would ever think her for a gamer.

Galatea was a departure from her very guarded nature and love of privacy—and that, she thought, was the genius. If—if—she somehow encountered one of her online friends or, God forbid, a coworker in AO (to her knowledge, none of them played, but to their knowledge, neither did she) they'd never expect Galatea to be *literally her*, albeit with some touching up and a full extra foot of height. So, paradoxically, that made Ardor Online the *best* place for her to try being herself online—her best self, remade with next-gen graphics in a cutting-edge MMO.

“Please let me know when—”

“Can you chill???” Seriously, the tutorial elf was really hot, but not *that* hot. “I’m almost done. What’s the rush, you got somewhere to be?”

“It’s my responsibility to facilitate speedy and efficient tutorialization for new players.”

“Well right now, I’m tutorializing, so just give me, like, five more minutes. I need to fix my hair.” That was the killer. Galatea had come together easily—she was *really* happy with how she shaped up. AO’s implementation of slider tweaks was super intuitive. You grabbed the body part you wanted to change, then some bars sprang to life representing various axes, and you tweaked from there. Surprisingly easy.

It was just that hair was hard.

She couldn’t quite make up her mind.

Mainly because it was all so good.

“The blunt bob is *nice*, but . . .” Not what she was going for. So sterile. She tried the choppy bob and that was nice, too. However AO rendered hair was *amazing*. So fluffy and glossy. If any part of the VRMMO experience was going to give her a complex it’d be the hair—Galatea could just *have* hair that’d take hours of teasing and crimping IRL, and she could have it *all the time*. And change it whenever (for a nominal fee, allegedly). But she still hadn’t found *the look* just yet.

Waves? No.

Curls? Not quite.

Wolf cut? Oh, that was *good*—but not for her. She needed a woman with a wolf cut to beat her to death. God, wolf cuts were hot.

Four more variations on the pixie confirmed she *did* want something with length. But shaggy cuts were *too* messy. She wanted something eye-catching, but subtle. Bold but restrained. Less but more.

God, she was terrible, wasn’t she?

But it had to be there—the perfect style that spoke to her soul. Just a few hundred more variations to swipe through and she’d—

Oh.

Oh, yes.

A blunt fringe over her eyes, but with long straight sidelocks framing her face and trailing all the way down over her clavicles, with the rest of her hair falling in one even curtain around her hips.

“This game has a himecut? Oh my god yes.” So impractical—she’d gotten a himecut twice IRL, first for the novelty and second after she had forgotten how much maintenance the first had required.

But Galatea would never have to worry about smart blunt bangs growing rough and ragged, the clean lines turning shapeless. Galatea could fucking *rock* a himecut with no extra effort.

“Please le—”

“WORKINGONIT!”

Himecut, locked in. Leaving just one last consideration before she could finish Character Creation and actually play the game.

How did she want to color her hair? Himecuts were meant to be black—that’s just how it *was*, the universal law of himecuts. *But* there were some really great examples of purple himecuts, like that one inexpressive mage built like a fridge who travelled around with a thousand-year-old elf. Or that one angel sister who loved sweets and bondage, though hers was two-tone with pink on the inside. Himecuts were meant to be black but they didn’t *have* to be. So she had to decide what color best suited Galatea.

Black *was* still an option, and default for good reason.

Green was . . . not really what she wanted.

Pink, too menhera.

Red was too 2000s.

But god, was she really so basic she couldn’t resist giving her character snow white hair?

With ice blue eyes?

Okay, with the name Galatea—*fine*. God she was so basic.

God she looked so good.

“Pl—”

“I’m ready to finalize character creation!” she said, before the elf could go through the whole spiel *again*. Seriously, how had nobody sent feedback about this nagging before? Or had they, and Full Dive Studios had some number cruncher crunch the numbers to determine that stressing out players during CC actually had a more positive than negative impact on retention and CCUs.

“Excellent. Please continue through the portal to Class selection.”

The mirror froze, no longer rendering her reflection in real time but showing her Galatea as a static picture. Then the mirror shimmered and she disappeared, and through the mirror she could see a grand hall or cathedral with high walls and an enormous ceiling.

“Literally through the looking-glass? This game rocks.” Galatea grinned and jumped through. The mirror’s silver surface rippled, and a moment of mercurial coldness gave way to a papery, stuffy heat—like a library in summer.

But it was definitely cathedral vibes. Arranged around her were three plinths, two on either side in transepts and a third directly before her in the ambulatory. Suitably epic and awe-inspiring orchestral music echoed distantly off the high ceiling, giving the room a sense of incredible grandeur.

This was where her adventure began.

“Here you are to choose your calling,” said the tutorial elf, stepping out of thin air behind her. The mirror was one way, apparently. “Open to you are three paths. That of the Warrior, stout, brave, fierce, and true.”

The left transept grew bright, revealing a seashell mosaic depicting a tall, faceless knight wielding a massive sword in her fight against a wicked serpent, while small, indistinct figures in the background looked on reverently. A brilliant shortsword had been buried up to its hilt in the plinth before the Warrior.

“That of the Wastrel, swift, clever, cutthroat, and cruel.” Now the opposite transept lit up, revealing the same mosaic from a different perspective. While in the background the warrior and the serpent tangled in mortal combat, a masked figure clad in dark leather rifled through the monster’s hoard. An open chest spilled its riches over the figure’s feet and they buried his hands up to the elbows in gold. Here a viciously curved dagger and overlarge pouch rested on the plinth.

“And that of the Witch, aloof, arcane, intelligent, and all-powerful.” Now the ambulatory illuminated, and the mosaic was retold again. While the Warrior battled the beast and the Wastrel helped itself to the spoils, the Witch focused on her work. In one hand, a staff strung with jewels all the color of the rainbow. In the other, a ball of swirling potential. Would she aid the Warrior in her battle, or abscond together with the Wastrel and his riches? The choice, it seemed, was her own, and set leaning against the Witch’s plinth was a simple wooden staff.

“I only get these three?” she asked, her voice so out of place in the majestic cathedral. But hey, somebody had to ask. “I thought AO was famous for its billions of classes.”

“Ardor Online features *hundreds* of classes,” the elf answered, ducking her head respectfully, but was that irritation in her voice? Awfully cheeky for a tutorial NPC. “And many classes trace their roots to the choice offered to you here: Warrior, Wastrel, Witch. There are alternative starting classes available to players who have accumulated sufficient experience and achieved certain account milestones. They, like non-Human races, are only accessible via Reincarnation.”

“Oh, so I don’t have to be a human?”

“All adventurers start their journey as Humans,” the elf explained. “But through emergent gameplay decisions may unlock the ability to Reincarnate into another race. Further, in special circumstances, a race-change may occur without Reincarnation, though this—”

“So is that like prestiging? You hit max level then reincarnate back to level 1?”

The elf sniffed testily. “Many paths lead to Reincarnation. The raw accumulation of levels is one of those paths. There are also—”

“Yeah, I’ll probably figure those out when I get to them. So I only get these three to start off with, huh?” She knew what she wanted—her preferences weren’t exactly subtle—but reincarnation or no reincarnation, she didn’t want to rush into this and wind up stuck with a class she didn’t like for however many hours it took her to promote or reset. Making a new character and playing through the tutorial and first few hours was *not* an option, either. She *hated* retreading ground. Nothing killed her desire to play a game more than being forced to sit through all the same cutscenes and waltz through all the same way-too-easy starter quests.

Wastrel was the first out of consideration. She wanted to *meet* people in Ardor Online, and being some kind of snarky, slimy thief wouldn’t win her many friends—at least not friends she wanted to win. Sneaky stabbers were fun in singleplayer RPGs, particularly ones that let you augment your natural stealthing with illusion magic, but it wasn’t a pigeonhole she wanted to

place herself in, not after going through all that effort designing Galatea to be her perfect avatar. She needed to be *seen* and *heard*!

No Wastrel.

Warrior had a certain appeal. She was reinventing herself with Galatea, getting out of her comfort zone. Nothing could be more outside her comfort zone than a boisterous, brave fighter who took names and kicked ass. Also, she had a love for magic knights, paladins or spellblades or anyone really who paired heavy armor and potent magics, strengthening their sword arm with enchantments and cantrips. She imagined Warrior was the starting point for most of the tank classes, and tanks traditionally lead parties and guilds—at least they did based on her experience with traditional MMOs. AO could be a completely different beast for all she knew. Frontlining typically came with a lot of extra responsibility for that reason—you had to know encounters inside and out, and be ready to instruct your party members on what they needed to do. As a first-time player who wanted to wiki warrior as little as possible, since AO was all about immersion and discovery, she knew she had no plans to study dungeon encounters, and more than that—she didn’t want to deal with entitlement from other players who expected her to be born an expert.

Warrior out.

Which left . . . Witch. Dangerous vulnerability to annoying puns aside, Witch was always going to be her top pick. She just *loved* magic, in all its forms—blasting magic, tricky magic, exploration magic, crafting magic—magic, magic, magic, *magic*! She could never get enough of it, and while Wastrel and Warrior might eventually let her get magical further down their promotion trees, this was a VRMMO, and could she really be herself, be happy choosing anything *except* the most magical class she could?

“I’ll take Witch!” she said, because maybe she had to say it, and maybe she just wanted to say it out loud, and she also stepped forward and grabbed the staff. It was warm to the touch, like it had been left out in the sun, not hot, but pleasant, familiar. “What do I do now?” she asked, turning to find the tutorial elf had disappeared.

“Now,” said the elf’s disembodied voice. “You get to play the game. Welcome again, Galatea, to Ardor Online. We hope you enjoy your journey. Let it be full of unforgettable and unique experiences. Make something of yourself.”

“Yeah that’s the pla—OW!”

The cathedral exploded with blinding light and when it cleared Galatea stood in a wide green meadow.

A wide green meadow packed with blinking adventurers holding swords, daggers, and staves, and wearing identically practical, plain clothes.

She watched one swordsman immediately set off down a well-trod path. Another started calling out, waving her hands until another new arrival recognized her and they met up, high-fived, and set off as well. Others stood at the edge of the meadow, under the circling trees, and called out:

“Looking for group!”

“Guild wanted!”

“Warrior LF2M dungeon spam!”

“Loud,” Galatea said, pinching her staff in her elbow so she could cover her ears—which did little to shelter her from the starting zone clamor. She had expected the tutorial to continue past class selection, breadcrumb her on the main narrative, give her a little more direction than just plopping her down with all the other noobs and telling her to get going, already.¹

But, she supposed that AO’s whole immersion schtick meant it did this instead, which she really didn’t find all that immersive, but hey. If the tutorial elf were still around, Galatea was sure she’d have something to say about “emergent gameplay opportunities” and “fostering player choice from the game’s very beginning.”²

Galatea fostered the choice to get away from it all. She only saw one way out of the meadow (player choice!), so she pushed through the crowd of other newbies and headed off down the path the others had taken before her.

“How! Far! Out! Do they spawn us????” She didn’t expect it to be so long. The first five minutes had been exciting, the thrill of a new adventure and that new game smell buoying her along with bouncy steps.

Then the next five minutes passed.

And another five.

¹ Additional and optional tutorialization is available through helpful popups, like this one. These can be turned off in your gameplay settings if you find them disruptive.

² Correct. Rather than an on-rails cinematic tutorial, Ardor Online intends for players to begin the process of socialization and discovery as quickly as possible.

And now she'd been walking for at least half an hour and was *seriously* questioning AO's commitment to immersive realism. Was it immersive to make her feet get sore on the way to town, because the starter boots didn't really fit her all that great?³ Sure. Arguably very immersive. Was it *fun*?

If she wound up with blisters on her soles IRL she'd sue them.⁴

That was probably covered by the EULA she skimmed over.⁵

As if reacting to her complaints, the winding forest path opened up, treating Galatea to a view that made her potential blisters so totally worth it.

"Woah."

She rested on her staff and gawped at the landscape. Laid out before her like a table setting was Ardor Online's capital city. Her path ended atop a jutting promontory—below her, a star-shaped lake glittered as it caught the sun, sparkling like one gigantic, multifaceted gemstone. At the tip of each of the star's four points was a mighty tower. Each tower was painted its own brilliant color: gold at the north, silver south, with red and blue to the east and west.

They were even bigger up close—taller, she realized, than Arda itself. The four towers dwarfed the capitol, and it almost gave her the impression that they were fencing in the city, rather than guarding it, as she first imagined. After carefully picking her way down the narrow, winding path from the promontory, Galatea joined the queue of (she assumed) other players entering the city from the south, in the shadow of the silver tower, with its sturdy, branching spires, like a birch tree.

Mostly, the other players looked like her—dressed all in the same starter outfit, though some had a feathered hat or short half-cloak that she presumed were early quest rewards. Having to dress like everyone else made her feel . . . unspecial and unimportant in a way she didn't like. Galatea was her idealized self—but in this crowd, she was just one of so many mooks.

Unimportant.

³ Yes.

⁴ Full Dive Interactive is not liable for injuries sustained while playing Ardor Online. Please refer to the User Safety section of your Deep Drop array user manual.

⁵ Yes it was.

Generic.

But that was only because she was level 1! Once she had a couple levels under her belt, some more gold—

How much gold did she have? She checked her pockets and they were empty. Confirming that, a disconcerting menu “popped up.”

It didn’t spring to life in front of her like they always did in VR fiction. Or rather, it did, just weird. It wasn’t there, but she could still see it, like her mind’s eye got hijacked, showing her a blank grid and exactly zero gold.

A huge armored man said “Toll,” and stuck out his hand. He could have palmed her head easily.

“I, um, I only just started playing the game today!” Galatea squeaked. Then, remembering she had reinvented herself, that she was *Galatea* now, not herself, more herself, she straightened up and cleared her throat. “I don’t have any gold—yet.”

The gatekeeper didn’t look very impressed. He pushed back his helm visor and stared down at her, chewing something. “Show me your nameplate,” he ordered, working her jaw. Then, reading her face, he added, “You play any RPGs before? Imagine a character sheet. Imagine it hard.”

She imagined Galatea’s character sheet hard.

Galatea

[New Arrival]

Lv. 1 Witch

STRENGTH: 7

AGILITY: 9

PHYSIQUE: 5

INTELLECT: 15

WISDOM: 10

CHARISMA: 4

Equipment:

Main Hand: **Beginner Witch's Staff**

Off Hand: **Empty**

Accessory: **Empty**

Head: **Empty**

Chest: **Beginner's Tunic**

Hands: **Empty**

Waist: **Beginner's Belt**

Legs: **Beginner's Pants**

Feet: **Beginner's Boots**

The guard groaned. "Go on through. First time's free, but if you can't scrape together ten gold the next time you want to enter Arda, you'll be shit out of luck. Remember that." He waved her forward, but now Galatea was curious.

"Who am I paying the toll to, exactly? And can't I just get in through one of the other gates?" she asked, even though the Wastrel behind her clicked her tongue in irritation and pushed her. Shoved her, really.

"You're paying the Silver Saints," he said, jabbing his thumb at the badge hanging from his breastplate, sporting a knight in profile with its hands clasped in prayer over the hilt of its sword. "And you're welcome to try the other gates. You'll find the Saints ask the least for entry. Now hurry up, you're blocking the queue."

Galatea's first look at Arda was spoiled by all the jostling. Beyond the tower and gatehouse, a fantastic sparkling bridge stretched over the lake to Arda. But too many people were coming in through the south gate for her to slow down and take in the sky above and waves below, or even the glimmering bricks she was pushed over as part of the living tide—was now when everyone logged on? Or was Arda like big cities in the real world, and the constant movement of people in and out caused endless congestion? Regardless, she couldn't take her time gawking at the huge portcullis she passed under—with equally huge iron teeth ready to slam home in case of, what, exactly, she didn't yet know. Was it just set dressing, or did Arda actually come under attack? Were players the attackers, defenders, both, or neither?

Galatea grinned, despite all the shoving and rude grunts. There was just so much she *didn't know*.

[Alfonse]: Hey there! You look like you're in need of some better gear!

Galatea looked around—the voice came to her clear as a whisper, despite the general noisiness of the crowd. Oh, because it *was* a whisper, sent from a merchant dressed in heavy wool robes that looked scratchy. Curious, she muscled through the crowd (“muscled,” with 7 Strength to her name) toward the vendor.

“Are you a player?”

“Sure am, Ma’am. I can show you my merchantry badge, if you got any doubts.” He groped inside his robe.

“No, no, I believe you. So, uh, what do you got? For sale, I mean. What do you sell?” She didn’t *see* any wares, not until he produced a rolled-up carpet from his robe and smoothed it out.

“Oh, I sell a little of everything. You’re a Witch, yeah? Probably only a couple quests deep? Yeah, not too much in your price range, I’m afraid, but I can lease you a mighty fine staff, a *mighty* fine staff, twenty gold a level, won’t find a better deal than that in the whole south quarter, I promise you that, Ma’am.” He smiled at her, and he wasn’t bad looking—maybe a little too rugged.

“I actually only just started playing,” she said.

He scowled and said, “Oh, so you were wasting my time, and can’t even pay me for it.”

“It’s not my intention! If I had the money—”

“But you don’t.”

“I’d like to!” Galatea protested. First the guard, now this merchant. What a welcoming committee. “Listen, it’s not like I *like* being dead broke. If I want money what should I do?”

“Start sucking dick,” he suggested, sneering at her. “Join up with one of the G.Guilds and hope a higher up thinks you’re worth cybering. Or play the fucking game—quests get posted at the inns. And don’t bother with the procgens.”

“Procgens?” But he waved her away.

“That’s all you’re getting for free. Now scram, brokie, I got a quota. Hello! You there, Sir! A big strong man like you needs a big strong sword, yeah? Why don’t you take a look at my wares—I’ve got a Scarseal Blade with your name on it!”

Galatea huffed and went on her way. *That* particular merchant had just lost a customer forever! And when she grew powerful and made many friends, she'd make sure they all knew how Alfonse treated those yet without the means to spend their way.

Still, he hadn't been all bad. Now she knew where she was headed—to an inn!

Of course, knowing she needed to get to an inn and actually *finding* one were entirely different things—and so far Ardor Online had done a great job replicating the total confusion that came with visiting a big city for the first time. There was just *so much* to take in. Buildings crowded the narrow street on either side, first-level storefronts and second-level player-owned (she presumed) houses that hung out over the street so far street-opposite neighbors could hop from balcony to balcony to pay their friends a visit. The end result was a thin strip of sky at the center of the street, a magical, deep blue thread guiding her on, making her feel like some kind of subterranean organism traversing a burrow just beneath the soil.

And just like the big city IRL, everyone had somewhere they needed to be and nobody had the time to stop and answer the question of a wide-eyed country yokel who didn't know her eyes from her elbows.

"Excuse me! Sorry! Hello, where can I find an inn? I'm new. I just started playing and I was wondering if you could point me to an inn? No? Sorry, I'm new here. Inn? Excuse me, the inn? WHERE CAN I FIND THE INN, PLEASE!" Galatea balled her hands into fists and screamed the last.

"You're standing right in front of one, dumbass," said a Warrior with creamy black skin, a halo of chestnut curls, a narrow sword half again as long as she was tall, and a face built for scowling, which was exactly what she did.

"Oh," Galatea said in a small voice. "Thank you. I didn't see the sign."



"Yeah well now you have, and can you get out of the way? I got a fat stack of quests to turn in." The Warrior—who, outside her sword, didn't look all that differently equipped—bullied her way past Galatea and shouldered the door to The Silver Goose open. Eager to glean some

knowledge on what the whole quest turn-in process looked like, Galatea shadowed her (from a respectable distance; she looked and acted like she had an attitude issue).

