

# TRUE ASH

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Black  
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Press

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# TRUE ASH

If trees could talk, you said. If they could tell us what they saw.  
But if you didn't want to talk about it, why would a tree?

We walked in the arboretum as if nothing had happened. Past Japanese Maples, Witch Hazels, Legumes. Through Pinetum and across the stone footbridge. The math of it, was what you said.

We stopped to eat among Hollies and Hawthorns. When you sliced an apple, the red cored curl made me want to ask questions. The thing that had happened was unlikely to happen again, but you needed to be sure, so you carried a knife. You wanted me to carry one, too, but I was clumsy and sometimes fell. Even in the arboretum I liked to wear heels, the kind most women wear at night. It felt safer to wear heels during the day. At night I wore flats, shoes that could run.

When we got back to your apartment, I always cleaned the bottom of my heels with a paper towel. I did this sitting on the floor in my skirt, and sometimes you watched, lifting my hem. After a while I stopped wearing anything underneath my skirt and our walks got shorter.

There was nothing unusual about them, you said.

Who? I asked. We were eating dinner at your place.

The couple, you said. In the arboretum. The couple I saw in True Ashes that day.

I thought you said it happened in Hollies.

God no, you said. Nothing like that.

I sprinkled salt on my salad. Sometimes I ate salty things and sometimes sweet, but never at once. You claimed you couldn't tell salt and sugar apart. But you said that about a lot of things.

I thought about all the couples I'd seen walking in the arboretum. How the woman sometimes bent into the man as if she couldn't walk on her own. How the man explained the names of trees while she extended her branches.

We're not like that, you said.

But what did you mean?

I wanted to ask what it was that you'd seen. I'd avoided the news for a week after that. You saw it first, from the outside, a stranger. On the cusp of True Ashes, and who knew what they saw.

Maybe trees bend toward us on purpose.

Sunlight, you said. The science of roots.

But maybe it's more. Maybe they feel things.

Would you stop eating plants if you knew what they felt?

I didn't answer, just rubbed my ring across my wrist.

You lifted my hem. Bunched my skirt around my waist and straddled me. My shoes and hands were dirty, but you wanted my mouth, so it didn't matter.

The couple, I asked. What was she wearing?

Did I mention a woman?

I assumed they were straight.

You smirked.

So it was two men. Or two women? Who else could it be, walking in pairs?



The next morning you went to work and I worked from your apartment. It was part of our agreement to trade. Sometimes your upstairs neighbor played music, pot smoke drifting down through the vents.

At noon I walked to the corner store for a sandwich. While I was browsing I noticed a pack of bubblegum cigarettes. I hadn't seen that kind of candy in years. Something about advertising smoking to children.

Can I have these for half? I asked.

The clerk looked at the date on the faded pink wrapper.

Just take them. We don't even carry those here.

I put the pack in my pocket. Bought coffee and a loaf of bread. Walked from the store to the arboretum. Scattered bread, waited for birds.

They swooped down from the sky to land at my feet.

If you would wait. If you would stand very still.

When you came home that night you asked if I'd gone there.

Why do you ask?

Because of the dirt.

It was true. I'd tracked dirt through the kitchen. In the movies you liked, girls licked the floor clean.

I scrubbed with a towel while you uncorked a bottle. Then you poured two glasses and we sat on the couch.



In the morning you were gone again. I couldn't remember the kiss, if there had been one, how long, mouths open or closed. All I was left with was the dream, but no one wants to hear about that. Everything the color raw umber, everything shaded and drawn. I went looking again.

I liked that the woods had a name here. Arboretum. Sometimes I got glossolalic about it. Sometimes it turned into other things. Our bore eat them. Arrr burr, arrr boar. Eee tomb. A tomb.

What had you seen? I texted you all day. And followed couples. Took pictures while their backs were turned. Them? I texted, with photo. Them? To the pictures you offered no response. Only: stop

that. You'll get yourself in trouble. So I stopped that. Was someone taking pictures, I asked. No. Was someone hurt. No. Was there blood. Absolutely not. Well what was it. I took a picture of the sky and you told me: closer. And then the day was filled with meetings, you with your people, me with the trees. Near noon I looked at my watch to see if I could be hungry. The stippled light made my wrist look bark-like just for a second. Then a crow chattered and I was me again.