“Fuck do you mean, ‘quest licensing fee?’” demanded the Warrior who yup definitely had an attitude problem, slamming her hand on the bar with enough force to jump the five gold pieces the bartender put down. “Sorry, but I didn’t see you out there fighting any slimes, so what the fuck do you think you’re doing collecting *over half* my fucking reward as a ‘quest licensing fee?’”

“Fighting inflation,” the barkeep said smoothly, not at all bothered by the seething Warrior staring him down. “You must be new here, Miss. In order to stymie the otherwise infinite amount of gold entering the economy via players like you who load up on procgen kill quests, G.Guild-affiliated inns collect a licensing fee on all system-generated quests, a tax that is then invested into Arda’s social institutions and general upkeep.”

“A tax that then goes directly into your pockets, you meant to say. How the fuck am I supposed to earn enough money to upgrade my gear if you’re taking *over fucking half* of everything I earn? Because let me guess—there are no unaffiliated inns in Arda.”

“No there are not Miss. But the answer to the first part of your question is pretty simple—take on some player quests instead. Might be a little more involved than killing fifteen slimes or collecting twelve bear asses, but the pay’ll be way better—and there’s no tax on your earnings. The licensing fee is paid by the quest giver at the time of posting.”

“And *why* didn’t anyone tell me this?”

Galatea had an idea, but it was a new voice who answered, “Because they *want* you to have to go through this little humiliation ritual when you first start off. Make sure you know your place in the world. Appreciate how *generous* they are, giving you an option *not* to get taxed, *if you do their work* for them.” The voice laced with poisonous sarcasm belonged to a short woman with a thin (in Galatea’s opinion, scrawny) physique and her black hair tied up in a ponytail and shockingly white skin. She sauntered up, tried to lean on the bar, was too short to lean on the bar, and so hopped on a stool instead, resting her elbow on the bar and her head in her hand so she could smirk sideways at the Warrior. The overlarge dagger tucked in her belt marked her a Wastrel, and the lack of any other unique equipment marked her as a fellow noob.

“You sure know a lot,” the Warrior snorted, scooping her sad five coins off the counter to keep them from being pocketed. “For someone still in her starter gear.”

“What do you want me to say? I spent a lot of time lurking on the forums, dreaming of playing AO one day when I finally scraped enough money together for a DD rig, and just recently I finally *did* get my money up enough to start Dropping—just in time to watch Ardor Online go from revolutionary MMO to colonized hellhole. You’ve seen them, right?” she asked Galatea, over her shoulder.

“Huh?” She was a part of this conversation now? She’d been trying to keep a low profile.

“The towers. You paid—” She paused, looked Galatea up and down. “Nah, you got your entry toll *waived*, right? First time’s free. Just like the quest licensing fee—they give you little *treats* to sell you on the supposed fairness of their system.”

“Who’s they?” Galatea asked. “The Silver Saints?”

“The S.Saints are one quarter part of the problem. There’s the R.Reds, the A.Accords, and the G.Glamer. Between the four of them they’ve carved up Arda and turned it into their virtual playground—at everyone’s expense save their own. You passed through the Saints’ tower, right? The G.Guilds built those towers because Arda is supposed to be a free state. You can rent guild halls, inns, shops, housing, but you can’t own them. We’re supposed to take turns, shake things up, be emergent.

“They don’t agree. And if they couldn’t build their fortresses inside Arda, they’d do the next-best thing—set up shop just outside the city’s defined borders and shake down everyone coming and going, and establish de facto control over the capital that way. To enter the city you have to pay their tolls. To work within it, you have to pay their taxes.” The Wastrel took out her knife and thumbed it. She drew blood, licked it off.

“But aren’t there other guilds? Other cities? The tutorial elf said—”

“She says a lot, and you can’t blame her for it, that’s just how she’s programmed. She’ll tell you about how the game is *supposed* to be, because it *was* supposed to be all that. Full Dive is either incompetent or complicit, because why would they let their immersive, emergent fantasy simulation get taken over by people who came from other games, already organized, and turned their genre-creating megahit into yet another rat race where you’ll never get the cheese? Yeah, there are other guilds, but they’re friend groups at best. No guild can get too big without drawing the eye of the G.Guilds, and anyone who draws the eye of the G.Guilds either joins up or crashes out. No exceptions. Like, uh, what was that one, recently? Undaunted?” Galatea noticed the Warrior stiffen. “They were a pretty big deal. Had the game’s highest level Divine

Knight, Raphael or something. Nobody plays that class. They were grassroots as hell, just doing their own thing, did a lot of outreach to noobs like us, helped people get situated, all that.

“Raphael goes missing, then turns back up as an ERPer. And not just any ERPer—a mobfucker with crazy avatar enhancements. Like *crazy*. They said her boobs were—”

“Shut up.”

“What?”

“I said *shut up*. Her name is Ramiel and her guild is Unprecedented.”

“Oh, a fan? Guild *was* Unprecedented. Last I heard—”

The Warrior decked her. Or tried to. Her fist *should* have connected with the Wastrel’s jaw, Galatea could tell it was a sure hit, a perfect arc, a hook that’d knock some teeth out—but just before contact that perfect arc went wide, and so did the Warrior, hopping on one foot to keep from losing her balance.

“Wow, you really are new,” the Wastrel said, pulling up her legs to crouch on her stool. “Can’t flag up for PvP in an inn. Weird you know about, uh, Rammy, but not how to play the game. You her fan club or something?”

“Are *any* of you wastes of subscription time going to take a quest?” interrupted the barkeep. “Because if you’re not, I’m gonna have to ask you kindly but firmly to get the fuck out of my Goose. That goes for you too, yeah, you in the back, Missy. This isn’t a soup kitchen. Either you’re here for quests or for drinks. If you’re not doing business, stay out of my business. Got it?”

Galatea gulped.

“Go ahead. Take a look,” the Wastrel suggested, gesturing derisively at the quest board, which was a large, dark oak board with a green felt back and around twenty sheets of paper stuck to it with pins of different shapes, colors, and sizes.

“*Transport Cargo, Restock Potion Shelves, Contribute Materials to Guild Hall*. None of these are actual quests—they’re all menial labor!”

The Wastrel just raised her eyebrows. “Except for the last one, which is a mercantile transaction disguised among the others. Welcome to Ardor Online, where the G.Guilds have recreated the labor economy. Oh, you wanted *adventure*? Sorry, you’re working a virtual nine-to-five to help make somebody else accrue virtually more money than God.”

“That just can’t be true,” Galatea moaned, grabbing one of the papers. *Wanted: Skilled Alchemists. Level 50+. 500 Gold/Hour.* “Why is it like this?”

“Oh, you know. Or maybe you just haven’t played enough MMOs to know how it goes: A new game launches, and everything’s great!” The Wastrel held out both her hands, fingers together, palms facing down. “But then some players, who have more time and resources to spend playing, pull ahead.” She flipped one hand palm-up and started raising it. “And the more they pull ahead, the more resources they have. The more resources they have, the more they pull ahead, and the less there is for everyone else.” Her other hand sunk down, the gap between the two growing and growing. “And because there’s naturally so very few of these resourceful players, they all come to know each other. They cooperate with each other, because they know fighting would just give some of the have-nots the chance to get theirs. Power solidifies. Treaties get drafted, bickered over, and eventually signed. Organizations take shape, and those resourceful players transform into a ruling class of elites. They have enough capital to manipulate the auction house. They have enough strength and personnel to police the rare spawns. They control the market, they control the drops, eventually they control Arda itself.” She stopped holding out her lower hand at all and let it drop by her side, while she held her other hand high above her head, fingers curled, reaching beyond the inn’s ceiling to the sky above. “And a game that was meant to be free and fair becomes anything but. Ardor Online is colonized.”

“You seem pretty damn invested for a forum lurker,” the Warrior said, staring hard. “And too well-spoken by half.” The Wastrel just shrugged off her suspicion.

“I’m an *avid* reader, what can I say?”

While they went back and forth, Galatea continued to search the job board for anything resembling a quest. It just couldn’t be like the Wastrel said. Ardor Online had too much potential to be reduced to yet another elitist circlejerk run by player mafias. There had to be at least one normal request. Just one real quest—she didn’t want to start her rise to power by lugging cargo crates around.

“Yes!” The Warrior and the Wastrel looked at her like she was crazy, but Galatea didn’t bother caring. Yes. In lieu of an explanation, she read aloud: “*Investigate Mysterious Cult. All Levels. Party of 3+ Required. Reward based on quality of investigation; 1000 gold minimum. Details available after quest acceptance.*”

“A thousand gold minimum?” the Wastrel asked. “Think that’s per person?”

“Even if it isn’t, I damn sure could use three hundred gold,” the Warrior added. “Party of three-plus required, though, what a pain in the ass. I hate looking for groups.”

The Wastrel looked at the Warrior.

The Warrior looked at Galatea.

Galatea did her best to smile. “Barkeep? We’ll, uh, we’ll take this one on.”

“So it’s your first day playing and you came right to Arda? Rough. Well, at least you got the crash course taken care of. You’d have to find this all out sooner or later, like she did,” Nim said as they walked together through the alleys in the Silver Quarter in search of their sign.

Nimue

[Wee Wastrel]

Lv. 9 Wastrel

STRENGTH: **14**

AGILITY: **30**

PHYSIQUE: **6**

INTELLECT: **12**

WISDOM: **3**

CHARISMA: **25**

Equipment:

Main Hand: **Wastrel’s First Gutter**

Off Hand: **Empty**

Accessory: **Empty**

Head: **Empty**

Chest: **Beginner’s Tunic**

Hands: **Empty**

Waist: **Wastrel Manypouch**

Legs: **Beginner's Pants**

Feet: **Beginner's Boots**

“You’re still using the starter staff? Ditch that shit already. Check your quest log; your first priority quest should be done by now. They can’t tax those, as far as I can tell,” Nahi grumbled. She stopped every so often while they walked to kick something. A pebble, a corner, empty air. Anything, really.

Nahirqo

[Warrior Apprentice]

Lv. 6 Warrior

STRENGTH: **20**

AGILITY: **10**

PHYSIQUE: **25**

INTELLECT: **3**

WISDOM: **10**

CHARISMA: **7**

Equipment:

Main Hand: **Apprentice's Greatsword**

Off Hand: (**Apprentice's Greatsword**)

Accessory: **Empty**

Head: **Empty**

Chest: **Beginner's Tunic**

Hands: **Empty**

Waist: **Beginner's Belt**

Legs: **Beginner's Pants**

Feet: **Beginner's Boots**

“Oh, uh, sure, let me check that.” They kept Galatea between them at all times, whether to protect her or for each to shield herself from the other, or just to keep her from running away, she quite frankly couldn’t be bothered to clarify. The *Investigate Mysterious Cult* quest requirement left them with no wiggle room—nobody else was about to party up with any of them, because Galatea was fresh off the boat, Nahi had an attitude problem, and Nim *also* had an attitude problem, just more elaborately. More than anything else, they were noobs with little gold to their names and even less gear. And apparently, Ardor Online was a game where nobody did anything for you that wasn’t already in their own best interest.

Priority Quest: Join the Party! 🎉 [Difficulty: Trivial]

There it was, in a submenu she hadn’t looked at before. “So what are—?” she began, and Nahi cut her off.

“Weeklies. Do them when you get them because again, they’re the only kind of quest that actually fucking pays.”

“They’re good for EXP and gear,” Nim added, spinning her great big knife around her finger. “Probably where our angry friend got her sword. But since they’re only once a week, they’re not exactly *ideal* for early progression. They scale up, though, and when you get near max level, they pay out *crazy*. And I *have* heard that the system can be a bit buggy—sometimes players will receive priority quests in sequence. I say *bug* because nobody’s figured out how to replicate it—sometimes it just *happens*.”

“I, uh, have another one.”

Nahi stopped. Nim stopped.

“You haven’t even turned in your first one yet,” Nahi said.

“Yeah.” What was she supposed to say? She was the noobiest of the noobs, what did they expect her to know that they didn’t?

“Well, don’t be shy, what’s your second priority quest?” Nim was *very* interested, peering over Galatea’s shoulder but it wasn’t like she could see anything. As far as Galatea could tell, the menus may have *appeared* in the world, but were totally inside her head, which made sense or else public spaces would be unusable with all the UI clutter.

“It’s, uh, *Complete Player Quests Together with Your Party*. Says I’m 0/1 underneath. And, uh, that it’s repeatable.”

“It’s *what*?” the two said in unison, which made Nim giggle and Nahi glare at her.

“Is that a big deal?” Galatea asked helplessly. Seriously, why her? And why did her first party have to be so . . . so . . .

She couldn’t decide between “polarized” or “dysfunctional.” Both.

“It’s a major deal,” Nim said, staring into the empty air just past Galatea now. “Especially considering I have the same quest. You, rage monster, check your priority quest log.”

“Rage mon—?! I’ll beat your ass—”

“Just *check* it.”

“ . . .”

“You have it too, don’t you.”

“What the fuck.”

“Guys!” Galatea couldn’t take it anymore. “Girls? Dudes. Is it really this big a deal? Please, it’s my first day. *Nothing* makes sense to me, so please—explain like I’m dumb?” Without her standing between them, Nahi and Nim had to exchange glances. She *hoped* they were embarrassed by their behavior.

Nim spoke first. “Never during all of my research have I heard about a repeatable priority quest. Recurring quests? Sure. Of course. You get a new quest every week—roughly. There’s some flexibility—the conspiracy-minded players allege the minor fluctuations are tuned to maximize FOMO, fear of missing out, and to keep players either anxious or excited to keep progressing. I haven’t made up my own mind on that quite yet, so I’ll refrain from offering an opinion. Anyway, a recurring quest is normal as can be. You complete it, it goes away, sometime around the weekly server reset you get a similar quest. Normal. But a quest like this—” She gestured at thin air. “—it’s gamebreaking.”

“It’s an infinite money, gear, and experience printer,” Nahi said, leaning against the alley’s brick wall, also staring at a menu Galatea couldn’t see. “Wastrel, what’s the reward on yours?”

“Five thousand experience and a blue helmet.”

“Mine’s two thousand and a green belt. These scale.”

Nimue grinned—then frowned. “Wait, let me check something.”

Nimue (lv9) left the party.

“And it’s gone.” She gave Galatea a searching look. “Reinvite me.”

Nimue (lv9) joined the party.

“And back. You try,” she said to Nahirqo, who grunted.

Nahirqo (lv6) left the party.

Nahirqo (lv6) joined the party.

“Gone and back,” she confirmed, and then they both—Warrior and Wastrel—turned their attention fully to Galatea in a way that made her wonder when she’d be able to learn an invisibility spell.

“So it’s gotta be you, huh?” Nim asked, stroking her chin.

“You some kind of main character or something? Anything you want to share with us? Have you actually been sucked into the game, isekai style? We’re just players, but you’re living it?”

“What? No. No!” Could this get any weirder? “No. I’m just—I bought my DD array this week. I saved up for it for eight months. I bought it from an official distributor at MSRP. It’s normal. I’m normal. Please don’t look at me like that,” she whined, hiding behind her staff.

Nim continued to look at her like that—like she wasn’t telling the truth. Like she had any reason to lie. Like she had any more idea what was going on than they did. Nahi, though, just snorted and kicked off the wall, slinging her sword around her shoulders and resting her arms on it like a yoke. “Lay off, Wastrel. Think it’s pretty clear she doesn’t know shit. She hasn’t even turned in her normal quest yet. Hey, accept the reward already.”

“Oh, I have to—?” Yeah, there was a button beneath her normal(?) priority quest. She tapped it.

Priority Quest: Join the Party Complete! 🎉

Rewards:

+1000 EXP

+10 Gold

Received Witch’s Walking Stick

Galatea reached Level 2!

Learned Spell: Spark

+5 Attribute Points

Galatea reached Level 3!

Learned Spell: Mage Hand

+5 Attribute Points

“There. Make sure you equip your new staff and spend your attribute points,” Nahi said, heading off down the alley.

“Just shove them *all* in Intellect for now.” Nim said, coming up alongside Galatea and prodding her forward after their party member. “Later on you might want to branch out and min/max, but at low levels it’s best to just pump your damage stat. Intellect for Witches, Strength for Warriors, and Agility for Wastrels.”

“Don’t I want at least a little bit of Physique? And what about Wisdom, who uses that?”

“a) You shouldn’t be taking hits in the first place, and you’re never going to be able to as a Witch. b) Promoted classes, which you don’t have to worry about, because when you promote they respec your attribute points for free. For now, all in on INT. Don’t make it more complicated than it needs to be.”

“You must’ve done a, uh, a whole lot of forum lurking.” Nim just snickered, and Galatea looked at her stats. She only had ten points to spend, and even the UI highlighted Intellect for her. But she didn’t want to just crumple after a single hit, so she put eight points into Intellect and the remaining two into Physique, and felt pretty good about her choice.

Better to be careful than careless.

She looked up after allocation to see Nim had left her behind, and Nahi was so far ahead she was nearly around the next bend. “Hey! Wait, uh, wait for me? Aren’t I the party leader?” She grabbed her new staff and scurried after her painfully unique party members.

“So this is the place?” Nahi asked, looking up and down the alley that, in fairness, looked no different from any of the other alleys they’d traveled on their journey deep into the Silver Quarter. Alleys that had emptied out as they went along, until they first stopped passing by other players, and finally even stopped running into (or, ideally, around) NPCs.

“Your hair’s really nice,” Galatea blurted, because the last twenty minutes had passed in almost absolute silence and she couldn’t stand the party atmosphere any longer. Were they or were they not adventuring together? It still counted as adventuring even without leaving the city, right?

“What?” asked Nahi.

“What?” snorted Nim.

“Your hair,” Galatea said again, but even more embarrassed. Might as well commit. “It’s really nice.”

“Sure, whatever. This is the place, right? Just looks like a church.”

“It’s so fluffy,” Galatea said, weakly. “Can I tou—”

She stopped because of the look in Nahirgo’s eyes.

Galatea shut up.

Nim stifled another snort. “Yeah, just looks like a church—but you don’t find that at least a *little* bit weird? A church, *allll* the way down these alleys, so far away from the main drag the devs didn’t even bother to populate the area NPCs? Do we know if this is a player cult?” she asked.

Eager to prove herself useful, Galatea pored over the quest description. “*Investigate the Cult of New Purpose—*”

“She didn’t ask you to read it out loud,” Nahi snapped.

“S—Sorry.” *Investigate the Cult of New Purpose, which has headquartered itself deep in the Silver Quarter. While religious expression is protected in Arda, it is only tolerated so long as it doesn’t interfere with G.Guild interests. Recently the Repurposers (as they apparently call themselves) have engaged in . . . disruptive behavior that threatens S.Saint interests. Even then, little is known about the organization, its goals, its leadership, or even its rank-and-file membership. This quest is an open invitation for adventurers to uncover any pertinent information about the Cult of New Purpose, particularly relating to the organizational categories listed above. Investigate only in groups of 3+.*

Reward subject to commissioner's discretion, but a minimum floor of 1,000 gold is guaranteed for new information, and we are willing to pay as much as ten times that for more comprehensive intelligence.

"It sounds like it's a player organization," Galatea ventured carefully, not wanting Nahi to yell at her again. She had just wanted to compliment her and now the atmosphere had turned even worse!

"Cool," Nim said. "Just making sure. So those two are players, then?" She pointed, and in yet another uncharacteristic-of-who-she-was-trying-to-be reaction to an MMO adventure that just wasn't flowing the way it was supposed to, Galatea gasped.

The twin sisters weren't even that shocking, she just didn't notice them until Nim pointed them out, when really she should have. She called them "sisters" not because they were identical, with the same shiny pink himecuts like her own, how dare they steal her look, except not really, because their bangs were too long, blocking their eyes, looking with their straight sidelocks almost like the black habits they wore.