Did you work today, you asked when you got home. I told you I tried to, but you didn't know what that meant. You took off your shoes and all I could think was that your feet were ugly, but that I liked all of the ugly in you. At ten, like always, you held my wrists behind me and pushed me up against the stove. I liked my hands on you, but you liked them behind me. No, you told me when I tried to get free. That's not how this is going to be. Your face was full of drink and I went stiff until you quit.

What did you see?

What?

What did you see?

But you were out, snoring, sawing zeas. I put on the noise machine, turned it to birds and mapped out the park in my head. Everything green, but the ashes were glowing.



I went to see my mother in Auburn and sat so long watching talk shows I couldn't get up from the chair. She was talking about men with red hair again. Why always this I didn't know. And hats. Cloche and fedora, schoolboy and beret. At least it wasn't the shadows. Sometimes she saw people who weren't there. Sometimes my father. Sometimes another one of me. Was I a twin, I started to wonder. I tried to pay attention. Ginger, she said. Ginger? Ginger, their hair. I hit my legs, but they were wooden. I hit them again; they softened a bit. My legs felt filled with water. I felt I could spread out again.

You called to tell me not to come home, that you would be late anyway. I thought it was good to be out in the sun, or, the light like flame on the carpet from the skylight. I let it lead me around the room. I stretched out in it, lifted my face to it. Is it strange, I thought and then texted, that I swear I can feel my hair grow. You never responded. Just two words to say goodnight: sleep well.



What did you see?

What?

What did you see?

Are we back to this again?

Out of the corner of my eye I saw an axe in your hand, but it was just the chain and you led me around, or it was just your two rings catching the light.

Come here, you told me. And I did as you said. I started to touch your face, but you said it tickled. In the lamplight you looked a little green. I couldn't see myself in you.

Close your eyes, you told me. And I was sure I'd never open them again, so I didn't.

Count to ten, you said. But I didn't.

On the bed, you told me. And that wasn't a question. My knees went out from under me. But you changed your mind.

Open your eyes. But they were already open.

On your feet. They felt out of control. I put on my heels.

Out the door. You may as well have collared and leashed me.

I was in front of you all the way, you giving directions. Right at the Hollies, left at the Dogwoods, straight through the copse of Magnolia. They smelled sticky and sweet. Dead blooms blackened underfoot.

Don't turn around, you told me. But I wouldn't have thought of it. Don't speak. I said nothing.

Into the stand of True Ash my heels sank slow as you stopped me. My toes found soil, that damp cold, and began to tunnel down. My legs were striated and hard, hard husk, a cortex, a casing, outer shell. My head felt light and the wind began to move through me. You kissed my shoulder, hand heavy at the back of my neck. You got me down on my knees, but that wasn't low enough. I disappeared in the leaves.

# THE APPEASEMENT

Marketing was always late. Sometimes she didn't even show, and the meeting went on without her. If legal didn't show, forget it. But marketing was this gray area, where we all felt like we could do her job. So first she was late, and then no show, and then the cops turned up in the lobby.

I was talking to Felice. Just talking. My wife at home, two kids, the end. Suddenly cops; there went that conversation. I ate lunch at my desk, but no one knew squat.

This was Friday. I spent the weekend at home. Had sex for the first time in how many months. Worked out at the gym, washed the car, mowed the lawn. Took the kids to a movie. Nothing too deep.

On Monday Brianna drove the kids to swim practice, but her power walking buddy canceled, so she was home by 8. I followed her into the bedroom. She was sorting laundry, little piles of clean.

“Wanna grab breakfast?”

“I've got stuff to do.”

I thought about asking for a blow job, but figured she'd like that even less than an eggwich. Instead I ate by myself at one of the food trucks. Watched traffic creep past boats on the bay.

When I got to work the lobby was quiet. I caught an elevator right away. Swiped my badge while I texted Felice.

*How was yr weekend? ☺*

The elevator didn't move.

Swiped my card six, seven times. Got out of the elevator and walked to front desk. It wasn't Herschel. Some guy named Frank.

"I work on 10, but my card won't swipe."

Frank's mouth did something weird.

"I can prove that I work here. Want to call upstairs?"

"You're not going upstairs. I have orders to escort all 10th floor employees out of the building."