That was why she called them sisters. Galatea considered herself more spiritual than religious, which sounded like the lazy way out because it was, and she had no problem admitting that. There was *probably* more to life than just living and dying, or if there wasn't there *should* be, but capital-letter Religion required commitment and self-control, and she wasn't good enough at either of those, or practiced enough at hypocrisy, to be faithful. Regardless, she knew a nun when she saw one, doubly so when two stood next to each other, though and perhaps fitting for an MMO, she had never in her life seen women of the cloth so questionably clothed.

They wore their bad habits with pride and beamed eyeless smiles at Galatea & Co. And—of course—they spoke in unison, in voices as velvety soft as their exposed skin. "Welcome, world-weary travelers. Have you come to set your worries aside? Have you come in search of new purpose?"

While Galatea thought of something clever to say, something probing without sounding like it, Nim easily replied, "We are. We heard of a church that removed itself from the power structure choking this city to death, and became curious as to what life outside the G.Guild's purview might look like. I'm Nim, the pouty one is Nahi, and my chubby friend is Galatea."

"Wha—*chubby*? I'm not chubby, I'm full-bodied. *You're* the one that's too skinny! You're built like, like a *twig*! A rake! You have all the curves of a broom handle!"

Nahi laughed, and surprised Galatea first because Galatea didn't think Nahi *could* laugh, and second because if Nahi were somehow miraculously to laugh, she would never have expected it to sound so musical.

Surprising anything at all about Nahi could be so pleasant.

"You must be very good friends," the sisters said, which was how Galatea knew this cult had to be full of crazies, or just plain liars, and gave up the slim hope she'd been incubating that maybe they were going to be investigating a friendly, chill cult—because surely those existed? They couldn't *all* be sex and/or death cults.

Right?

"Come, catechumen, you are welcome to join us. Let us find your new purpose together!" The sisters separated, moving with a unison that'd be unnerving in the real world but one that Galatea could chalk up to mirrored inputs in game, and stood on either side of the party, like escorts.

Or shepherds.

They were women of *some* god, presumably.

An opulent one, apparently, because Galatea had been too absorbed in trying to improve her party's relationship dynamic to take in the church they were set to infiltrate, and realized only as she was ushered inside just how *grand* it was compared to the nondescript alleys they had traversed to find it. She only got a glimpse of the exterior, an impression of tall spires—steeple?—and ornate windows, but the windows existed on the inside, too (which wasn't a given in a virtual world, but Ardor Online did if nothing else live up to its claim as the *immersive* action MMO). If the tutorial cathedral had been awesome and ancient and majestic, this one was richly ornate. Colored light struck a tile floor depicting a pattern Galatea couldn't fully make out beneath the twin rows of wooden pews. Stained glass imparted warm shades of red, pink, and orange, giving the inside of the chapel a bountiful feeling—the warm end of summer when the grain turned to gold and the harvest well underway.

"Are there, uh, any other, um, adherents?" Galatea asked.

"Of course."

Before Galatea could ask where they were—she was making progress with the investigation!—a message popped up.

[Nimue]: It's cute that you're trying to help but let me do the talking, yeah?

[Galatea]: r

[Galatea]: oh itsss harrrd to ttype

[Nahirqo]: Then don't

[Nahirqo]: Just let the schmoozer schmooze

[Nahirqo]: Get schmoozing, schmoozer

[Nimue]: Schmooze commencing!

"Apologies for my blunt and chubby friend," Nim said, putting her 25 Charisma to good use by flashing the sisters a winning smile. "She's actually the one who asked if we wanted to join the—" she paused with believable embarrassment. "We only know what the G.Guilds call you. Is there a name you'd prefer, instead of the Cult of New Purpose?"

"What could describe us better than what we are?" the sisters replied in stereo, clasping their hands together over their chests.

[Galatea]: theyy hhave huge booobs.

[Nahirqo]: Yeah, we noticed

[Nahirqo]: Pretty hard to miss

[Galatea]: i couldn't mmake mmy booobs that bbig

[Nahirqo]: It's a microtransaction

[Nahirqo]: If you want boobs that big

[Nahirqo]: You have to buy them

[Galatea]: hhow muchh?

[Nimue]: Oh my god can you two shut up while I'm schmoozing holy fuck don't make me mute party chat.

"So it's not, like, *offensive* to call you cultists?" Nim asked, playing up her awkwardness to sound genuinely curious.

"As fully fledged members of the cult, we bear the title Convert. I am Sister Revi," said the pink-haired big-boobed nun on the right. "And I am Sister Sway," said the identical pink-

haired big-boobed sister on the left. No matter how hard Galatea looked—and Galatea was looking *hard*—she couldn't find any detail that set Sister Revi apart from Sister Sway.

They were both identically gorgeous. Even with half their faces hidden beneath their pink fringes, Revi and Sway's full lips were perfect for the knowing, rapturous smile that seemed their default expression. Pink lips beneath pink bangs, smiling from faces the same heavy white color as full-fat cream. They were free of blemish—a matter of course, player characters defaulted to beauty—but also free from more than just disfigurement. Other than their prominent lips and subtly upturned noses, the sisters' faces were not so much unremarkable as . . . unmarked. Unembellished. Lacking identifying details—their skin was so smooth and clear that it gave an impression of emptiness, of a lack, of an absence.

They were unquestionably beautiful, even mesmerizingly so, but the sisters shared a featureless beauty that was maybe even more captivating for it.

Because their remarkably unremarkable doll-like faces only accentuated their sinfully developed bodies. Of their bad habits, only the coif and veil were as religious sisters in the real world might wear. Black with white bands above their perfectly cut locks, their veils granted them a legitimacy that the rest of their habit obliterated. They wore no tunics at all, but elaborate, deconstructed scapulars—the apron, or overgarment worn by those of the cloth, reimagined to be as provocative and titillating as possible.

Quite literally **titillating**. The scapular had been broken into several pieces, the top and most prominent piece of which draped over breasts so immense they couldn't possibly hope to be so perky in the real world. Breasts that would **break backs** if they existed under normal gravity, if they didn't belong to video game avatars well capable of bearing the burden of their **big jiggly weight**. And they *were* jiggly. They were oh-so-jiggly. Not even the subtlest movement from Revi or Sway went without an **emphatic wobble** that Galatea was hopeless to resist, because she may possibly remotely potentially just a little bit be into big boobs. She wasn't like a **breast-obsessed lesbian who only dated girls D-cup or bigger who lowkey resented how her party members were a) too trim and muscular and b) obnoxiously flat, respectively** or anything like that.

Everyone liked big boobs, some people just didn't want to admit it. If not everyone liked big boobs, or almost everyone enough that the leftovers didn't really count, why would big boobs be a cosmetic microtransaction that Galatea really badly wanted to look into? Sure, she had been deliberately conservative during character creation because she didn't want to enter the world of AO looking like a total goonbrained porn addict, but now that she could see what **huge**

honkers looked like in engine, in motion, under dynamic lighting, she felt equal parts admiration and yearning.

[Galatea]: oh

[Galatea]: they have

[Galatea]: moles

[Nahirqo]: What? Where. Stop spamming and keep it to one message

[Galatea]: where their tit curtains split in their cleavage just below the amulets Revi has a mole on the right sway has a mole on the left

[Nahirqo]: . . . they have moles where?

But it was true, and neither Nahi nor Nim could criticize her for pointing out the only possible way to tell the twins apart. Without the moles they were a pair of perfect pink hourglasses, because beneath their incredible heavy jiggling boobs and below the glittery pink amulets Galatea *only* noticed because they jostled between the twins' tits, soft wide stomachs much like Galatea's own flared out to thick hips and fat thighs barely covered by the remains of their habitual scapulars—black loincloths that she could swear were ever so slightly transparent, like harem gauze, and even if they weren't, they hung so low she could see the sisters' subtle sacred thongs that together with their loincloths straddled their fleshy hips with a martyr's resignation, thin strappy cloth overwhelmed by sinful meat, but still managing just to hold. Galatea didn't know the sisters had enormous shelf-like asses, but all the material evidence suggested that they must, because there was no preventing the sheer mass around their double-wide hips and mutton thighs from coalescing in a pair of truly tremendous dumptruck asses.

Nim continued to chat them up, and Nahi joined in, but Galatea was stuck staring. She wasn't a gooner, but she was a terminally online nerd, and not just not a stranger to but in fact on quite good terms with internet pornography. She was so terminally online, in fact, that real people just didn't do it for her—real people couldn't be excessive enough. Drawings could, and drawings were what fed the breast obsession she didn't have and if she did it would just be a healthy interest in what was, again, a universally admired and desired secondary sex characteristic.

The twins were hitting Galatea right in the uncanny valley, and her brain just wasn't equipped to deal with VRMMO horniness on this level. Going into AO she had had a loose idea that yeah, the players might get friskier than in other MMOs because of the immersive VR and

physics simulation and all that, and *traditional* MMO players were frisky to begin with, or at least had frisky subpopulations, so it stood to reason that there'd be elements within AO that might be pretty damn horny and not at all interested in hiding it.

She had expected that and tried, she thought, to prepare herself for her first encounter with VR slutttery.

But this was like siccing level 90 mobs on her when she only just finished the tutorial—

Oh.

Right.

She should inspect them.

For the sake of their quest.

Sister Revi <Cult of New Purpose>

[Convert]

Sister Sway <Cult of New Purpose>

[Convert]

Lv. 50 Indoctrinator

STRENGTH: **50**

AGILITY: **10**

PHYSIQUE: **90**

INTELLECT: **10**

WISDOM: **20**

CHARISMA: **115**

Equipment:

Main Hand: **Hand of Blind Faith** (Blessed +5)

Off Hand: **Touch of Submission** (Blessed +5)

Accessory: **Amulet of New Purpose** (Blessed +5)

Head: **Conversion Veil** (Blessed +5)

Chest: **Cultist's Titdrrape** (Blessed +5)

Hands: **Vespers Gloves** (Blessed +5)

Waist: **Cloth of Temptation** (Blessed +5)

Legs: **Sinful Stockings** (Blessed +5)

Feet: **Pious Anklebreakers** (Blessed +5)

That was . . . really, really, weird. It didn't matter if she inspected Revi or Sway, the same character pane popped up. Not *identical panes*, but the *same pane* with glitched UI that somehow fit *both* their names on it. Like the game didn't even recognize them as separate entities. Was this something to worry about? Nahi and Nim knew more than her, and surely *they'd* have inspected the sisters by now, if Galatea had allowed herself to be **so distracted** and only just remembered to do it. She didn't know how customizable character sheets could be—while the job title **Indoctrinator** with its bright pink text set off warning bells in her brain, maybe it was actually normal? Plenty of games used pink as a rarity color.

She also remembered reading how Ardor Online had a whole suite of customization tools baked into the game to facilitate immersive roleplay—was this that? She knew other games had RP add-ons that let players pimp out their profiles (sometimes horribly literally). So was she reading too much into this?

“So to join the cult we just have to put these on?” Nim's voice drew Galatea out of her head and back to (virtual) reality. She held up an amulet identical to those nestled between the sisters' boobs, a gold chain and a pink diamond pendant that captured and reflected so much of the chapel's light it **glowed**.

“Yes,” the sisters said, squashing their breasts as they reached to cradle their own amulets in their hands. “These amulets are essential to our religion. They signify each member's willingness to submit to their new purpose, their desire to change, and their hope for a new future. This world, as you well know, has been shackled by stagnant forces. The G.Guilds rule over a never-changing status quo, where they have everything, and you nothing. The Cult of New Purpose was born out of the need for change—for not just Arda but this entire world to be liberated from the mundane greed of the G.Guilds.”

“Yeah, I can totally get behind that sentiment,” Nim said, nodding along, and Galatea wasn't sure how much of it was part of her act. “The G.Guilds are killing this game, just like they killed the games they abandoned in order to take over AO. They're parasites who don't care one bit about the health of their host—only about the thrill of money, power, and the abuse of both. They'll suck all the magic out of AO, then jump to the next game, and repeat the process

infinitely. Does your cult ever plan on taking direct action against them? I can get behind ‘seeking a new future’ and all that, but AO will never be free until the G.Halls are torn down. And *do* forgive me for being so confrontational, but you two just don’t strike me as the violent type.”

[Nahirqo]: You’re supposed to be schmoozing. Pump them for information so we can get out. I didn’t come here planning to join a cult for real.

[Nimue]: Religious fanatics love when you give them the opportunity to play apologetics. Trust me, this is very much still within the realm of schmoozing. And don’t you think they have a point? Being a self-described cult aside, SOMEBODY has to do something about the G.Guilds. Maybe we could hijack their organizational structure and mount some real, actual resistance for a change.

[Galatea]: uh guys i think there’s something off about them

[Nahirqo]: No shit dumbass

[Nimue]: Yeah, did you forget they’re cultists? Despite my dear Nahi’s assertions, I DO know our mission here still. I’m hearing the Wonder Twins out, then we make an excuse to bail, and once we’re safely away we can talk about next steps.

[Galatea]: no i mean

[Nahirqo]: Shush. Just go back to ogling their tits, perv. Let the adults run the quest

Galatea was of two minds. One mind thrilled with the electric razor sharpness of danger. The sisters were skeeving her out in a big way—maybe she’d get used to stuff like this as she played the game more, but the whole stereo-speech and matching avatars and matching character sheets thing was weird. Really, really weird. And while she wasn’t really sure if she liked Nahi and Nim—their only common ground seemed to be picking on her—Galatea didn’t want to be the kind of person who let bad things happen to people just because they were mean to her. She’d air her complaints to them later, and in an ideal world they’d be able to work things out like the adults Nahirqo claimed them to be, but being fed up with their constant jabs and general prickliness wasn’t enough of an excuse for Galatea to let them walk face-first into . . . she didn’t really know what, but *something*. Whatever it was. That was her first mind.

Her second mind wanted very badly to do exactly what Nahi told her to. To let the adults run the quest while she **ogled the twins’ twins**. They were temptation manifest. Their bodies were made to be looked at—almost certainly, because why else would you buy cosmetic

microtransactions? This wasn't real life—if a player looked a certain way, it was a choice, and the sisters chose to **bounce around** with **giant tits** barely covered by nun outfits that would make a slutty Halloween costume retailer clutch their pearls and send their local representative a strongly worded letter about the steadily slipping standards of public decency.

She had two choices—sit back and stare, or be a hero. And in the game world, if not in real life, Galatea yearned to be a hero.

“Hey, uh! Nim, I don't think you should—”

But a hero always arrived just in time, while Galatea was a little too late.

“Hm?” Nim already had the amulet over her head. She put it on—

Nimue equipped Amulet of New Purpose.

—and nothing happened. No flash of light, no sudden screaming or falling to her knees. She looked at Galatea with a diplomatically neutral expression, like she was trying very hard not to laugh or smile or call her embarrassing. She hooked her thumb around the amulet's chain and snuck her a wink.

[Nimue]: Can you PLEASE trust me to know what I'm doing?

Galatea swallowed hard and nodded and then it was Nahi's turn. Sister Sway produced an amulet and held it out to the Warrior, who grunted unhappily but took it and put it on. It glinted dully around her neck, nowhere near as exciting as the twins' amulets with their constant **bouncing**. Despite her trepidation, Galatea had to admit the amulets looked really normal on Nim and Nahi—cheap and tacky, but harmless.

Nahirqo equipped Amulet of New Purpose.

Harmless and normal but when the sisters turned their attention to her Galatea's gut screamed to run away. Something about the four women standing in a row with their amulets glittering, the four of them standing together with Galatea apart, othered, alienated.

“I think I'm just gonna go, if that's okay,” she said, inching toward the door. The chapel's emptiness had turned oppressive. Where were the other parishioners? Why were Revi and Sway the only ones there?

Nim stepped forward with conciliatory hands and a wry smile. “Galatea, did you forget why we came here?”

“Don't go getting cold feet now,” Nahi grumbled, moving to cut her off.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” the sisters said in their voice that did nothing but make Galatea more and more certain she should be more and more worried. “The Cult of New Purpose has a place for everyone. Unlike the world outside, we are accepting. We accept your trepidation, Galatea. We embrace your apprehension. And still, we welcome you. We will help you find new purpose.”

Cult talk. Definitely cult talk. And Nahi and Nim were just nodding along with it, like it wasn’t creepy at all. Fuck subtlety, it was time to run. She turned and tripped over Nim’s outstretched foot.

“We just *can’t* have you ditching us,” she explained with a shrug.

“We only get the priority quest when you’re in the party,” Nahi added, before planting her foot on Galatea’s back. She could barely breathe. “Stop making a scene, we’re trying to fit in here.”

“You’re fitting in . . . a little too well!” Galatea groaned, trying to wriggle her way free, but Nahi was much too strong.

“Please!” the sisters cried with what sounded like genuine distress. “Unhand your rogue sister. She knows not what she does, so enslaved is she by the G.Guilds’ wickedness.” They rushed over, **audibly**, but Galatea didn’t feel any comfort from their worry.

“I only just started playing today! What enslavement! What wickedness! What’s *wrong* with this game!”

Nim and Nahi stared down at her like strangers. Which they *were*, damn it, they were all strangers, and Galatea was an idiot for thinking for even a moment that their dysfunctional party had the makings of *anything* at all, let alone meaningful friendship. Stupid, stupid, idealistic and *stupid*. She had wanted it too much—wanted to meet special people and forge special friendships and go on special adventures together, and her wanting had landed her in whatever mess this was. On the floor with a boot between her shoulders and two **crazy stacked nuns** drawing closer.

“Release Sister Galatea,” they ordered, and Nahi did just that, though not without one of her signature dissatisfied grunts. Before she could scramble away, Revi and Sway picked her up and each hugged one of her arms.

Squish.

Which placed Galatea between the twins in a way simultaneously **hellish** and **divine**. Belatedly, Galatea realized the Revi and Sway were even taller than she was—which put them at six and a half, maybe even seven feet tall. The empty church with its vaulted ceiling had made them appear shorter. But no, now she realized they were exactly the **wrong** height.

Squish.

“It was never our intention for you to come to harm,” the sisters said as their bare breasts attempted to swallow Galatea’s head. “Please understand that your sisters only did what they felt necessary. We all want what’s best for you. You are so lost, Galatea. Lost in this world. We are so happy to have found you.”

They were creepy.

Squish.

They were weird.

Squish.

They were **so fucking soft**.

Squish.

But that didn’t mean Galatea couldn’t fight back. She had two spells, Spark and Mage Hand, and though she hadn’t been able to try out either she had absolutely nothing to lose trying it now.

Squish.

Come to think of it, she hadn’t had a chance for *any* combat. She spawned, walked to town, and volunteered for this quest hoping to earn some gold so she could buy some gear and—ugh, RPG treadmill nonsense. How hard could it be? Ardor Online’s love for immersion surely wouldn’t extend to something like making magical spells really hard to cast, right? That’d be so unfair to Witches if their main mechanic was more involved than a Warrior or Wastrel swinging her weapon.

Squish.

God it was like they were trying to **squeeze** the resistance out of her. Why didn’t they just put the necklace on her? What made her any different?

“Oh Lord, let this poor lost soul welcome Your guidance into her heart. Soften her stubborn mind.” Revi—she thought it was Revi, Revi had her mole on the . . . left? No, right was Revi. Rs. Revi put her hand on Galatea’s head—what little of it crested above their massed cleavage—and oooooooooough.

Ohhhhhhh it felt gooooooooood.

Squish. Squish. Squish. Crackle.

Something was—was *happening*. She knew it was, the something, it was happening but she didn’t know what it was, she couldn’t quite put her finger on it because it was Revi’s fingers on her that tingled so gooooooooood. Like a deep deep deep deep scalp massage targeting her brain. Galatea couldn’t help but smile.

Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Tickle. Crackle. Tingle.

Wait.

Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish.

Targeting her brain.

Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish.

Revi was trying to—okay, she didn’t know what, but it was *bad*, whatever it was, it had to be, because the creepy nun was targeting her brain! God, how could she be so stupid! She struggled—Sway had wedged Galatea’s staff where her thighs met her ass, crosswise, and in the process forced Galatea’s hand between her legs. She had very soft, very squishy thighs, and that was no doubt part of the trap. The sisters were a trap and she had to break free, before—

Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish.

Her eyes rolled back in her head. This was the *best* thing she’d ever felt short of plain sexual pleasure, whether in the real world or here in a deep drop. It was just so *much* and all around her. Huge boobs in her face, silky thighs pinching her hands, and those magic fingers scratching her scalp. It was all so bad but it felt so good. It’d be so easy for her to just stop thinking and submit. To just let the pretty big boob sisters do with her what they wished, because how could people that pretty with such big boobs have anything bad in mind for her, and how could she have anything in mind at all, really.

Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish. Squish.

What was she even fighting, again? Did she honestly want *not* to be squished between Revi and Sway's pious perky breasts while her hands could feel up more holy thighmeat than she could ever handle and her brain tingled so good? What, exactly, about any of this was all that bad? Was she stupid?

[illegible]

She was stuck making **stupid faces**. She knew she was, because she knew she couldn't not under so much **pressure**. The sisters embraced her with **crushing** fervency, pressing themselves to her with such zealous disregard for decency that the only parts of her possibly left visible were her feet—with her on her tip-toes as if she yearned to be **taken up into the fold**. Her feet, and however much of her head poked out above their boobs—the small patch of silky white hair that Revi scratched and massaged with her gloved fingers that felt so good.

Galatea had to—

Squish.

She had to—

Squish.

Cast a spell.

Squish.

While she was still able.

Squish.

She knew exactly what she had to do.

Galatea casts Mage Hand!

Galatea casts Mage Hand!

Squish. Grope. Squish. Grope.

The **only bad thing** about the sisters smothering her like this was that she couldn't grab their asses. She was so curious, she *needed* to know if their asses were as big as their boobs. As **big** and as **soft** and as **heavy**—she just had to know. They had her hands trapped between their legs, but she could still get her hands on their asses.

Gropegropegropegropegropegropegropegropegropegropegrope.

She was delighted, not surprised, to find Revi and Sway's asses **marshmallowy soft** and **squishy**. Her telepathic hands **sank in** and started **kneading** as hard as she could. Galatea may have only had a measly 7 strength, but she was grabbing them with her mind which let her really flex her—

Galatea

[New Arrival]

Lv. 3 Witch

STRENGTH: 7

AGILITY: 9

PHYSIQUE: 7

INTELLECT: 18

WISDOM: 8

CHARISMA: 4

18 intellect. 18? Was that right? She'd put more points into Intellect than that, hadn't she? It wasn't an alarming discrepancy or anything—Galatea could grope the sisters just fine with 18 intellect. 18 intellect was more than she needed, frankly. It just wasn't the number she remembered—and it was red? Was a red number good or bad? She just didn't know enough about Ardor Online to make these kinds of judgements—that was exactly why she needed to stick to people more knowledgeable than she was, like Nim and Nahi.

“Oh Lord, grant this soul simplicity. Relieve her of her errant thoughts, the distractions that keep her from discovering her new purpose.”

Galatea didn't understand why the twins were praying for her, but she appreciated the sentiment. They, unlike her party members, really did seem to care for her wellbeing. Nim and

Nahi were knowledgeable, sure, but they were also jerks. Nahi was angry all the time—probably at herself most of all, but she tried taking it out on Nim, but Nim was too good at dodging her anger, so she was learning to target Galatea instead. She didn't like that. And Nim—Galatea didn't know what her deal was, exactly. She was a know-it-all and Galatea didn't buy her story about lurking the AO forums. There was more to her that she wasn't sharing, and it made Galatea feel like Nim thought herself above her party members. Like she and Nahi were just means to an end, tools to be discarded.

“Oh Lord, ease this mind's burden. Her intellect betrays her and leads her to unhappiness. Let new purpose wash over her, and free her from the prison of intellectualism.”

Galatea groaned in pleasure as Sway's hand joined Revi's. Together the sisters massaged Galatea's scalp and she couldn't help it—her eyes rolled back in her head. It was like their fingers could literally send **thoughts and prayers** into her head just by stroking it. Galatea redoubled her efforts to ~~escape~~ **maul fat nun asses**, but despite a desire higher than ever, she just couldn't put the same oomph into molesting the nuns as before. It wasn't that they were any less **addictively soft**.

INTELLECT: **8**

WISDOM: **5**

She just **couldn't** seem to **focus** on her spell. **And did she really need to?** She had accomplished her goal—she ~~failed to escape~~ confirmed that the sisters did indeed have **big fat asses** to match their **big fat titties**. With her mind at ease, was there anything left for her to do but **relax** and **let it happen**? Was she really so boorish that she'd try and break free from a **twin double breast press**? Now *that* would be **truly stupid**. Dimly, distantly, and most of all unimportantly, she heard Nahi speaking.

“Why can't you just put the amulet on her and be done with it already? How come Chubby gets special treatment?”

“Read the item description, meathead. No, I guess that's too much to ask, isn't it? The amulet has no effect if it's forced on. She has to *choose* to accept her new purpose,” was Nim's equally unimportant reply.

Unimportant, and certainly nothing to panic over—but didn't that mean she could keep the sisters squishing on her so long as she didn't agree to wear one of their amulets? Not that there was anything wrong or suspicious about their amulets—Galatea knew now for a fact they were **totally normal trinkets** with **no special effects**. If Nahi or Nim thought they were, well, they

were **just being stupid**. Really, wearing the amulet or not wearing it, Galatea had no strong feelings. **It wouldn't hurt her to put it on** if they asked, but it felt like a pretty clever scheme to **pretend she didn't want to** if that meant she could get more of this **exceptional personal attention** from Revi and Sway.

"No matter what you do to me," she declared safely from the confines of their paired bosoms, where her scheming smile couldn't be seen to give her away, "I'll *never* accept your amulet! It'll probably, uh, make me stupid or something!"

She stifled a giggle at that, which was very easy to do since she had plenty of **nunmeat** handy with which to muffle herself. Now they had no choice but to—

"Oh Lord, forgive Your servants their failure and grant this soul Your salvation. We beseech Thee intercede on her behalf and save her from false reality!"

—really. She wanted them to fuss over her, but they didn't need to take it *that* far—

A strange light filled the cathedral, so bright not even Revi and Sway's bodies shielded her from it, a light so bright it **burned itself** into her vision, a bright **dazzling light** that made everything move like a flipbook, **strobing light** that made her blink and blink and **blink it in**, so **beautifully bright** and **inescapable**. She heard Nim call out, and Nahi, and the sister sisters prayed with words too fast for Galatea to comprehend, and she was squished between them but still could see the light, as if it were **pouring directly into her eyes from elsewhere**, and it was so bright that she passed out.

Galatea awoke as someone else.

Someone else with a pounding headache. Not just a pounding headache, she realized after a moment's consciousness and evaluation—that person suffered from a full-body soreness all the way down to her bones. She groaned with a voice that didn't sound quite right and looked around. In front of her, a contraption she half-recognized—a tall framework cylinder with a technological exoskeleton suspended inside. A Deep Drop array. The knowledge came to her distantly, something somebody else knew and she had just picked up in passing. The body that wasn't hers stank, so she struggled to her feet—despite the soreness—and took a long, hot shower, all the while experiencing constant, high-intensity déjà vu. She knew her way around the apartment, even though she would have sworn this was the first time she'd ever been there.

After, she spent some time staring at the woman's face in the mirror. It wasn't hers. She knew she had snow white hair and ice blue eyes, and this woman was just too plain. She wasn't ugly—worse, she was unremarkable. An instantly forgettable face, with tired eyes, a sharp nose, puffy cheeks, and a narrow jaw, and so she instantly forgot that face when she stepped out of the steamy bathroom wrapped in a fluffy green towel in search of something fresh to wear.

The woman's clothes, too, were plain and forgettable. She helped herself to undergarments not worth mentioning, as well as a pair of comfortable black boyshorts and a same-colored cutoff top. Practical, if not particularly striking.

The television set had been left on—television, another thing she knew, but distantly. Television was a thing that existed, but not something she had personal experience with. Or so she felt. Whoever had been watching had left it on a news channel, and now a serious-faced man read from a teleprompter:

“Ms. Johnson is the fifteenth confirmed case of what scientists are calling Deep Drop Dissociative Disorder, or DDDD. ‘Deep Drop’ refers to the full-body pseudosensorial virtual reality apparatus that first entered consumer markets three years ago—despite protests from certain members of the medical field, who at the time raised concerns about the DD’s direct nervous interface, still a black box protected by patent today. Symptoms of DDDD are many, but the first is an overreliance on virtual stimuli and, as the condition’s name suggests, a disassociation from rea—”

She turned it off. Something about looking at him made her sick. His face was either too real or not real enough, she didn't know which, but just looking at him made her uneasy. People didn't really look like that, did they?

Halfway through what she supposed was breakfast without actually checking the time of day the realization hit her like a bodkin arrow to the skull.

She was her.

“Ow. Ow ow ow ow.” The world *shifted* as she remembered herself. She wasn't Galatea. She was—well, that didn't matter. She knew who she was. “Ow.” Her headache spiked, then vanished, leaving her with phantom head pain and all too much lingering body pain. “How long was I dropped?” she wondered. Where was her phone?

Charging on her nightstand, where she distantly remembered setting it. She hadn't wanted there to be any interruptions in her first drop. “About a day, huh?” Minus however long she had spent passed out on the floor. The user's manual for her DD array strongly urged no

more than a two-hour session to start off, but what could you even accomplish in two hours, anyway? Maybe that limit made sense for other games but for an MMO?

And how could *anyone* avoid binging Ardor Online?

She thanked her past self for having the foresight to cash in on her PTO. Getting a temp to cover for her was a pain in the ass, but worth it. Not only was she not missing work, she was getting paid to get right back into the game. “Though, ow. Maybe not so long this time.” After cleaning up her dishes, she did a quick circuit around her apartment—just in case there was something she forgot. Nope. She had given her place a thorough deep clean before the technicians delivered and installed her DD. Not so much as a stray soda can for her to pick up now, though the cleanliness emphasized just how *little* she owned. A couch that she crashed on when she couldn’t make it all the way to her bed after a long day. A TV that only had basic cable, because who even watched television anymore? If she had people over (she didn’t, ever) she could cable her laptop to the TV set and play whatever off it. A compact kitchenette with a fridge that existed in a perpetual state of half-full trending toward empty. Her last roommate was a fridge stuffer and after dealing with science projects molding at the back of the shelf for months at a time, she had adopted a minimalist approach to grocery shopping. If it wasn’t going to eat it within a week, it needed to be indefinitely shelf stable. Complete the image with an empty sink and full drying rack (a strict habit developed in response to the same prior roommate), and then a cramped but functional bathroom and that was her apartment.

Unremarkable and unimpressive, just like her. Her time in Ardor Online really underlined it. She was a nobody. In the real world she was just herself. “But in there, I can be anyone. I can be exactly who I want to be. I can matter.” She only half-believed it, but she also had to. She never had a chance in the real world to begin with. She wasn’t born into money, had no famous or influential parents. Whatever she tried to accomplish, she’d be trying in a zero-sum game where other players had long ago gathered up all the resources. She’d be building herself up with the scraps they left behind.

Sure, it was a pretty big hit to learn just how similarly Ardor Online mirrored real-world stratification of wealth and power under the G.Guilds, but that was a problem she could solve. Or contribute toward solving. A virtual world, unlike the real one, actually *did* run on logic and rules. It was a true system which meant while the odds were long, they were still fair. Besides, there were already those taking a stand against G.Guild exploitation, like—

“Ow, ow, ow.”

—her headache returned, interrupting the thought. It was funny—when she first woke up she couldn't even remember herself. Now, she could barely remember what she did as Galatea. As if she and her video game avatar were different people leading different lives. How ridiculous. She was Galatea, and Galatea was her. The only difference was that Galatea was prettier, taller, had better hair, could cast magic spells, and had friends.

But Galatea was still her so she was all those things, too. Just not in the real world, which was all the more reason to get back in game. She had important people waiting for her.

Important people and four friend requests. She spared one final look around her apartment, wistful without knowing why, before she stuck her face into the DD rig and let it take her, somewhat literally. When active, the DD array looked like an artist's rendition of a medieval torture device. To simulate a full range of motion she had to hang off the ground with resistance bands tightening and loosening to emulate strain and gravity. It was a bit like a technological cocoon, which she thought was fitting, because only by entering DD array could she metamorphose into a fuller, truer self.

Four friend requests, though. Not bad after just one day in the virtual world!

Nahirgo (8) **Accept/Deny**

Nimue (10) **Accept/Deny**

Revi (50) **Accept/Deny**

Sway (50) **Accept/Deny**

Popular, popular! It annoyed her that Nahi and Nim had been playing and getting levels while she was offline, buuuuuut she couldn't say for certain that she wouldn't have done exactly the same had she not passed out last night.

Nahirgo (8) **Accepted!**

Nimue (10) **Accepted!**

Why *did* she pass out, again? Everything after they found the church was so blurry. She remembered the twins were all over her—Galatea had some serious animal magnetism going on, huh? The twins were all over her, and they were all having a great time, and then—blank. Huh. Well, that was something she could worry about later—or better yet just *ask* them, keep building her rapport with the stacked sisters.

Revi (50) **Accepted!**

Naturally, she just wanted to be good friends with them for reasons that had nothing at all to do with their virtually enormous holy knockers. Their virtually enormous holy knockers were definitely a pleasant benefit to their friendship, but really, she just wanted to hear them out some more. They sounded like they had good ideas, and if she could listen to a few of those good ideas for a couple hours while nestled comfortably between sister-nun tits—well, what else were friends for?

There. Domestic and social obligations sorted out. Nothing stopping her from loading into AO to spend another sixteen hours as her better self.

Nothing stopping her staring at the loading screen. ©

“Gwuh?” She didn’t remember the loading screen looking like that, but she also **didn’t really mind** the change. It was like . . . a visual representation of what she felt as she **dropped** out of meatspace and into **superior virtual reality**. Like Alice, tumbling head over heels down the rabbit hole in search of Wonderland. Though unlike Alice, this was **exactly what she wanted**. Staring at the loading screen helped her forget she was a body strapped into an apparatus with an optical input device covering her head. Staring at the loading screen let her **forget all that boring shit** so she could focus on what really mattered: **getting back in the game**.

Staring into her screen she forgot her soreness.

She forgot she was off work, because she forgot about work completely.

She forgot her dissociative episode, because she forgot herself again.

She was so much happier forgetting herself.

“She” was just a weight. A burden. A mass of obligations and anxieties.

Galatea was better off without her.

Galatea was better than her, period.

Galatea was taller than her, prettier, had four amazing friends already and surely she’d get even more.

“She” was just an annoying prerequisite.

Galatea would be better off if she made herself scarce.

She needed Galatea, of that she had no doubt.

But *did Galatea need her?*

Staring, she forgot that question too, and felt so much better.

Welcome Back, Galatea!

“So good to *be* back,” she said—to an empty chapel. Galatea rolled her shoulders, relishing in how *right* this body felt compared to the one she was seconds away from forgetting existed at all. Yup, there, *fully immersed*. She knew she was playing a game, of course she knew that, but everything outside the game *just didn’t matter* to her anymore. She was here to adventure, earn experience, get fat loot, and make even more friends!

Speaking of friends. “Where *is* everybody?” Neither Nim nor Nahi were there to greet her like she’d hoped, and she didn’t see Revi or Sway around either—she didn’t think those two capable of hiding behind the pews or pillars with bodies like theirs, and neither did she think they *would*. Sure, maybe she indulged a little too much in her own delusions of grandeur to have expected everyone waiting with bated breath for her to log back in—but even an informal welcoming party would have been so nice and thoughtful!

And sure, Nim and Nahi weren’t exactly nice or thoughtful—but they could be rehabilitated, she was sure of it. Nahi *obviously* had some unresolved trauma resulting in the chip on her shoulder, and once Galatea worked that out with her they’d be inseparable. Similarly, once she earned her trust, Nim would share her secrets with Galatea and the two of them would be thick as thieves. And once she was best friends with each of them, she could work on resolving their interpersonal friction. Yes, things were rough between them all—but they had only just met! No, not met—they had been cast together by fate itself, and naturally there would be some discomfort as they navigated their new lifelong friendships.

Would they have sent her friend requests if they didn’t feel the same, deep down? No. Those friend requests were *actually* their way of asking forgiveness for how they treated her. Calling her chubby when she was very, very attractively plump—really, it spoke more to their insecurities than anything else. But Galatea would help them with that, too. There was nothing Galatea couldn’t do.

Except, it seemed, find where it was everyone went. Absent her friends the chapel was oppressively silent—more like a graveyard at midnight than a place of worship. “So, uh, anybody else here? Any other New Purpose people, or whatever?” Her voice caught in the vaults overhead and echoed back at her, sounding as thin and nervous as she felt. There was *something*

there, she could feel it. Not a presence so much as a suggestion of presence. Like when you played a -vania game and could just *tell* the room you were in had a secret.

Galatea approached the altar, wincing at how loud her footfalls sounded. She was the only thing breaking the church's absolute silence. She carefully made her way up the three wide steps to the sanctuary, admiring the altar's bigness.

It was this huge thing, a solid slab of milky white stone shot through with veins of inky black. A gold-trimmed altar cloth lay cast over it, with elaborate fringes dangling halfway down its height, and atop the altar cloth were some tall and expensive candlesticks, a dish full of . . . something, and a cross.

A cross that had eyes, which was pretty weird.

Not eyes that tracked her as she approached, thank God, but eyes like gemstones studded into the, oh, two-foot-tall thing? It was big, obviously the centerpiece, and eerie. Why did a cross need eyes?

Ironically, perversely, Galatea couldn't keep from staring at it as she approached. It was just so **weird**. Sure, cross on the altar, she was with the program up until it had eyes. And not just, like, eyeballs or whatever—**swirly eyes** that reminded her of **something she had already long forgotten**. Tugging on the strings of recollection as she stepped closer to the altar, no longer caring to quiet her steps, because the cross was just so **weird** and **she had to get a better look at it**. She had to **gaze upon it**.

Cult Cross casts an unknown spell!

(INT failure) Galatea failed to identify the spell!

(WIS failure) Galatea failed to resist the spell!

She smiled. It was just simple **harmless** curiosity. She had **nowhere else to look**, really, not with the chapel so empty. The stained-glass windows and high arches just weren't all that interesting compared to the swirl-eyed cross. The stained-glass windows she had never really noticed depicted **broad figures** in various **acts of worship**. The kind of stuff that would usually get patched out or banned from User Generated Content submissions, but she didn't have to wonder if Ardor Online had a very loose adult content policy because she never even noticed the **stained-glass-blown bimbos** to begin with. Her first visit she hadn't been able to take her eyes off Revi and Sway, and this time the odd cross **gazing into her** had all her attention. She reached out—

“Catechumen Galatea! What a pleasure it is to see you again so soon!”

—and jolted free of the spell that bound her. Metaphorically speaking, of course. **There was no actual spell involved.** There was just one sister speaking to her this time and she had a mole on her left tit, which meant she was Sway. “Hello, Sway,” she said, keeping her eyes glued to that identifying mole. She couldn’t let it out of her sight else she might forget who she was talking to, which would be terribly rude of her. Best to keep staring at her tits so the mole couldn’t escape. “Your sister isn’t with you?”

“My sister is always with me,” she said despite physical evidence to the contrary. “I came to get you when I saw you were online. I prayed for your swift return, but faith serves the prudent best, and I hadn’t anticipated you’d only take such a short break.” She smiled the smile of one who knew religious mysteries, and was eager to dispense divine wisdom to those who could stomach sermons.

“Yes, well,” Galatea told Sway’s breasts, “I guess I just couldn’t stay away. You know. It’s, uh, it’s better in here, than . . .” she trailed off, not wanting to mention it.

“Better in here than *other places*, yes,” Sister Sway nodded as if Galatea were very wise. “You’ll find that a common sentiment among our commune. The Cult of New Purpose is populated by those disillusioned and disappointed by the world outside.” She made a sweeping motion toward the big church doors, but trusted Galatea to know what she really meant.

“So, uh, where are the others?”

“Sister Revi has already escorted Proselytes Nahirgo and Nimue to where they need to be. It takes some time to adjust to life among the collective. New purpose comes to all in time, but not to all equally, or easily. They require guidance, which my sister provides.”

“Commune, collective,” Galatea repeated, keeping a neutral face. “So you’re like, one of *those* cults, then?” She didn’t know how to pantomime what she wanted to say without saying.

“I’m afraid I don’t follow, Catechumen Galatea.”

“That’s fine. Why am I a catechumen and they’re proselytes?”

“Because they have accepted their new purpose, at least symbolically, while you yet hesitate.”

Sway **jiggled** and it sort of came back to her. “Right, the necklaces.” The necklaces and her **pretend resistance** because she wanted the sisters to keep rubbing up on her. A masterful plan befitting a Witch of her great intellect. Crazy how she kept forgetting these things. One

would think a high Intellect stat would correlate to good memory, but her recollection was totally shot! Chalk it up to first-time dropper disorientation, she supposed.

“Though I can see you are more than just passingly interested in finding your new purpose,” Sway said, smiling quite sweetly at her as she reached out—to pull her close for a kiss? No, to touch her hair. Galatea had no one to blame for her dashed expectations save herself, but she still felt a little bitter. “It’s a lovely new color isn’t it? That much closer to your new purpose.”

“Huh? Oh. When did that happen?” Galatea had only *just* logged in, and hadn’t she taken stock of herself after the loading screen? Her hair was supposed to be snow white.

So why was it **bubblegum pink**?

“My sister and I have high hopes for you, Catechumen Galatea. Despite your hesitance, you are still closer to the ideal than your peers. You still will not take the vow?” she asked, stroking Galatea’s cheek. It was hard—no, impossible to believe that what she felt was just simulated sensation. The silk dragging against her skin was **more real than reality**. How much hardware did it take for them to be able to render feeling? She could lean in—she did lean in—and the sensation grew stronger as she cuddled Sway’s hand.

“Oh, the vow? Is that what the necklace thing is all about? Yeah, uh, I’ll never take the vow! Or something like that.” She was an adventurer, not an actress. Nim probably could have sold it better, but did she need to convince Sway she was unwilling, or did she just have to say no? If the sisters had high hopes for her, that meant they weren’t going to give up easily, right? So she didn’t have to play hard to get *convincingly*. She just had to play period. “Never *ever*. No matter how much you try to convince me.”

“Catechumen Galatea.” This was the closest Sister Sway had ever sounded to offended. “The Cult of New Purpose does not convince new followers. We do not persuade our proselytes. We do not kidnap our converts. Faith that is forced upon someone fades away at first light.”

“Is that, uh, written in your scriptures somewhere?” Galatea wondered how many holy books she could stuff between those holy tits. “And isn’t proselytizing just convincing people to join your faith? I’m not sure how I’m wrong on this.”

“You are not wrong, Catechumen Galatea. Come with me,” she said, turning away and robbing Galatea of her unobstructed view of her tits. But at the same time allowing Galatea to appreciate her wide, swaying ass, so she’d survive somehow. “The duty of a full convert is to teach. I’m sure you have taken note of my and my sister’s class.”

“Indoctrinator sounds kinda bad.”

Sister Sway smiled back at her. “Only to the unenlightened. ‘Indoctrinate’ carries an oppressive connotation, but have you ever truly examined the word beyond the surface level? ‘Indoctrinate’ simply means to instill a comprehensive understanding of doctrine. No more, no less.”

“Indoctrination is usually pretty coercive though, right?”

Sway rearranged the items on the altar, twisting the candlesticks and shifting the eyeball cross that would have **grabbed her attention** if Sway’s **stuck out ass** wasn’t much more immediately interesting to her.

“I know you’re not like, a *real* religion or anything, so you don’t have, like, vows of chastity or anything, do you?” Galatea’s hands were so terribly empty. She wanted so badly to grab it.

“There is only one sin and it is stagnation. Do you yearn for my body, Catechumen Galatea?” She swung her hips, once, in a mesmerizing arc, and Galatea’s digitized soul nearly left her simulacra body.

“Yeah,” she managed, after swallowing her drool. “Yeah, I think I yearn. I yearn *hard* for your body, Sister Sway. Can I—?”

“You may not,” she said, twisting the altar bowl before straightening up. A grinding sound came from behind Galatea but keeping Sway in view was more important. The sister’s body in motion was a poem. Or pornography. One of those.

“But before—”

“Yes, before. You should know that there are no restrictions on carnality within the Cult of New Purpose, and neither are we disallowed to partake of the pleasures of the flesh with those not yet indoctrinated. Sister Revi and I did what we did in full accordance with our faith.”

“So why not?” Galatea whined.

“Because you’re playing hard to get,” Sway replied, with a smirk more clever than pious. “And it is only fair that I do the same. You can take me—*after* you take your vows.”

“See, that’s so totally coercive!” Galatea complained, stomping her foot. “You can’t just be so sexy and dressed like that and *moving around* like that, you *know* what you’re doing to me and now you’re using that against me it’s not fair!”

“Yes, well, perhaps if you had at all been subtle in your obsession over our bodies, or more agreeable during your party’s induction rite, you wouldn’t be in this terrible situation, would you, Catechumen Galatea? Similarly, if you weren’t attracted to other women, I’d have no means by which to coerce you.”

Galatea choked on that. “Are you saying it’s *my* fault I’m—?”

“A raging lesbian? Of course not. That’s simply who you are, and we accept that part of you, Catechumen Galatea. Homosexuality is no sin within this church.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“Oh, don’t be so sour. I never said you couldn’t continue to molest me with your gaze.” Sway smiled like the devil herself. “I find it rather intensely pleasant to be so blatantly desired.”

Permission granted, liberty taken—Galatea wasn’t about to let **all that nun** go unmolested. Even if her brilliant strategy had been thwarted, it wasn’t like Sway’s body grew any slimmer, and the sister absolutely could not control what went through Galatea’s mind, so she was free to fantasize as much as she wished.

Though her face burned for being called out as a “raging lesbian.” *That* didn’t sound all that accepting. And so what if she was a perfectly normal, well-acclimated queer woman? She could turn it all right back around on Sway and say it was *her* fault, because of *course* Galatea’s love for women flared up when served **sacred wobblemeat** bursting free from a habit that only half-pretended to cover her up in the first place!

Sway and her sister were the ridiculous ones. Not Galatea. Regardless, she wasn’t going to complain too loudly about a free show, so she stared *hard* at Sway’s ass as she descended the secret staircase that opened up behind the altar.

Galatea followed that **huge, pale, swaying full moon** down stone stairs so sharp they were either just cut or weren’t properly anti-aliased. She followed, staring, even as the stairway closed behind her, stone grinding against stone with a heavy finality that failed to register, because Galatea preferred to focus all her attention on the very **soft**, exquisitely **jello-like ass** wobbling in front of her.

Yes, she preferred breasts. Of course she did. Bigger boobs were just better, and anyone who didn’t understand that was coping like crazy. But you had to be a total boor to completely reject the appeal of **big jiggly asses**. If anything, Galatea’s appreciation only showed *just* how

much better boobs were—she could obsess over asses more than the average ass lover, but in her next breath switch gears because yes, boobs were just that much better.

So no, she didn't keep track of the twists and turns within the church's labyrinthine basement, because she was too busy proving herself a true breast lover by staring at Sway's ass. And yes, the only reason she realized they had reached their destination was because Sway's ass stopped swaying, and instead **rippled pleasantly** before she stole it from Galatea's view, which bothered her only so long as it took to lock on to her titties instead.

"So, uh, where are we?" Galatea asked, realizing she probably *should* care where the unnatural nun took her, even if she didn't really. It was **too easy to forget**, but this was all **just a game** after all. She didn't *really* need to fear for her safety when following **wobblebodied strangers** into their cult's sex dungeon. Which, frankly? She hoped this was. It wasn't until Sway took it off the table that Galatea realized just how much she could go for some **freaky cult sex** with **stacked nuns**. Would that sound bad to *anyone*? Nobody with a good sense for fun, she thought.

Even though she asked her question, Galatea didn't bother looking around. Even if it *was* a sex dungeon, she already had her eyes set on what she wanted out of it—Sway's boobs in and around her face, please and thank you. People could be getting hot wax dripped on them five feet away and that would be their own business and Galatea wouldn't pry. She knew what she wanted and she knew how to get it.

Kind of.

"So, Catechumen Galatea," Sway said, and because now she had to listen as well as stare, Galatea finally took notice of the sounds around them. Lots of moaning. Some prayers. Meaty smacking. Freaky cult sex dungeon, yes! "Please allow me to ask you for the *last* time: Will you don the amulet of your own free will, committing yourself in service to your new purpose? Do so, and I will reward you." She grabbed her breasts and pressed them together and Galatea nearly passed out. "Though the choice *must* be your own."

"And what if I say no?" Galatea asked, dumbly. Because the *smart* thing to do would be to say, "Yes, absolutely! I'll put the necklace on, or whatever you want! I'll join the cult if you pamper me lots and lots! I'll join if you let me grab your tits, please!" Sway would get what she wanted, Galatea would get what *she* wanted, and they'd all be winners. It was the smart thing to do.

INTELLECT: **8**

But for whatever reason, Galatea just didn't feel like doing the smart thing. She had made a plan—to play hard-to-get—and she was going to stick with it, because it was a *good* plan, and nothing bad ever came of sticking to your guns.

“Should you say no—and I pray that you do not—then I will have failed as your assigned Indoctrinator, and the salvation of your soul will be entrusted to an angel instead.”

That . . . sounded fine actually? If the Cult of New Purpose's whole schtick was styled after Christianity, with Revi and Sway as outwardly facing thirst trap nuns, then an “angel” was probably someone even higher ranked than them within the cult, with even stronger powers of persuasion.

Galatea stared at Sway's perfect tits, wondering if stronger powers of persuasion could even exist, and if so, how large they'd have to be to outclass the sister.

She really wanted to see if an angel's tits were even larger than a sister's. She had a mental image all summoned up—which was more taxing than it should have been, since when was her mind's eye an *effort*? But either way she could see her new (or really, supplementary) target: A blond-haired, fair-skinned angel with white feathered wings and an absolutely **massive rack**. Probably wearing some kind of loose white toga that wasn't really as loose as it should have been because it was tied too tight around her narrow waist as if she *wanted* her huge angelic hooters to get stared at. She probably did, that holy slut.

“Yeah, no. Never gonna happen. Give me the angel,” Galatea said, smirking at the thought of trading up a busty nun to a bustier angel. She just kept winning—Nim and Nahi could learn from her ability to drive a hard bargain. Never take the first deal, girls. Always try for a better one.

Sway gave her an odd look.

“I'm not stupid. You're holding out on me,” Galatea said with an affected sniff. “But you already said you want me bad. So I want a better deal. I want the angel. Give me the angel.”

Sway tilted her head and pursed her lips, troubled.

“No use trying to mind game me. It's your fault for putting your cards down on the table. And for not putting your tits in my face.” Sway's lack of a response made Galatea talk more and faster to fill the silence. “Honestly, I probably would have joined the cult by now if you just kept up the skinship. So it really is your failure that the angel gets to convert me instead. Must, uh, be a failure of your faith, or something.”

Sway didn't take the bait. She finally opened her mouth to respond, only to be interrupted.

"You!" Galatea turned, but it was not Nahi or Nim who addressed her, and she didn't sound like Revi—despite being her identical twin, just like Sway. Only this new sister wasn't dressed like a sister at all, but staggered toward her bursting out of a too-tight purple leopard-print bikini and matching leggings. "You aren't one of them, right?" She said with the plump lips Galatea had imagined kissing her. "You need to run—run *now*, while you still can! They're crazy! They're all crazy! I came here for a quest but—but it's not a quest it's a *trap*!"

It was so strange, hearing a different voice coming from a face she knew so well. From *tits* she knew so well, because Galatea couldn't help but look for similarities there. The panicky woman had a mole, too, on the right like Revi, but lower, nearly hidden where her boob pooled against her rib cage.

"Why are you just standing there?" she demanded to know, flailing wildly with her arms and throwing her perfect pink himecut into disarray. Wide, terrified eyes stared at Galatea from beneath the overlong front fringe. Wide, terrified eyes that repeated her question: Why was Galatea just standing there?

It was a fair question.

A good and pointed question.

It was all a lot to take in, probably.

"Run! Now! Before they convert you! Before they can catch you. Before one of *them* catches yo—**ouuuughoghgh!**" *That* at least made Galatea take a step back, as Sway's doppelganger cycled through a number of expressions, each more outrageously erotic and overstimulated than the last. Pursed lips to slack-jawed to kissy face to what Galatea could only assume empty-mouth fellatio might look like, complete with swirling tongue, until finally her head went totally limp, chin landing on her chest with eyes wide open but seeing nothing, and only then, as she fell to her knees with a couple meaty slaps rather than a thump, did Galatea see what even she could deduce to be the cause of the clone's outburst.

There were tendrils sprouting from her ears. Or at least that's how it looked at first, before she saw how they trailed off behind her, down the woman's back like reins. Massed tendrils, each about as thick as a USB cable, coiled around each other, about ten in each ear, writhing and twisting and plunging in and out of the impostor sister's head while her body jerked and twitched on the floor.

It wasn't until she started laughing that Galatea ran, and it wasn't until Galatea ran that she realized she *could* have known the way out. If only she hadn't let Sway's ass occupy all her thoughts. But still she ran, ran away from the bubbling laughter that dissolved into pitched, echoing giggles that bounced off the tight walls of the blind corners she threw herself around, chasing her through the labyrinth surer than any pursuer, and joined by the sound of meat and moaning that Galatea now heard the desperate edge to.

The sounds of people enjoying themselves against their will. People *made* to feel pleasure. Minds and bodies overwhelmed, resistance smothered and overwritten.

And as she ran, as adrenaline flooded a body that, in the real world, was in no danger, Galatea remembered.

She remembered her fear.

The real reason for her resistance.

And the **light** that made her forget.

Galatea put her head down and ran faster—panting though she wasn't even winded. Just a game. Just a game. Just a game. If she kept repeating it, would she believe it? Would belief make it real? The disorientation—the *dissociation*, did they do that to her? Was that the light? Or the game? Did the manipulation end at the doors of the church, or was this entire game some kind of sufficiently advanced island of the lotus eaters? To what end was any of this? And where were—

Galatea tripped and found her party members, who were also her friends, who had accepted the amulets they were offered and now looked like porn parodies of themselves.

"Glad we could catch up!" Nim said, pulling back her foot and tossing her long pink twintails over her shoulder. Her formerly flat chest now accommodated D-cups, which were still very much on the small side for an MMO, but much more than she had the day before. However modest her chest remained her thighs more than compensated for. Wider than her shoulders, Galatea may as well have tripped over a fallen tree trunk. Sensing her gaze, Nim spun around revealing an ass so big just that small swivel was enough to make it **CLAP**. She cocked her hips to one side, then the other, each movement provoking another deleterious **CLAP** that made Galatea's heart throb—from what, she wasn't sure. "Really, Gal, you're gonna love it. It's a lot to take in at first, trust me I know, but once they give you your new class—**mmph**, nothing ever felt so good!"

Nimue <Cult of New Purpose>

[Proselyte]

Lv. 10 Noisy Hypnoichi

STRENGTH: 5

AGILITY: 1

PHYSIQUE: 60

INTELLECT: 3

WISDOM: 2

CHARISMA: 50

Equipment:

Main Hand: **Empty**

Off Hand: **Empty**

Accessory: **Amulet of New Purpose** (Cursed)

Head: **Hypnotic Hair Ties** (Cursed)

Chest: **Hypnoichi Bodycondom**

Hands: **Dickgrippers**

Waist: **Condom Belt**

Legs: **3XL Noise Dampener Pantyhose** (Broken)

Feet: **Infiltration Heels**

Despite a million more pressing questions, Galatea asked “What are you wearing?” because somehow her getup was just as shocking as her **constantly clapping physicality**. They had her in a rubber leotard molded so tight to her body that her areolae made large, visible dents in the pink plastic. The real concerning problem lay lower, though. Where Galatea might have expected Nim’s mons to be blister packaged, there was instead a pink **bulge** almost half as large as her enhanced tits. The thing was pinched between her enormous thighs but it struggled and twitched, eager to be free of its plastic prison.

“Yeah, they gave me this great gear after I promoted. I told them I always wanted to be a ninja, and look!” With fluttering lashes, she drew her hands up her thighs, fingers indenting the stark white of her nylons as if her legs were pure jiggly fat with no muscle at all. She groaned as her hands neared her hips, her knees buckling and spreading as Nim dropped into a low squat with her heels pressed together. Even that movement **CLAPP**ed, and **CLAPP**ed some more when she started rubbing her big bulge through her suit. “Gal—**mmf!**” **CLAP**. “Trust me. It’s so—**mm.**” **CLAP**. “**Sooooo goood.**” **CLAP**. “They helped me find my new purpose.” **CLAP**. “They’ll help—**mmmmmm**—you too.”

After saying that, Nim stopped paying her any attention. She turned all her attention to her rubber-sealed crotch and focused on finding the best way to jerk her hips against her fingers, **CLAP CLAP CLAPP**ing all the while, the sound of her **utterly unsilenceable ass** echoing off the narrow walls and hitting Galatea from unexpected angles that made the whole experience even more unearthly and nightmarish.

This couldn’t really be happening, could it? Nim liked to tease her. This was just an elaborate practical joke, right?

“I started playing again to find out what happened to Big Sis Rammy. All I could turn up were rumors, so I decided to grind and earn some respect so I could ask people more important than the rumormongers. But thanks to you I found new purpose.” Nahi was so quiet compared to her **noisy** neighbor that Galatea had barely paid her any attention. And now she saw she should have, because whatever the cultists did to Nim, they did worse to Nahi.

Nahirgo <Cult of New Purpose>

[Proselyte]

Lv. 10 Wobble Whorrior

STRENGTH: **6**

AGILITY: **1**

PHYSIQUE: **80**

INTELLECT: **1**

WISDOM: **3**

CHARISMA: **20**

Equipment:

Main Hand: **Empty**
Off Hand: **Empty**
Accessory: **Amulet of New Purpose** (Cursed)
Head: **Brainwash Helm** (Cursed)
Chest: **Bouncy Bikini**
Hands: **Pacification Gauntlets** (Cursed)
Waist: **Whorrior Loincloth**
Legs: **Empty**
Feet: **Monsterbait Fuck-Me Greaves** (Cursed)

Compared to Nim, Nahi's outfit wasn't so outrageous. Bikini armor wasn't *that* out of place in a dress-up MMO. In poor taste, sure, depending on who you asked, but still largely on-theme. But if Nim's body had been made **embarrassing**, Nahi changes were designed to **humiliate** her. The fit, fiery Warrior had **gone to fat**. Her **pudgy belly** poured over the retaining wall set by the top of her loincloth. Nahi didn't have Nim's extremity in curves—the Hypnoichi's hips, ass, and thighs were much larger than her Bimbarian peer's—she had been saddled with a **general excess** that threw into question if she could even swing a sword at all. Her arms were **plump**, her belly, **chubby**, her legs, **chunky**, her ass, **doughy**, she looked more like a **body pillow** than a person, a **cuddly whorrior** who you couldn't touch without remarking on how soft she was.