"But my stuff," I said. What I meant was Felice.

Frank gestured toward the door. "Let's go."

"It's the cigarettes, isn't it?"

"Exit the building."

"I knew it!" I pounded my fist on his desk.

"You need to leave now or I'm calling security."

"Aren't you security?"

Frank picked up the phone.

"Fine." I took one of the *MetroTech* pens and jammed it into a plant on my way out the door.

Michelle and Amit were under the awning, smoking. I held out my hand and Michelle shook the pack. We sent little puffs of smoke toward the office.

"Someone ratted us out."

"That marketing chick."

We made small talk, a thing I like. But they were standing too close and then walked off together. Everyone else was fucking around. I was so good, not one time with Felice.



When I met Brianna, she thought my job was cool. We sold candy bars marketed to look like health food. Sometimes I think her sweet tooth was the hook. I liked that about her. She knew how to eat.

Then the sports bar craze took off and our sales plummeted. Who needs a fake sports bar when they can have the real thing? So we sat

around trying to come up with gimmicks. Something else fake to replace the real thing. Our first hit was toothpaste, frosting in a tube. Mint, and it came with a chocolate toothbrush. We made marzipan smartphones that glowed in the dark. Dark chocolate laptops with licorice cords.

Meanwhile, marketing got paid the big bucks to come up with candy cigarettes.

“It’s been done,” I said, “and those guys got in trouble. Nobody likes it when you market to kids.”

But no one was listening. Just fucking around. I could logic all day, but what did they care?

It wasn’t enough to sell bubblegum sticks. Kids today were a lot less naive. So marketing came up with “Roll your own candy.” Called it True Ash; it sold off the shelves. Pouches of green candy leaves and rice paper. Kids bought it and rolled it. Some rapper wrote songs.

Now marketing had disappeared, and Felice wasn’t texting, and my wife was so clean.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. Why was I shut out of my office? Candy rolling papers weren’t my idea. I just crunched numbers and signed company checks. Maybe Felice was upstairs, cross-legged and stubborn. Not texting was code for how much she cared.

I took a spin in the revolving door: my hamster wheel, energy, sparks of frayed nerve. Frank eyed me from behind his desk. I thought about pulling the fire alarm, but slowed my revolution as I realized there wasn’t one. Everything was so high tech; probably an app for “Fire.”

I stepped out under the awning and scanned my phone. 99¢ and a few minutes later a woman screamed “Fire” and a siren unfurled. I threw in a car crash and “Help” for good measure. Soon Frank was outside, racing into the street.

I walked past the potted plants, around the sofa, and into the stairwell. The first three flights felt fine, felt loose. By six my hamstrings and arches complained. I was panting as the tenth floor blurred.

I expected the door to be locked, so I leaned into it and fell when it opened. I'd never taken the stairs before; during earthquake drills we did shelter in place. My kids still did fire drills; tsunami drills, too. We just did earthquakes. I didn't know where I was. The room was dark, and smelled like church, or a bake sale where everyone bakes the same thing. I wished I hadn't eaten an eggwich. I should've had fruit and granola with soy.

I reached my left arm as far as it would go left, hit wall, righted myself, held the door open with my heel. The light cast from the stairwell was weak, sad, only crept inches into the dark space. The smell of overcooked oatmeal, the smell of stale chocolate chips came over me stronger. Like Betty Crocker had died.

I reached out my right hand and the wall was there too. I felt around both ways for switches. Nothing. The door fell closed behind me. Fuck-it fuck. I couldn't move forward without letting it go. What was dim then became alldark, black. I waited for my eyes to adjust; they didn't. I stood there in the dark, thinking about egg sandwiches and Felice's lower lip and how easily lives like ships were sunk. The siren sounds of the fire alarm stopped. And I knew it was a matter of time.

Where lights? I willed my eyes to see, but they were useless. Fuck-it fuck.

I crept along one wall. But every time it seemed the door with its thin sliver of light was still just a step behind me.

Christ, I thought. Christonacracker what have I gotten myself into. Eventually the slit receded behind me and another one appeared in front of me. I opened that door: more stairs. How... the... fuck? And beyond that, another door. I stood in the stairwell and the building hummed a little. If I listened, I thought I could hear words: *acquisitive* and *fricassee*, *fricative*, *stressless*, *stressless*, *stressless*. But it was just the tap-tapping of the air vent and the rasping of small winged insects beating themselves against the fluorescents.