Even her resting bitch face had been undermined by fuller cheeks that made her look, frankly, adorable, because she still *tried* to look nasty, it just couldn't work, because she looked like nothing so much as a life-size, fantasy themed **teddy-bear plush**.

"This would never have happened without you, Tea." Her voice was pleasant enough, but there was still the Nahi edge in there somewhere, buried deep beneath the accommodating plumpness. It was as near to an accusation as Galatea suspected she could get in her current state. "We owe you this. I can't wait to see what they'll do to you."

She stayed standing, but blocked the path together with Nim. Side-by-side, they were just **too much meat** to get around. And, when Nahi flipped her loincloth out of the way, she revealed she **had meat** just the same as Nim, though unlike her Hypnoichi companion, there was

nothing stopping her from **stroking her cock to Galatea**, which she did with her traditional scowl, however untraditionally adorable that scowl now looked.

There was no way out and Galatea had finally had it.

“You know what? Fuck both of you,” she said from the floor. “How is any of this my fault? *I’m* the new player. *I’m* the one who doesn’t know up from down and left from right. Where the *fuck* do you two get off putting this all on me? I didn’t *force* you to accept that quest at the Silver Goose. I didn’t *make* you party up with me. You two wanted to leech off my Priority Quest, while treating me like shit the *whole* time, even though I’d done *nothing* to either of you, and now you’ve both been completely fucked over by the cult we were supposed to investigate, because you put on their stupid fucking necklaces without a second thought, and you want to blame me? Where the *fuck* do you two get off? Congratulations, you’re my first party ever and my *worst* party ever!”

Galatea would likely have discovered exactly where the two of them got off if the roadblock hadn’t served its purpose. Something grabbed her from behind, latched onto her with more limbs than a person could bring to bear, limbs that curled around her arms and back as she threw herself against the wall, trying to squash whatever it was before it could *get* her, because she could feel the tendrils crawling up her neck, searching for her ears, just like that other unfortunate girl, and she wasn’t going to just let it happen.

“You can’t hurt it,” Nim said, **CLAPP**ing with even more enthusiasm as she fondled her rubber bulge. “The angel will save you, Gal.”

“The angel will show you your purpose, just like it did for us,” Nahi added. Her whole chubby body **wobbled** as she beat her dick off.

Galatea didn’t want **twerkjerk**ing and **wobblewank**ing to be the last things she saw before they *got* her, so she twisted to see if she could at least learn what it was that was going to turn her brain to mush.

A **great swirling eye** stared back at her.

“Oh. I remember you,” she said, **because wasn’t the eye so familiar**. And then the tendrils found their way inside.

The eyeball walked her back, puppeteering her legs and forcing her head to turn and take in the enormity of the cult’s operations. On the way in she’d been distracted. On her way out

she'd been rushed. Now, as the eyeball undid her escape attempt with jerky, uneven steps, she had all the time in the world to absorb what she'd missed.

There were monsters in the church basement. Galatea marched past cell after cell and in each cell was a player and attached to each player was an eyeball like hers. **Gorgo**—grotesque floating orbs with eyelids so thick they looked like pursed open lips, plump mouths open around **wonderf**—horrific eyes with yellow whites and **huge pink irises that swirled and swirled**.

Galatea thought all the captured players were girls until she was walked past one particular cell where a blue-haired boy begged her to save him while she watched helplessly from within her head, unable even to shake her head no. When he realized she wouldn't help him, he clawed at her through the bars, which provoked his monster to inject him with something that made his shouts **jump up an octave** and his short-cropped blue hair explode with new length, trailing past his **widening hips** as it turned **pink from the roots**. The last she saw him he was mauling his own **swelling C-cups** with a look of **pure girlish pleasure** plastered on his face. **Her** face now, or shortly.

As the sample size grew, Galatea couldn't help but recognize the commonalities between the captured girls and **soon to be girls**. Pink hair. Eye-covering bangs. Curves that trended toward a certain ideal. The cells were full of **proto-sisters**, clones of Sway and Revi that were working through various stages of **conversion**.

"They're so lucky," Nim said from somewhere behind her. It came as no surprise—Galatea had heard her **CLAPP**ing the whole time, even if she couldn't control where she looked. Her crappy party members were escorting her—how kind of them. "The proselytes here have been chosen for the highest honor—to join the sisterhood. Nahi and I were deemed inadequate."

"Nim is too flat. The angels' attempts to fix her all went to her ass for some reason."

"And you're fat, Nahi! You just wouldn't let go of your muscles, so they gave you a gut to bury them under! For shame!"

"For shame," Nahi agreed, instead of firing back like she was supposed to. "I can only hope that with Sisters Revi and Sway's continued guidance I might be able to overcome my pride and accept a higher purpose."

Nim **CLAPCLAPCLAPP**ed up to Galatea and caught her arm. "That's why she was so mean to you, by the way. Nahi has body image issues, and you so totally set her off. She's so totally obsessed with that Rammy girl, wants to be *just* like her."

“But now I see the errors of my ways. Big Sis Rammy wouldn’t want me to be her imitation.” Galatea could hear her huffing and puffing just to keep up as they passed cell after cell of proto-sisters. “If Big Sis were here, she’d tell me to **join the cult**. She’d tell me to **give the cult my everything**. I’m certain Big Sis would **fully endorse the cult**, if she just knew about it. And in her absence, **I must serve**.”

“It’s a much healthier mindset, really. I was the same way. Playing AO for *work*, can you believe it? In what world could work ever be more important than **my calling to serve**? Girls like us, even if we’re failures, **belong to the cult**. **We have no other purpose**. You’ll see. It’ll all make sense soon, Gal. And you’ll feel **so stupid, just like us!**”

Galatea felt **plenty stupid** already—and only partly for walking right back into the trap she had escaped by chance the day before. She still didn’t even know how she *had*, and saying she escaped may have been overstating it, considering the following dissociative episode sent her right back into the game and Sway’s waiting arms.

But she *did* feel stupid—and didn’t feel too bad about not noticing this sooner because even now she couldn’t concretely describe it. It was like parts of her brain were shuttered off, inaccessible, but also like she forgot they were there in the first place, so she never even bumped up against the closed doors to discover they were locked. Lose a limb and it’s easy to tell—you can see it, feel it. Lose some smarts and you lose the ability to know they’re gone—like losing the memory of a limb.

Stupid and **helpless** as she walked deeper into the labyrinth—noting as she went how the girls in the cells looked more and more like Revi and Sway, though the imitations still had their flaws. One had the wrong haircut—**pink**, as was appropriate, but short and spiky instead of the long and luscious himecut the majority of proto-sisters sported. Another had boobs that were **way too big**—she sat in the corner of her cell and probably wouldn’t ever stand up again. Her tits were so big only her feet stuck out, and as Galatea watched, the eye attached to her stabbed her tits with tentacles and they grew even bigger with a moan that carried existential dread.

And so on, and so forth, until Galatea could swear she had seen every way *not* to make a sister, and a few ways even beyond that. They really had to have made her **dumb**, because she couldn’t figure out the why. Why do any of this? They were turning players into copies of Revi and Sway—Revi and Sway *themselves* might just be copies of somebody else—to what end?

All this deformation, the suffering, the subjugation—for what?

The cell door clanked shut behind her. Nim waved from the other side of the bars. “We’ll be back later to check in on you, okay? The Sisters have high hopes for you, so don’t let us down!”

“Enjoy yourself,” Nahi added. “Once your time with the angel passes, you’ll miss it. There’s something to be said for mindlessness. It’s better.”

They left and she was alone with the eyeball. It blinked its lippy eyelids at her, which produced a quiet, wet squelching sound.

If only she could have screamed.

For the first hour, nothing happened, which was horrible in its own way. The cell door shut, her so-called friends waved goodbye, and the eyeball retrieved its tentacles from her ear. It watched her, blinking wetly as she tried the door—which wouldn’t open, because Nim and Nahi, those traitors, locked it when they abandoned her there. It watched her, blinking wetly as she tried to slide between the bars—which didn’t work, because she had made her character model **stupidly big** and **stupidly wide**, and she couldn’t fit.

Then Galatea had an idea. She remembered this was all a game. Immersive or not, possibly actually affecting her brain and psyche in real time or not, it was *literally* just a game. She could leave whenever she wanted to. She called up the ESC menu, noted the irony, noted also that it wasn’t irony, because the keyboard key from which the menu took its name had been named that for exactly this reason (though understandably not this exact scenario), and slammed the virtual **LOG OUT** button.

Cannot log out in a dungeon!⁶

She stared in disbelief at the floating error text, and as it faded away she tried again, jabbing her finger against the button that wasn’t really there.

Cannot log out in a dungeon!

Cannot log out in a dungeon!

Cannot log out in a dungeon!

⁶ To prevent disruptive and exploitative behaviors, players are required to sign out in designated safe zones.

“Nonsense. I was able to log out just fine from the chapel.” But she wasn’t in the chapel. She was below it, in a twisting, turning labyrinth full of floating eyeballs and lost, transformed adventurers. She had obediently and unwittingly followed Sway down into a dungeon, and now she was trapped. In a cell. With a giant floating eyeball.

There was nothing else in the cell, not even a cot to sit on, and so with no other recourse, she addressed the giant floating eyeball in the room.

“So are you a player, or controlled by a player, or summoned by one, or?” She just wanted to make sense of a bad situation. It wouldn’t necessarily make her feel *better* about what she knew was coming next, but at least she’d be able to contextualize it all before her mind turned to mush like Nim and Nahi. They never had a chance to do the same. Galatea had all but given up on their quest—she wanted the information out of morbid curiosity.

Nothing she learned would save her.

Knowing would not set her free.

But her curious nature hadn’t been tentacle fucked out of her yet, so why not ask?

Of course, rather than answering, the eyeball just blinked another squelching blink at her instead. Great. Fantastic. The thing wasn’t even capable of speech and after a couple hours with it, she wouldn’t be either. Amazing.

Then, a moment later, as if in answer to her question, the eyeball’s nameplate popped up.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” (Level ??/Tier 5)⁷

Ambrose Dana’s Pet

“Well at least I know your name,” Galatea sighed, before Blinky did what he did best and closed his great big eye. His creepy lip-shaped eyelids looked like they were blowing her a kiss. “And that of your owner. Ambrose Dana.” She committed the name to memory, unsure if she’d be allowed to remember. “You’re all his pets? Does he have, like, a special class, or is pet-taming a—”

⁷ Ardor Online uses both a “Level” and a “Tier” system to assign difficulty ratings to non-player characters. Levels range from 1 to 200, like they do for players, while Tiers serve as a modifier: a Level 5/Tier 2 monster is approximately twice as difficult to defeat as a Level 5/Tier 1 monster. A Level 5/Tier 3 monster is twice as difficult as a Level 5/Tier 2 monster. While players and classes skilled at “soloing” content may be able to defeat high Tier monsters on their own, it is generally understood that any monster Tier 4 or higher is designed for group play, and it is inadvisable to combat such a monster on one’s own.

She never finished the thought, because Blinky opened his eye, and his spiral was suddenly so much **stronger**.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” targets Galatea with his gaze!⁸

(DEX failure) Galatea failed to look away!

(WIS failure) Galatea failed to resist “Blinky’s” gaze!

“Puh—Pretty . . .” Galatea was seeing Blinky in a **whole new light**. Yes, his body was grotesque—a disgusting, overblown approximation of a human eye sandwiched between **big bimbo liplids**. The cluster of tentacles that hung from his body like a jellyfish’s stingers gave her the creeps, and the veins that bulged their way across his leathery, spherical purple body were disgusting. But despite everything else about his physical appearance, he had a **really beautiful eye**.

A gorgeous, swirling, pulsing eye. ⁹

Galatea is enthralled by Bimbo Gazer “Blinky’s” gaze! ¹⁰

Galatea gained status: Don’t Blink.¹¹

Galatea gained status: Keep Staring.¹²

Galatea **didn’t blink**. Galatea **kept staring**. How could she do anything else? Blinky’s eye was **stunning**. Artful even. She could do without the rest of him, she could do without this whole absurd scenario, happily. But she just couldn’t do without his eye. His **swirling, spinning eye**. It was almost funny, charming even, how cartoonish he looked, with his eye wide open and **swirling, swirling so deeply**. It didn’t work like a normal eye, and she supposed there was no reason it had to. A monster’s eye could be whatever it needed to be, and Blinky’s departure from human form was what made his great big eye so **interesting**.

⁸ Gaze attacks are powerful, but highly telegraphed. To avoid a gaze attack, simply face away from the source.

⁹ To facilitate deep immersion, certain attacks in Ardor Online feature “intrusive” audiovisual effects.

¹⁰ Certain attacks can inflict status effects: Powerful, lasting debilitations that should be removed immediately by the party healer. If your party does not contain a healer, seek out a place of worship in any major city!

¹¹ **Don’t Blink: You can’t.**

¹² **Keep Staring: You must.**

He didn't have a pupil. Instead, a strand of black **curled** its way out from the center of his eye, hair-thin and **swirling**. It traced a **spiral** out of his **glowing pink iris**, and it **spun** and **spun** and **spun**, like a pinwheel caught in an insistent breeze.

Galatea was caught too. Caught by the **slow spinning spiral**. It was just **too interesting to ignore**. **Too pretty** not to stare at. It spun so **steadily**, **flexing** and **pulsing** subtly, but regularly, perfectly in time with her breathing.

Or Galatea was breathing perfectly in time with Blinky's **pulsing spiral**. Did the order of operations really matter here?

Blinky's spiral **pulsed** and sped up, and Galatea had to **stare extra hard** to keep from falling behind.

Bimbo Gazer "Blinky" casts EXP Siphon.

Galatea doesn't resist.

Galatea loses 666 EXP.

Bimbo Gazer "Blinky" gains 666 EXP.

Galatea is now Level 2.

Galatea's head swam. Her eyes were strangely teary—probably only because she hadn't blinked in so long, and had **no intention to blink** anytime soon. Or maybe they were tears of beauty, because Blinky's spiral really was that **special** to her. Because in a way it felt like Blinky's spiral was also **her spiral**. The more and harder she stared into it, the more she felt like there were **parts of her in there**. Like the spiral was **personalized** to her, or **she contributed to it** in some way she was incapable of understanding, but could still intuit. And that made Galatea feel special. She was a **special girl** with a **special spiral** meant **just for her**. It was enough to make her want to **giggle**, so she did.

She **giggled** and she **stared** and she **didn't resist**.

Galatea doesn't resist.

Galatea loses 333 EXP.

Bimbo Gazer "Blinky" gains 333 EXP.

Galatea is now Level 1.

She thought her nose might be bleeding, but when she touched her upper lip to check her hands came away clean. She didn't see any blood when she held her hand up in her peripheral vision (because actually turning her attention away from Blinky was **just stupid** and wouldn't be happening), but it was weird, because she almost *felt* like there was blood on her fingers when she rubbed them together. But she didn't see any, so she really just must have been mistaken.

How could staring at Blinky's **pulsing spiral eye** give her a nosebleed?

When Blinky reached out to her with his dangling tendrils, Galatea held out her hands and let him crawl up her arms like a creeping vine. She had nothing to fear—**Blinky was her best friend**. “**Buh—Best fuh—friend**.” Even more than Nahi and Nim and Revi and Sway, **Blinky was there for her** when **she needed him**. Their friendship transcended mere words. Words alone could never convey what **just one look** from Blinky told her.

She was **special**.

She was **important**.

She was **seen**.

Blinky saw her in a way nobody else did. When he looked at her Galatea felt **vulnerable**, like all her **defensive layers were being stripped away**.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” casts Expose.

Galatea doesn't resist.

Galatea's mental defenses crumble.

Galatea gained status: Vulnerable.¹³

She couldn't have been more open to Blinky if she were naked. His great big eye saw everything, all of her at once. There was nothing she could hide from his unblinking gaze and **she had never felt so free**. There were no secrets between them. Nothing unspoken. Blinky **saw** her, truly and fully **saw** her, and her **vulnerability** gave Galatea comfort. She had nothing more to hide. Blinky saw her everything and didn't turn away. He gazed upon her insecurities, her faults, her **incredible weakness**, and despite all of her many flaws, he didn't so much as blink.

What was that, except a true friend?

¹³ **Vulnerable: Let him in.**

And why would Galatea resist a true friend reaching out to her? What happened to all the other girls was different. They didn't share the bond Galatea had with Blinky. His tentacles didn't grip her, they **embraced** her, and she them. Their slithering, slimy touch was like a sticky, many-armed hug, not a grapple.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” attempts to grapple!

Galatea doesn't resist.

Galatea gained status: Entangled.¹⁴

If anything, Blinky's touch was comforting. He was there for her. He wasn't going anywhere. She wrapped *her* arms around his tentacles, binding him to her and her to him, because **friendship** went both ways. **Friendship** was **participatory**. She couldn't let him do all the hard work. “I **thu—think** I **luh—love you**,” she said, a little too tongue-tied to add that she meant platonically, as friends, a deep, abiding love between **friends who trusted each other fully**. But it was okay that she couldn't command her words, because she didn't need to. Blinky understood her. She could always rely on Blinky to get her. She could trust Blinky. **She could keep staring.**

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” began channeling!

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” is building up to a powerful spell! Look away!

Galatea doesn't attempt to identify “Blinky's” spell.

Galatea doesn't resist.

Blinky's spiral grew fast and frantic and Galatea's breathing matched his pace. He wanted to show her something, she could **just tell**. He was asking her to trust him, and **of course she did**. **Blinky would never hurt her. Blinky would never let her come to harm.** Blinky and Galatea were the **very best of friends** and she would prove it by **staring straight at him** as his light grew **brighter** and **brighter**, pulsing **brighter** and **brighter**, so bright it **burned afterimages** into her eyes, so bright it made her gasp and back up against the wall, but **that was fine** because **Blinky was with her**, Blinky's tentacles were **all over her**, crawling up her neck and around her tits and down her front.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” casts Brain Blank!

¹⁴ Entangled: Unable to cast any spell with a cast time greater than instant. Miss chance up. Evasion down. Movement speed reduced.

Galatea doesn't resist.

Galatea went totally blank.

"..." Galatea had nothing to say. She had no more thoughts to offer. There was nothing for her to say or do or think or feel, nothing at all. Blinky's eye bombarded her with too much light.

She never even felt her brain shut down.¹⁵

Flickering. Flashing. Hollowing out the inside of her head. Leaving her

BLANK.

BRAINLESS.

STARE

STUCK

SUBMIT.

BIMBO.

Galatea didn't know what a bimbo was. She didn't know anything. She was blank. Brainless. Staring. Stuck. Submitting to Blinky's bright beautiful blinking eye. Her whole body relaxed when the blinking stopped and swapped back to the comfortable swirl her overburdened brain was so used to.

So much easier to stare at the spiral.¹⁶

Bimbo Gazer "Blinky" casts Bimbo Brainwash!¹⁶

¹⁵ Any feelings of disorientation and vertigo experienced while playing Ardor Online are a natural consequence of fully immersive virtual reality, and completely medically harmless.

¹⁶ Claims that Ardor Online is capable of altering player cognition are entirely fictitious. It has never been proven. No one will ever believe you.