Huh, I thought, ten flights up. *Industrious* fuckers. And then I thought, lifespan. They spent their whole lives getting here? Just to die against the light?

I checked my phone, but had no bars in the stairwell. Was it the same one as before? I tried the door across the way but it was locked. Had I never been in the stairwell before? I hadn't. There'd been talk of exercise walks up and down, some of the girls. But I'd never gone.

I was suddenly all turned around. And both doors were locked, fuckity fuck. And down at the bottom I'd find Frank. I didn't know if what I'd done was arrest-worthy. Not yet, I thought. But still.

My phone buzzed: a texted image from a number I didn't know:

It was a picture of me in the stairwell. Standing there staring at lights.

I should have maybe thought creepy, thought get out, thought this is the way things start to go bad in scary movies. But my first thought was: this is getting me nowhere and god do I look stupid standing here.

Another text: *try the door again.*

*Which one?* I texted back. Got no response.

So I tried one, the closest. It opened to a long hallway, lighted. Improvement there at least. At the end, a corner going right. The matte-white walls were scuffed and dirty before the turn. Cleaner after, dotted with a few framed photographs of beach scenes. Palm trees leaning and sea foam frozen in the moment of release. And one faded poster of Duran Duran's *Rio*. Those perfect white teeth and white skin, those lilac knives of earring, and red lips, black hair. Just as the song started up its first cycle of what I was sure would be days in my head, the fire alarm started bleating again. I'm given time, I thought. If I get arrested, well, let's make it worth it.

The hall led to the 10th floor lobby. From there I could find my way. All the elevators were closed, but one was dinging madly. It sounded like a fucking game show.

The doors to Sucrawin stood open. Everyone had left in a hurry. Desk drawers tilted. Chairs upended. The cheaply piled carpet of ill-design trashed with overturned and trampled files. The carpet was almost prettier like this.

God I hated that carpet. On hung-over days I had to look away so I didn't get sick.

Computers were unplugged and separated from their CPUs, which were nowhere to be found. Sad tails to silent machines. On Felice's desk, the candy jar had been shaken down, only grape saucers left. No one wants those. Which I wasn't supposed to say. They *were* Sucrawin, after all.

Grape saucers taste like cheap whores, Felice had said once. I got some mileage out of that. Privately though, you know.

I popped a saucer in my mouth. "Whores," I said.

On my desk there was nothing left. Only the series of 3-D boxes I had penned into the corner while on particularly bored phone calls. Penned and repenned, lines gone over and over, sometimes expanded into more tiny cubes. There was a picture of my wife from a million years ago—before, when things were a little wilder and I could pin her arms behind her. And one of the kids. God I love those little assholes, I thought. I'll never feel like I know them. But love, love doesn't have to make sense.

I'd like to love more, I thought. I think.

My phone buzzed. Another text from the same number: *get out.*

*Who is this?*

*Now.*

*Who is this?*

And I thought about all the times my wife got to talk and I didn't.

*Sheryl?* I said. Probably not, but it made me laugh to send that. On the way out, on the receptionist desk, next to the dancing statue of Purr-Purr Kitten Sour, was a manila file folder that I couldn't remember having been there before. I flipped it open. Inside, a spreadsheet titled: *The Appeasement*. I took it and got the hell out of there before things got any weirder.



The Appeasement was just names and numbers. A list of them. And then some letters that made no sense at all, some kind of code.

One column of numbers was clearly cash amounts. Most in six digits, some higher, with a point-O-O after.

If they were payouts, why wasn't I apprised? I sat on the cold stone wall outside fingering the pages, chewing on my lip, and thinking what to do next. Now that I had no job would I become obsessed with this? Was that the thing to do?

I found Felice milling about, smoking her Pall Malls in the plaza out front of the building. She was standing with her skirt hiked up so high. Was she waiting for me?

"Your nails look great," I told her. Pale blue, mint green on the ring fingers. Just a little chipped around the edges.

"Were you in there?"

"I was."

"Someone said the whole building's on fire, but I said where's the trucks if that's the news."

"Company's gone. Any idea why?"

"Why are you asking me if you were just in there?"