Galatea doesn't resist.

Galatea began to be **brainwashed**.

Brainwashing progress: 10%¹⁷

Galatea didn't know what a bimbo was. Thankfully Blinky was there to **fill her empty mind** with all the information she needed. He was an excellent **reeducator**. Understanding flooded into Galatea through Blinky's spiral eye: **Bimbos were bouncy. Bimbos were brainless. Bimbos were stupid. Bimbos kept staring.** Galatea didn't know what a bimbo was, or why Blinky wanted her to know so badly, but she trusted him to have his reasons, and in the meantime she could help him out by **bouncing in place** while she **kept staring**. She didn't know why that felt like the right thing to do, but she did, and if she felt anything, knew anything, it was because Blinky put that knowledge and feeling there. If **she felt like bouncing**, then that was because **Blinky wanted her to bounce for him**. And if Blinky wanted that, Galatea would **happily comply**. What else were best friends for?

Staring.

Stupid.

Brainless.

Bouncing.

Blinky blinked his special spiral at her. 

And Galatea absorbed the message and **bounced bigger**, because she did not know what a bimbo was, but it was clear **Blinky wanted her to be a big bimbo**, and that made Galatea want to **be a big bimbo for Blinky**. A **big bouncy bimbo for her bestie**, which meant she had to **bounce her boobies bigger**. Even if **bouncing boobies bigger** didn't make sense, that wasn't for her to debate. She knew Blinky could **make it make sense**. That was his job. Hers was to **bimbo bounce**.

Bimbos have big boobs.

Bigger boobs better bimbo.

¹⁷ Certain status effects build up over time instead of being applied to the player instantly. Status effects with gauge accumulation are much more dangerous than their counterparts.

Bounce your boobies bigger.

Big boob bimbos bounce.

Boobybrained bimbos bounce bigger.

Galatea's thoughts were scattered and her **bouncing made it worse**. Her head was a human snow globe—**bouncing** and **shaking** sent her thoughts **swirling** end over end and without Blinky there to **keep her on track** she probably would have **lost her thoughts entirely**! But his **gentle, insistent reminders** kept her **bouncing big**, so big now her boot heels **cracked** against the cell floor when she came back down.

Bounce. Crack. Bounce. Crack. Bounce. Crack.

The only **real** problem was that Galatea couldn't figure out how she was supposed to **bounce her boobies bigger**. But before she could even begin to remember how to form a sentence enough to ask, Blinky helped her out, because Blinky was always so helpful. He had wormed his way beneath her boring Beginner's Tunic while she bounced, and sensing Galatea's frustration, he did something to her—for her.

Bounce. Crack. Squeeze. "Guh."

When Blinky's slimy tentacles squeezed Galatea's bouncing boobs, a thousand volts shot through her tits. She had never been stung by a jellyfish before, but it must have felt something like Blinky. Too many points of stimulation to name any specific pokes, prods, stabs, or pinches. Just a **full-surface tit inferno** as her boobs burned from the outside in. Blinky watched her, waiting for Galatea's reaction, and because he was watching her so intently, she knew what he expected.

Galatea bounced bigger.

Bounce. Crack. Bounce. Crack. Bounce. Crack. Bounce. Crack.

Bounce.

Bounce.

Bounce.

Bounce.

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Just had to keep bouncing.

Ardor Online: Party Finder

Galatea gained status: Heavy.¹⁹

Heavy was the right word. Her big boobs were her whole center of gravity now—without Blinky there to steady her she'd have fallen on her face. Well, no she wouldn't. Galatea would have fallen **face-first into her tits**, which sounded fun, but also she wasn't sure she'd be able to stand back up if she fell.

She remembered the proto-sister trapped beneath her massive tits.

She *hoped* she could bounce that big, eventually. But Blinky had other plans.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” channels Bimbo Brainwash.

Galatea doesn't resist.

Galatea's brainwashing strengthened.

Brainwashing progress: 30%

Blinky made everything so easy to understand. 

Galatea felt a **giggle fit** coming on as she **stared into the spiral**, and that's how she knew she was learning. She **stared** and she **giggled** and she let Blinky explain. **Bimbos were sexy. Bimbos were stupid. Bimbos bounced their brains away. Bimbos giggled. Bimbos jiggled. Bimbos just dumbered down.**

Bimbos had more fun.

Sexy.

Stupid.

Just dumb down.

Jiggle.

Giggle.

Bounce your brain away.

¹⁹ Heavy: Reduces Agility. Reduces evasion. Lowers movement speed. Doubles stat requirements for chest-slot items.

Galatea gained status: **Bimbo Jiggle Curse**.²⁰

Galatea gained status: **Bimbo Giggle Curse**.²¹

Galatea had so much fun **giggling** and **jiggling**. Seriously, who would ever have guessed that the secret to having a great time was to **shake your tits** and **smile**? Not her! That's why she was so lucky to have Blinky by her side, telling her all these **true things** she just didn't know yet. If bimbos had more fun, like he said, then yeah, **Galatea one-hundred-percent wanted to be a bimbo**. What kind of nasty, boring stick in the mud *didn't* want to have more fun? If the choice was between having more fun and not having more fun, wasn't that a **no-brainer**? The thought made her **giggle**, which made her **jiggle**, which made her **giggle** more, which made her **jiggle** more, and the more she **giggled** and **jiggled** the more a **funny feeling** crept over her.

Like all the **dumb fun** she was having had an **additional affect**. Like **giggling** and **jiggling** **dumbed her down**, which was **so stupid it couldn't be the case**, but if it were, that would be **amazing**, because if she could just **bounce her brain away** she'd make for the **bestest biggest bimbo ever**, and then she'd get to have more fun than anyone else!

Which sounded super selfish when she put it like that—it wasn't like she *only* cared about her own fun, but she **wasn't hurting anyone** by **just dumbing down** and **bouncing her brain away** with **jiggles** and **giggles**, and once she finally *had* bounced her way to **bestest bimbo**, she could share the fun around!

And she could start with her **bimbo bestie**.

“**Buh—Blinky, can I, uh . . .**” Her sentence petered off into a nervous **giggle**. She was going to ask him if he wanted to feel her **big bimbo boobs**—but Blinky had all but anchored himself to her bouncing chest. How much more of a feel could he cop than what he had already? That really stumped her. She was too **giggly** and **jiggly** to think of any good ideas. Her brain was full of **fat fluffy nothing**, and thinking around nothing was **harder than you'd think**! Still, she tried, because Galatea just didn't have it in her to be a selfish, self-absorbed bimbo.

It was nasty of her to think it, but this was probably what set her apart from Nim and Nahi, what made them failures and her a budding success story. Galatea was a **total empath**, and

²⁰ Curses are high-level debuffs with permanent durations and unique, debilitating effects. Curses are resistant to most forms of debuff removal—curses will even persist through promotion and reincarnation. Removing a curse is an expensive and involved process. Thankfully, curses are rarely encountered outside of high-level content, where players can be safely assumed to have the economic means and interpersonal connections necessary for curse-lifting. Some players even choose to maintain a curse, for roleplay purposes or as a form of self-imposed challenge.

²¹ As curses are non-standard status ailments, they do not have an associated tutorial entry. This is deliberate: Curses should be daunting and discovering the exact effects of a curse is an intended part of the curse-lifting process.

they were each so mean and cared only about themselves. She was the one who made the party, she was the one who invited them along—and they turned that into something bad, like it was her fault that they ended up a **huge-assed hypnoichi** and a **cuddly whorrior**. They did it to themselves! And still she felt bad for them—angry sure, but like a true empath she could separate her hurt feelings from her outstretched empathy. With Blinky’s help she’d become the **bestest bimbo ever**, and then it’d be her turn to help her friends! Honestly, if any two girls were in need of **giggling** and **jiggling**, it was them! Galatea could pass what she’d learned along, and then the sum total **fun** in the world would go up and up!

But first the help at hand, and in lieu of a smart solution, Galatea opted to do something **really stupid**.

“**Blinky! Look! I call this the jiggle dance!**” She had no idea what she was doing—but she wanted to do something for Blinky so badly, and what did you give the Gazer who had everything? A **show**, was what her **silly stupid brain** decided on. Before she could think twice about it—really, before she could even think once—Galatea threw her arms behind her head, spread her legs, and **got down**.

She didn’t have the Agility to pull off any kind of real, coordinated dance. All Galatea had going for her were her **bouncy bimbo boobs**, and so she did what she did best. Galatea **jiggled** and **giggled** for Blinky, awkwardly **shimmying**, **shaking**, **dropping**, **popping**, and every other high energy **-ing** she could manage. And while her huge tits **smacked** against her arms, her chin, her rib cage, and most loudly each other, she sang Blinky a stupid little song.

“**Thank youuuuuu, Blinkyyyyyyy~**”

Smack.

“**Thank you for helping me seeeeeeeee~**”

Smack.

“**Thank youuuuuu, Blinkyyyyyyy~**”

Smack.

“**For making a bimbo out of meeeeeeee~**”

Smack.

Her pitch was far from perfect, but she hoped her enthusiasm would carry the tune. She felt like an **idiot**, which was sort of the point, and she looked like one too with her **insipid smile**

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” channels Bimbo Brainwash.

Galatea leans into it.

Galatea’s brainwashing is over halfway to completion.

Brainwashing progress: 60%

[illegible]

²² In the course of playing Ardor Online, you may discover and unlock Character Traits unique to you. Traits are not status effects, and so they are permanent and cannot be removed. The only way to divest yourself of a trait is to reincarnate into a class incompatible with said trait.

²³ **Spiral Slut:** It could be anyone telling you anything. So long as they did it through a **swirling whirling spiral, you'll believe every last word.**

her. And how much she needed to love him in return. Because of course she would. Galatea was a bimbo, or so very close to one now, and bimbo bitches belonged to Blinky. She didn't quite see herself as a bitch, that was more Nim and Nahi's territory, but if Blinky wanted her to be, she'd be the sweetest, most affectionate, most agreeable bitch ever.

"Looooooooove Blinkyyyy. Obeyyyyyy Blinkyyyy." She could do both those things, easily. It was right for her to obey Blinky, and she knew that not only because obedience made her head all light and airy, but also because whenever she repeated what Blinky told her his tentacles squeezed her whole body in what was, without a doubt, the very best hug ever. The way he gripped her made her feel so safe and secure. Blinky had her and he'd never let go. What more could a girl ask for from her man? Even if her man just so happened to be a floating eyeball trailing tentacles.

Oh, there was something she could ask from him.

Thought it wasn't so much a request as giving consent.

"Galatea loves you Blinkyyyyyy, Galatea obeys you Blinkyyyyyy, so pleaseeeeeee, make Galatea the bimbo you want her to beeeeeeeee.♡" She begged him while performing her jiggle dance, because if he liked it so much the first time, why would she stop? Shaking her bimbo body like a complete moron had a strong positive effect on her bestie, so it was only appropriate for her to make her tits smack when making such an important request.

Galatea didn't need to know what a bimbo was to want to be Blinky's bimbo. All she had to do was trust his tastes, which were so far entirely aligned to her own. That's why they were such a perfect match—whatever Blinky wanted just so happened to be what Galatea wanted, too! How rare was it to find a partner who shared your tastes exactly? Blinky could do whatever he wanted to her and she'd love it.

It was coming. The bond between her and Blinky was strong enough now that Galatea could just tell. One more push. One more blink. One more—

Bimbo Gazer "Blinky" channels Bimbo Brainwash.

Galatea loves it.

Brainwashing progress: 100%

Galatea has been completely bimbo brainwashed.

Galatea gained status: BimBrain Curse.

Galatea gained status: **BimLibido Curse**.²⁴

“Uwah . . . hehehe . . . hehehehehe . . .” Galatea finally **got it**. It was **so simple** she felt like a **dumbass** for taking this long to figure it out. “**Bimbos** are . . . **busty brainless bitches** with, **like, boobies bigger than their heads** who only, **like**, think about totally **yummy things** like **fat cocks**. **Bimbos jiggle** and **giggle** and **bounce their brains away** because they, **like**, know **stupid sluts have more fun**. A **big boob bimbo’s job is to bounce brainlessly**. Nobody cares what goes on in a bimbo’s head because they, **like**, already know there’s **nothing going on up there**. A bimbo is just supposed to **bounce, giggle, jiggle, sway, and obey!**”

Giggle.

Sway.

Jiggle.

Obey.

Big boob bimbos

bounce

their

brains

away.

“**Bounce, bounce, bounce my brain awayyyy!**” Galatea was so lucky. All the things bimbos did were **things she loved doing already**. She had to make **absolutely zero changes** in how she presented herself and behaved in order to **play the part** of the **bona fide bimbo** Blinky wanted her to be. No wonder it had taken her so long to figure it out—how often did you encounter a word that, **like**, basically summarized **your entire being**? **Bimbo** and **Galatea** may as well have been **synonyms**! She gazed adoringly at Blinky from beneath her eye-obscuring bangs—she didn’t notice her hair growing **longer** but she loved it like this. Pink was, **like**, **definitely** her favorite color, and having more and longer pink hair was, **like**, a dream come true? It **swished so pretty** when she **bounce, bounce, bounced her brain away**.

Only . . .

Galatea *did* have a problem.

“So, **um, Blinkyyyyyyy?**” She thought about calling him Master, since **she belonged to him**, but that just didn’t sound right. Blinky was Blinky. And while Blinky knew best, if Galatea

²⁴ Remember, Ardor Online has not been proven to alter player cognition. However you **choose** to act within the game is simply a reflection of **who you truly are**. Do not blame a game for your behavior. **No one will believe you**.

had doubts left to voice, they were only there because Blinky allowed it. Ergo, they were **Blinky-approved thoughts**, and she could—should—share them. “Don’t you think my butt’s, **like, wayyyyyyyyy too small?**”

Granted, Blinky hadn’t told her anything about bimbos having big butts. But they were at the point where he didn’t have to. Galatea finally knew what a bimbo was, and with that knowledge she knew that **big boobs were not enough**.

What good were big boobs without a **phat ass** to round out the package?

“**Blinkyyyyyy**, do you think you could, **like**, I **dunnoooooooooo . . .**” Galatea stuck out her butt, as if to prove just how inadequately sized it was. It barely even *jutted*. “Make my ass all nice and, **like, juicy?**” She wagged it for emphasis. “Unless you’re okay with having such a **skinny bimbo**,” she added, teasingly, knowing that if Blinky was okay with having such a skinny bimbo that’d be the end of it and she’d be just fine with a small ass. But knowing also there was just no way. Galatea could *feel* she was still **incomplete**. There was nothing she wanted more than to be **Blinky’s best bimbo**, and if a little bit of playful teasing helped her get there—well, where was the harm?

CRACK.

“**Ooooh!**” Blinky answered by **whipping her** with one of his tendrils. Galatea **giggled** and **wiggled** her ass—noting with a deep, affirming pleasure that it was ever so slightly **bigger**. “That **stings**,” she moaned, as she stuck her ass out further, all but **shoving it in his** (non-existent) **face**. “**Spank me more, Blinkyyyyyy! Gawd**, I just wish I had some, **like, fuck-me heels** instead of these ugly boots.”

CRACK.

“**Yes!**” Galatea was glad to be free of her tunic. Her gear was so *practical* and *boring*. She wanted to **stand out from the pack**, and how on virtual Earth was she going to do that dressed like every other newbie adventurer?²⁵

CRACK.

“**Yes!**”

CRACK.

²⁵ Ardor Online takes place in the world of Cathexis, not a virtual Earth.

“Yes!”

CRACK.

“Yesssssss!” Each lash tore a strip through her boring **Beginner’s Pants** revealing her **swelling bimbo booty** that was reacting so well to Blinky’s **special venom**. Her once-loose pants were **practically painted on** now and only growing **tighter, creaking** at the seams and tearing at the edges of the strips Blinky’s tendril cut. “Yesyesyesyesyesssss, Blinky! **More, Blinky! Don’t you dare stop now!**”

CRACCK!

“Nnf!” He hit her harder that time and **she deserved it**. It wasn’t her place to demand anything. She was **Blinky’s bimbo** and she should **know** that he would make her **perfect**. Acting like that insulted both of them. “**Blinky, I’m sorrrrrryyy! I’m just a stupid bimbo and I should know better!**”

CRACK.

The next slap was practically a caress. Apology accepted. Galatea’s ass was nearly the size of her tits, now. Huge. Heavy. It **pressed** against her pants but wasn’t allowed to **wobble** just yet. But it was close. She was **so close**. “Just a little bit more, Blinky,” she panted. “Just a little bit more. I’m **so close**. I’m **so close**, Blinky. Can you feel it?” Surely he could, because his next barrage of jellyfish stings hit her **exactly** where she needed him.

CRACK. CRACK. CRA-CRA-CRA-CRACK!!!

RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRIP.

Beginner’s Pants broke!

CLAP. CLAP. CLAP.

Galatea’s **big bimbo butt bounced free** of bottoms that just weren’t there anymore and she moaned at just how good it felt to be **unencumbered** at last. She grabbed herself and marveled at just how **much meat** she had. “Now this is, **like**, a real **shelf**,” she moaned, hefting her **phat cheeks** and **pressing** them together. “I’m, **like**, a **whole ass bakery** now.”

If Galatea had one regret, she had two, and they were in ascending order of importance first, that with **tits bigger than her head** and **an even phatter ass**, the **comfortably curvy figure** she had planned for herself had all but vanished. Her **general meatiness** lost emphasis in proximity to **prime bimbo T&A**. It bothered her a bit, but not so much that she’d think about

having her tits or ass reduced—the opposite, actually. Second, she *knew* she could still be a bigger, better bimbo for Blinky.

“But this is as big as you’re allowed to make me, isn’t it?” Galatea hadn’t spent all that time studying Sway’s curves just to satisfy her lust. She knew the sisters’ measurements down to the centimeter, and so she knew she now matched them to the centimeter. She wasn’t dumb, just a bimbo. And a bimbo could still put two and two together.

If you gave her about an hour. Maybe two.

“Anyway, I’ve had, like, plenty of time to think this all over,” Galatea said, shaking her head, which made her tits jiggle, and her ass wobble. “You can make me bigger, Blinky.” She said it with all the seriousness a jiggly giggly bimbo could muster. The best she could manage was an impish pout, but it would have to do to convey her seriousness. “I’m your bimbo. Not theirs. I haven’t, uh, taken the oath, or whatever it was they wanted me to do.” She splayed her fingers across her unamuled neck, baring it for a lover’s kiss. “I know you want to do, like, everything the super sexy sisters tell you, because I’m the same way. But more than that, Blinky, I want to, like, be your perfect bimbo. And I’m not there yet, am I?” she asked, catching one of his tendrils so she could rub the tip over her mouth like lipstick. Blinky froze up. It stung good, and she smacked her fuller lips a few times to get a feel for them before fixing her owner with the sultriest look she could summon up—without a mirror to check, she might just have looked like a slutty idiot trying too hard, but also that’s exactly what she was, so was there even a problem if she did? “It’s the Cult of New Purpose, right? Not, like, the Cult of Their Purpose. I found my new purpose. My purpose is to be your bimbo. You’ve probably made, like, a bajillion bimbos for them by now, right? I think you, like, deserve at least one bimbo all for yourself. I’d even be okay with two or three others, if I get to help you pick them out.” She continued to lick and suckle his tentacle, kissing it and stinging her tongue on it and trying not to moan too loud as her lips plumped and plumped until they were perfect BSLs—Blinky Sucking Lips.

No matter what, Galatea didn’t want this to be about her. Her desire was what he deserved. She had to say this because nobody else would. “You’re more than just, like, a tool, Blinky,” Galatea said while slurping on his tool. “You’re not just somebody’s pet to order around. You have, like, your own desires, and you totally deserve to have them fulfilled.” And she deserved, more than anyone else, help him fulfill them out.