"Because you seem to know things."

"You're talking at me. I'm just seeing where that's about to go."

"Do you want a drink?"

"Do you have one?"

"We could go somewhere."

"Why would we do that?"

Jesus, those legs.

"I want to take you for a drink is all."

"That's all?"

"You act like you don't believe me."

"Takes better game for that to work." She dropped her cigarette and stepped on it. Despite my irritation I wanted to kiss her stupid mouth. What would the world be like if I just did that? If I was a person who just kissed a beautiful mouth that was in front of me?

"You don't happen to know Marketing's name?" I asked her.

"Why?"

“I want to ask her what happened. She doesn’t show up one day and then things are just over.”

“Isn’t that how it goes—someone stops showing up?” Felice turned around and started walking. After a few paces she stopped. “Legal would know.”

“What?”

“The name. He knows everybody.”



I got in my car and turned on the radio. Took me ten minutes to admit to myself that I didn’t care what was happening in the world right now. Did I ever? I switched to something Top 40, all Cristal and ass. But then the hour hit and it was “throw-back” whatever and Jodeci came on and it was like high school again and I was at Homecoming, standing in the dark and twinkling gymnasium where I never asked Sandrine Calleo to dance.

I knew where Legal lived, but didn’t have his number. I had been there once when he’d moved. A new house. I was as shocked as any that he’d had a housewarming and invited me. He was friendly, but in that distant way. I don’t know what I expected, but I wanted to know what beer he would buy. Bridgeport, the I.P.A. and then something local. That had seemed about right. And then the almost empty bottle of Laphroaig I saw in his kitchen that I knew he hadn’t moved with. No point. There were only two or three fingers in there. Had he drunk a whole bottle of good whisky in the week and a half that he’d lived there? In any case, he was in a much better pay bracket than I’d ever be.

I didn’t have his number. Could I just show up? And then Nelly’s “Country Grammar” came on and I felt compelled to move, to do something. What? I popped the trunk and got the 2-liter bottle of Vodka of the Gods. With the label ripped off it looked just like a bottle of water. I hoped. I took a few drags until I got clear about what I had to do, got back in the car and rolled up on Legal.

I knocked on the door and some dude answered. Someone I'd never seen before. Nice shirt, nice tie. Had I got the wrong house? No, there was the brass lion knocker on the door, the sun dial on the lawn. And I realized: I didn't know Legal's name either.

"Is Legal here?"

"I'm sorry?" the young man said.

"I'm—"

"Sucrawin?"

"Sucrawin, yes."

"Hold on a minute," he said and closed the door all but a crack. I heard him walk off a few paces before yelling *honey* into the cavernous house. Gay? The thought had never occurred to me. Good for him, I thought. It was hard not to admire the young man's intensely good looks. I've always prided myself on my ability to separate sexual attraction from attention to the detail of attractiveness. I was in no way *interested*, for example, in boning this young man, but GQ would not have turned him down. As he led me into the house, I even admired the way his slacks fit neatly over his ass. *Good for him.*

Legal's boy led me into the kitchen where Legal was standing with his hand in some pot. He shook it out and I heard some scratching. "Lobster," he said by way of explanation. He had a white apron tied around his waist, a yellow Polo shirt uncovered, a spot of red (wine? blood?) near his navel.

"You don't know my name do you?"

"I did once," I said.

"Doctor," the young man fake-whispered in my direction.

"*Doctor?*"

"Yes," Legal said. "My father loved the nickname 'Doc' and thought the best way to make sure of it was to name me Doctor."

"You're kidding."

"He's not," the young man said. "Have you ever thought about *your* name? Or, like, the name James or Douglas or Karen? Where they came from. It's all just sounds."

“This is Nurse,” Doctor said.

“He’s just kidding.”

“It *is* what I call you.”

“Henry,” the young man said, and held out his hand.

“Hank,” Doctor said. “I like Nurse Hank better.”

“Of course you do,” Henry said, leaving the room.

“So what’s this about? Do you want a drink?”

Laphroaig? I thought, eyeing the brown liquid in his crystal tumbler.

“Whatever you’re having.”

He poured it neat. Tipped his glass, raised an eyebrow.

“I’m trying to get ahold of Marketing.”

“And?”

“I don’t know how to reach her.”