Blinky’s eye stopped spinning. The spiral became just a swirl, no less beautiful at rest than it had been in motion. Galatea didn’t love Blinky because hypnosis told her to. She loved Blinky because, um, because he was such a sweetie! And studly. He was a sweet bimbo stud,

perfect for a **sweet bimbo bitch** like her. She loved him and that was all that mattered. She didn't need to know why she did. **Feelings like hers couldn't be faked**. She sucked extra hard to prove it, hollowing out her cheeks like the cartoon mascot for some super sour candy.

Her fear—her only fear at this point—was that Blinky would say no. That his allegiance to that Ambrose Dana jerk was more important to him than **what they had together**. That he'd say no and turn her over to the sisters so she could be made their **perfect clone**. That **what she felt** only went one way, and he just didn't love her back like that.

But then Blinky unfroze. He blinked once, slowly, and she saw what she had known in her heart for some time already—Blinky was so much smarter and so much more thoughtful than the other floating eyeball monsters. Blinky was **special**. Even better than being special yourself is to have a **special someone**.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” and Galatea form a bond.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” is no longer owned by Ambrose Dana.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” wants to become Galatea's pet.

“Blinky!” The tentacle fell out of her wide-open mouth. This was more than she could have ever dared hope. She stared at the dialogue box and covered her mouth, like a spoiled heiress getting gifted her very first sports car. “Are you, **like**, sure? **Like**, really, really sure? I mean—” She had asked, if not for this exactly, for something like it. And now that Blinky had made it clear he wished to prioritize her over the cult, she was embarrassed. “—I'm just not sure I'm, **like**, good enough for you,” she said into her tits. “I mean I want to be. But, **like**, you're just so **amazing**, Blinky. You're the **best**, Blinky. And I really do want to be the **best bimbo for you**. So!” she declared, looking back up at him and **gazing all the way deep**. Meeting his eye so seriously, even when it was still, made her head spin. But she battled through the wooziness. “No matter what the game says, you're not my pet. You're my, **like**, **partner**, Blinky.” She paused. “You're also **my owner**. You're, **um**, both. So, **like**, we're **partners**, but also **you own me**. I know it sounds confusing!” said the only one confused. “But we'll make it work out! We'll make it, **like**, totally work out. Because we're **partners**. And **you own me**. Both can be true, **like**, simultaneously.” She reached out with both hands to touch his leathery, wrinkled body. Blinky's skin was soft and slightly springy, like a seal's blubbery thickness.

Galatea tamed Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” (Level 40/Tier 5)

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” became Galatea's pet!

“I’m yours,” she said, low and leaning in, so that she couldn’t see anything but Blinky’s big eye, and so he could see all of her. “I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours I’m yours,” she repeated, again and again while stroking his body. “I’m yours I’m Blinky’s bimbo bimbos belong to Blinky Galatea belongs to Blinky I’m sorry I’m sorry I love you so much and I’m sorry.” She felt so guilty. She wished there were another way, a way to make the game recognize that he owned her, not the other way around. Just reading the text felt **wrong** and made her stomach churn uncomfortably. “I promise I’ll find a way to make this better.” A game like AO (**so easy to forget it wasn’t a game**) that prided itself so much on immersion had to have a way for monsters to claim players as pets. It just had to.

She just had to find out how to do it.

Blinky didn’t seem nearly as bothered by their new circumstances—his tentacles coiled around her hands and squeezed reassuringly. “You’re, **like**, wayyyy too good to me,” Galatea sobbed. Tears rolled down her face and she couldn’t say whether they were of joy or frustration. All she ever wanted was Blinky and now she had him. So she had better get her act together.

“Okay! No more, **like**, crying,” she declared, rubbing her face on her shoulders to get rid of the tears. “Bimbos don’t cry. They **giggle. Ehe. Ehehe. Ehihihe**. So! Blinky!” She fixed him with a serious look and pressed her forehead against his upper eyelid. “**No more holding back**. We don’t, **like**, have to listen to the sisters. **Do whatever you want to me. Make me your perfect bimbo**. Not theirs.”

She let go, stepped back, closed her eyes for what felt like **the first time in hours and hours**, and exhaled. “I’m ready.”

She expected **another spiral**. She **anticipated one**, even. A **spiral slut** like her was **wide open** and ready to be told **what to think**. But Blinky surprised her. He didn’t **flash her vulnerable brain** with the final spiral she was **desperate for**. Instead he floated up to the top of the cell, hovered over her head, and revealed that he had **many more tentacles** than she ever realized. When she looked up, she couldn’t see Blinky’s main body at all. Just an overgrown tangle of lashing vines, slick and dripping with the **venom** that had gotten her so far.

Even a bimbo could tell what was going to happen next, so Galatea held herself still—an incredible feat for someone **built to jiggle**—and **giggled** quietly to herself as Blinky came down. His tentacles **stung** her scalp. They **stung** her ears, her cheeks, her nose, her mouth, her chin, her neck. They **stung** her shoulders as they wriggled down, **stung** her arms and **stung** her armpits and **stung** the base of her breasts as they swallowed her up, until Galatea couldn’t see

anything but writhing purple flesh cords, tangling with each other like snakes in a mating ball. Blinky's twisty, slimy underbelly swallowed her up.

Bimbo Gazer “Blinky” attempts to engulf Galatea!

Galatea doesn't resist.

Galatea gained status: Swallowed Whole.²⁶

Galatea gained status: Flesh Cocoon.²⁷

Galatea gained status: Venom Saturation.²⁸

Blinky's tentacles could stretch all the way to the floor, and did, with her inside. She was surrounded—**engulfed**—by wet, writhing, **stinging** meat. Just as she felt like so much wet, writhing, **stinging** meat herself.

Beginner's Belt broke!

Beginner's Boots broke!

Galatea was **totally exposed**, **completely vulnerable**, and **unable to resist**. And that was fine, because she wanted Blinky to know all of her, to touch and record every last inch of her body, so **he could make her the way he wanted her to be**. She'd have plenty of time in their future together to dress up in all kinds of **eyeball-baiting outfits** for his pleasure. She didn't know if Blinky could get hard for her—but she'd make sure to find out. As his **pet owner**, it was her **job** to take care of him. It was a big responsibility, but she'd manage.

“AAAAAGYYYYUOOUGHUGHGHHHHGHHHHGHHHHGHHHHGHHHHAAAAAH!!!” Just like how she'd manage to survive this. Blinky's venom covered her whole body like **paralytic lotion**, rocketing Galatea well past the point of **heat** to full-on **breeding rut**. Her huge nipples jutted so far forward that Blinky's tentacles had to rub their sides and tips separately, like ropes threaded around a pair of pulleys, and with venom soaking in from every direction they grew **fatter**. As did the entirety of her breasts—**growing bigger**, exposing **more surface area** to Blinky's venom, soaking up that **much more venom** to **grow even bigger** in a positive feedback loop that left her **howling**.

“SHOOOOGOOOGBLINKYITCHSHOOOOGOOOODDDDD!!!” There was no room for **jiggling** in Blinky's **flesh prison**, and

²⁶ **Swallowed Whole**: Certain monsters possess advanced grapples. It is strongly advised to avoid or break out of these grapples as quickly as possible, as they can transition to even more debilitating statuses if left unchecked.

²⁷ **Flesh Cocoon**: You have been trapped in an advanced grapple! Without help from a party member **there is no escape**.

²⁸ **Venom Saturation**: Curses are not the only means by which monsters can permanently debuff players. Be wary of all attacks that have conditions before they can be used.

Galatea lacked the composure necessary to **giggle** her way through the **titillating torture** his tentacles inflicted on her. She could only **scream** into the muffling wall of tentacles until Blinky, always thinking of her, stuffed a **tentacle down her throat** to keep her from biting her tongue off.²⁹ The venom scorched her throat like a shot of frat house shot of Fireball, but after the initial burn it proved **intensely soothing**. Suckling on Blinky's tentacle helped her calm down and process what all was happening to her body.

Blinky was making her **better. Better than better**. Blinky was making her the **best**. Bigger than the sisters, bigger than any game rated by the ESRB would ever allow, big enough to make her a **walking TOS violation** that justified the “online interactions not rated” clause all on her own.³⁰ Blinky's tentacle hell was her **chrysalis** from which she'd emerge a **mature** and **true bimbo**. She couldn't **jiggle**, but she could **wiggle**, and she did, doing her part to make sure Blinky's venom was **properly slathered on**. The stinging stopped stinging—now she just felt **fucking hot**. Blinky was making her **so fucking hot**.

Galatea gained trait: Venom-fed Physique.³¹

Galatea gained trait: Gazer Bait.³²

When the tentacles withdrew, they left Galatea **glazed** and **dazed**. Apparently she was so **inundated with venom** that she couldn't absorb any more, and the excess clung to her naked body like a thick layer of mineral oil. For many long moments she couldn't speak—after she didn't-know how long spent with Blinky **rubbing, squeezing, gripping, and squishing** her whole body like someone **wringing out a sponge**, the lack of direct stimulation was itself stimulating. She stood **slack-jawed** and **drooling, staring at nothing** as she struggled to process all the new sensorial signals bombarding her brain. Swallowed by Blinky, it had been simple—just as his many tentacles were one collective organ delivering her **pleasure** and **venom** and **venom-pleasure**, her whole body had just been one single **node**. Now she was back out in the open,

²⁹ There are no recorded cases of real physical harm coming to players as the result of their activities within Ardor Online. However, some medical professionals suggest mouth guards for players who regularly undergo intensive physical roleplay.

³⁰ Ardor Online does not have a rating, but requires a state-issued form of identification in order to register an account. Full Dive Entertainment is committed to providing the highest-quality adults-only fully immersive MMO experience it can.

³¹ **Venom-fed Physique:** Your proportions have been permanently altered as a result of overexposure to gazer venom. Strength and Agility totals are halved, while total Physique is tripled. Consequently, attribute point investments in Strength or Agility will only result in a one point increase for every two points invested, while a single point in Physique will increase the attribute by three.

³² **Gazer Bait:** By allowing a gazer to customize your body to its liking, you are now the very image of what gazer-type monsters look for in their prey. Gazer-type monsters are more likely to target you than other players, but are also more likely to be nonhostile as they assume you have already been enslaved by one of their breed.

devoid of his all-encompassing embrace, and she had a body that was **just too much**. Her hands found their way, with great difficulty, to her tits before she could return to her senses. They were drawn, instinctively, by the feeling of **heaviness**, and by the twin points of need **calling out for attention** from atop the heaviness. Her arms were only just long enough to reach the far side of the **massive melons** hanging from her chest, and to make their way from the outer edge to their **increasingly sensitive center** she had to **press** them together so much that her arms were swallowed from her biceps to halfway down her forearms, where her hands reemerged from the **sea of titflesh** to find **two stout spires** standing proud above the gently pebbled **promontories of areolae**, lighthouses guiding drowning sailors to land.

Galatea grapples herself.

Ten sailors dragged themselves ashore and clung to what they found, and Galatea's surfacing consciousness got thrown back beneath the waves. **Tug. Pinch. Pull.** Those **fat nubs** in defiance of human physiology were connected to **more nerve endings than could exist** in the real world, scattered throughout her breasts with the density and complexity that the **brain** required, not boobs, and **tugging, pinching, pulling** on them produced something equivalent to **anti-thought**.

Because how could her brain possibly keep up when tasked to interpret the sensory signals sent from an organ of approximately equal, **if not greater nervous complexity**?

Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.
	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.
Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.
	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.
Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.
	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.
Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.
	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.
Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.	Pull.	Tug.	Pinch.

She could, at least, manage to giggle. “Ehehehihehehi.” Her brain couldn’t compute the exact magnitude of pleasure experienced by her breasts via her fingers and nipples, so it did what it could—it labeled the impossible sensation as great pleasure and called it a day. Galatea immersed herself in that great pleasure, surrendered herself to it, because it was so much bigger than she was. Boobs that big, nipples that hard, weren’t just a part of her body. They were its purpose. The rest of her existed so that her nipples could get tugged, pinched, and pulled. Her thick nipples absolutely must be tugged, pinched, and pulled, just like how yellow lights must turn red.

Galatea grapples herself.

Galatea grapples herself.

Galatea grapples herself.

The light in Galatea’s head was stuck on red and likely would have remained so forever if not for the intervention. Tendrils coiled around her wrists and pulled them away from her breasts. Galatea couldn’t just let go of her needy nipples, so she dragged them along, pulling her breasts down and apart and enjoying a delicious springy tension as they stretched ever so slightly under the strain. Stretching. Tightening. Her fingers pinched harder to keep their purchase, but the tendrils were stronger, tugging her hands down and further down, stretching her big boobs to the limit until finally her sweat-and-slime-covered fingers couldn’t hold on.

Bwoingggg! Slap!

In defiance of earthly physics Galatea’s boobs snapped back into position, smacking against each other so hard they jiggled, and jiggling so wildly her fat nipples managed to touch. They clashed like jumper cables, except the sparks only existed in her mind, and finally that was enough to short Galatea back to startup, where she had just enough time to see how she couldn’t see the floor anymore before the tentacles guided her hands past her hips and pressed them into the new flesh there.

“Oh! Ohhhhhhhhhh.” Her giant tits were unmanageable, but her ass was even more so. She could, with difficulty, fight her way to the front of her tits and grab her nipples whenever she wanted—she wanted right then but she wasn’t allowed so she couldn’t—but there was simply no grasping the size of her ass. “Blinky . . . it’s gigantic! I could, like, be a pop star with a booty this big!” Her ass was big enough to sell at least two albums on image alone. Three or four if she took her singing lessons seriously. Ten if she learned to dance dirty instead. She’d be

nobody's favorite artist but she'd land her fat ass on the billboards with every single—so long as the single had a music video.

That was the level of ass she was working with. And all **delusions of divadom** aside, it really was as **phat** as she had dreamed. **Phatter**, even.

"Blinky," she said, knuckle deep in her own assmeat and trying to get deeper. "Am I, **like**, even going to be able to leave the cell like this? I, **um**, don't think I'll fit."

But fit she did—barely, with Blinky holding the cell door as open as it could go. Galatea squeezed through to freedom, and shivered when the cold iron bit into her flesh.

The icy, unyielding metal helped sober her up. She wasn't safe and she wasn't free—least of all because **Blinky owned her**, but more distressingly because she was still deep in the labyrinth the sisters had lured her and her friends into.

"Okay, so—**ough**." When she turned to conference with Blinky, she overestimated the narrowness of the cell corridor and dragged her nipples across the wall, like a grizzled cowboy or hard-boiled detective striking a match for her cigarette. Desire was her flame, and stimulation the enemy of her thoughts. She **squealed** and **squirted** before coming back to herself, switching from **orgasmic idiocy** to **serious bimbo business**. "So!" she said, pawing her tender chest. Blinky gave her some venom with a quick **grip-and-twist**. "**Aough**—thanks, Blinky! You take such good care of me. But! So! **Like**, anyway!" Thinking was not what Galatea did best, but she had to do it or else they'd take Blinky away from her, and that could not be allowed to happen. So, for Blinky's sake, she thought her hardest. "We need to get my friends. I mean, okay, we're not like besties or anything. We're besties," she said to Blinky, who dipped his eyeball in confirmation. "But me and Nim and Nahi are, **like**—proto besties. Like how the other girls aren't the sisters yet but kinda are the sisters. We'll be besties if we just, **like**, get the chance."

Blinky nodded.

"Right! So! We have to, **like**, get them out of here, because they've been, **like**, **totally brainwashed** by the church. Cult. Thing. Whatever they're doing here, they did it to them, so I have to save them!"

Blinky blinked.

"Even though we're not besties yet, yeah. No, we're besties. You and I. I'm, **like**, talking in circles. I have to save Nahi and Nim so we can become besties, and I was, **like**, really hoping that, maybe, **um**, you'd help me do it?" She looked up at Blinky with her best puppy-dog eyes

and fluttered her lashes. And then, because fluttering her lashes wasn't enough—a boy like Blinky with such a big eye must have seen much bigger and better eyelashes than she'd ever have—Galatea **jiggled** her tits and **giggled** as vapidly as she was able.

Which was, of course, **powerfully vapidly**.

Galatea didn't hope to coerce or convince Blinky. She'd respect whatever it was he decided. If he wanted her to leave without her friends, well—that was just bad luck for Nahi and Nim, and maybe they should have treated her better.

But she didn't worry, either, because she wouldn't let just anybody be her owner, and Blinky proved yet again how much **he deserved to have her** when he blinked and bobbed his head. His eye **strobed** like an emergency light, not as bright and beautifully blinding as it could if he wanted it to, and Galatea understood. Her eyes, it seemed, had adjusted to speaking Gazer.

"You're the best, Blinky! The absolute best!" She pulled him down for a big, **squishy** hug. His lumpy skin rubbed against her just the right way. She held him for a long few seconds, ensuring her gratitude transferred properly, before releasing him back to bob in the air next to her. "Okay! So!" It was really hard, keeping her plan in mind, when her mind was constantly thinking about getting back in the cell, waiting for her necklace, and giving up. Or constantly thinking about finding a nice, quiet spot in the alleys up above, where she could give Blinky the service he deserved for being such a caring stud. "Okay! So! First! I need to get dressed. Then I'm gonna have to ask you to help me change classes." She gave Blinky a look. "Because I'm, **like**, totally not cut out to be a Witch, right? And they have the, **um**, stuff to make people change classes here, right? **Nim and Nahi changed classes, I don't want to be left out!**"

She coughed cutely, having accidentally revealed her real motivation.

"So! Change of clothes and class. That way I, **like, totally** blend in with the other bimbos here. Then we, **like**, go and *get* my friends, and **fix** them so they're not so **cultbrained**. Then the four of us can all get out together!"

Blinky bobbed, blinked, then strobed something at her. Galatea gasped.

"**Ohmigawd**, yes! Totally! Absolutely! Blinky, that's the *best* idea! A thousand times, yes! Okay! So! For now, let's pretend like I'm still being brainwashed." Galatea brushed her hair—longer now, wilder, a real **mane**, and no longer **pink** but **platinum blond**, almost the snow white she had chosen for herself but even brighter, metallicized, glittering as it caught the light—back over her ears, as if she expected Blinky to gift her some lovely earrings. "Make yourself, **like**, at home," she said, eyes closed in anticipation of something even better and more intimate than a

kiss. A connection that entangled lovers could only approximate the ghost of. “You, **like**, probably have a way better idea where we need to go, anyway!”

When Blinky wormed his way inside her head, Galatea’s whole body shook, which meant it shuddered, which meant it **jiggled**, which meant it **smacked** and **clapped**. Like a dog shaking off water, Galatea moved both very much and not from her spot as the tentacles curled around her brain, situating themselves inside her skull and **filling up her empty head**. This was **even better than staring at the spiral**. This was zero degrees of separation from Blinky’s will and her obedience. When he moved her, it wasn’t a command to be followed. He didn’t even require her submission. He willed it. She performed it. Her body was **his own**.

And she had to **giggle** at that. Galatea **giggled** with her **eyes crossed** and **lips stupidly curled**, with **drool running down her chin** as her naked, **hyperpornographic** body moved with heavy, uncoordinated steps through the labyrinth, past cells and cages where players were converted into **product**, tens, maybe even a hundred persons having their **personalities overruled**, and their **avatars overhauled**.

It was the perfect camouflage. No one would ever think she wasn’t **just another brainless bimbo**. One on a mission to get some great clothes, a better class, and maybe even save her friends along the way.

“**Eheheiehihihihihi!**” She sounded barely any different from the half-transformed bimbos still trapped in their cells.

The perfect camouflage.