“Or know her name?”



Taylor Swift (Marketing) lived in a brownstone halfway across town. Is her name really Taylor Swift or are you fucking with me is what I asked Doc. Nurse Hank laughed like he’d heard the joke before. I asked also about the payouts, but Doc wouldn’t tell me about any of that.

I went up the steps, knocked, and no one answered. I sat in the car and ate two energy bars, UpBeet & Butters. Who knew beets were so good for you? They made my mouth red; the almond butter stuck in my teeth. I thought of zombie films, all tough sinew and gore. Every time, I thought. Didn’t help to wash it down with Red Bull. I stuck my tongue out. Red. Rinsed with Vodka of the Gods. Still red. Jesus. At least my breath was clean. Like mouthwash.

I heard Joan Rivers used vodka as deodorant.

A car pulled up and Marketing got out. Jeans, a pink t-shirt. Before today it’d been nothing but dark pantsuits, blue or gray or black.

“Taylor?” I got out slowly, not wanting to scare her.

“No one calls me Taylor.”

“Are you—”

“Alison. It’s my middle name.”

And it was then I noticed the resemblance. Why it had never occurred to me, I don’t know. The brushed out blonde finger curls, bright blue eyes, dark eyeliner, the semi-opened sparrow lips tinted ruby red, sweetsoft voice, and the cutest fucking nose.

“You look like Taylor Swift,” I said, stupidly. “Is that a stupid thing to say?”

“Is that what you came here to talk about?”

“No.”

“Are you going to murder me if I let you in?”

“I’m just worried about my next paycheck. Is the company going to start up again or is it over?” Suddenly who she was seemed important. That song about being trouble was starting to fuck with my synapses.

“I don’t know what I can tell you.”

“Why did you get in trouble?”

Red lips, wry smile.

“Who are you?”

“I was made in the late 80s. A product. Born fully formed and kept on ice until the future was ready.”

“What does that mean?”

“There are hundreds of us.”

“Fully formed?”

“Yes. Born at 18.”

“And you never age.”

“Only how we were programmed to. Which is gradually. Something you’ll never notice in your lifetime. I have a half-life of 300 years.”

“Why not go on forever?”

“The planet doesn’t have that long.”

“But do you sing?”

“I can.”

“But, so...”

“Yes, she’s one of us. One of me.”

“Why marketing for you?”

“There’s one of us in each profession.” Then she told me about subliminal messaging, which was effectively banned in the 80s after soda pop got caught with sex on its mind. “Even though research on action priming shows that subliminal stimuli can only trigger actions one plans to do anyway.”

“Was Sucrewin using subliminal messaging?”

Marketing nodded. “Just on the candy cigarettes, the new kind, the rolling kind; it was something we were trying. If it’s truly subliminal, you can’t get caught. I’ve been using it my whole career. Mostly on soda and political campaigns. After the SEX in the ice cube debacle (not my campaign), I decided to show it could be done. I was just showing myself though. I never let on to the executives or anybody that I was inserting anything below the threshold. But I was.”

“You were?”

“With the candy and the rolling papers, kids were just supposed to think it was cool to roll your own tooth decay. Somehow kids started snorting it though. And then getting mixed up in harder stuff—bath salts and methamphetamines. Everything went up their noses. Sales were through the roof, but kids’ faces were losing the game. Gummed up sinuses. Some kids were filling other holes, betting on a quicker high. I won’t go into what a mess that was. No one ever figured out the problem. I can’t even say I did. They couldn’t pin it on me, but they asked questions.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you’re the only one asking.”

“You don’t think I’ll take this public?”

“You won’t. You’re not that kind of guy.”

I just looked at her.

“My job is to know people. It’s what I do. You’re not a guy with follow through. Besides, I’m assuming you’ll want to be on board when we start back up again.”

“We’re starting back up?”

“We just need a little rebranding. A new logo will probably fix most of the mess.”



A year later Sucrawin reopened with a new focus: everything gluten-free. Beans, nuts, dried fruit, beef and salmon jerky.

Things that wouldn’t have gluten anyway.

I came up with the pitch. Walked away with *Employee of the Year*.

That was part of my appeasement: a trophy. There were other things, too. Things I asked for and got. Some of them NSFW.

Brianna and Felice get along just fine.