

Hard Feelings

by F.R. Southerland

No one ever called the diner by name. Maybe “Dine Right Diner” never quite caught on because of the cheesiness of the title. It was just “the diner”, an appellation that everyone in the city—in the immediate vicinity especially—knew. There were other diners, other restaurants and eateries, but the Dine Right was unlike the others. Not really because of the greasy spoon menu items, or the dim lighting and chipped Formica tabletops, or even the general slow-moving, altered ambiance of the diner. It was something else. Location maybe? It was smack-dab in the center of the city, an easy to find sort of place.

Andy always thought it was location-based, but more than that—it was the people. The cooks and wait staff, the customers. Everyone who passed through the diners doors and spent any amount of time there had a story to tell, had some kind of extraordinary presence. She had wondered, before, if didn’t have something to do with the mystical origins of the city itself and the complexities of its composition. Was the diner built on some vortex of power? On some in-between sort of space, ever shifting?

These were the sort of things that came to her mind as she stood at the diner’s counter, waiting for someone to take her order. The feel of the place was warm today, which the witch took to be a sign of good things to come. It wasn’t overly crowded either. Her gaze searched the dining room, searching out familiar faces. There were a couple—customers who were usually here, or others she might’ve seen at the store, or who visited her shop. There was one woman she was sure was a cashier at the grocery store. Andy gave a pleasant smile when she was caught looking and immediately shifted her gaze back to the counter.

She’d often wondered why Vivian, the Alpha of the Newfound Pack, worked at a place like this. Was it convenience? Was it because this place was a central hub and she could keep an eye on things? Or was it something else? She’d always considered asking Glen about it but they’d never quite gotten around to talking about that. Or much else.

Laughter came from behind the closed kitchen door. Through the round window, Andy could see one of the cooks moving back and forth, and then the top of a head, brown hair pulled back. And then Vivian emerged from the door, adjusting the strings of her apron. The smile on her face faltered for just a second when she saw Andy.

It wasn’t really a surprise to see the red-haired witch there. She came in several mornings a week to pick up coffee for herself and the others at the magic shop. It made sense that she’d be there this morning. It only startled Vivian, as it always did. She liked Andy well enough, but some of that like had soured after the way she had treated her cousin Glen. Break-ups had a way of doing that. Vivian truly didn’t hold any bad feelings toward—except that she kind of did. Sometimes, the ferocity of those feelings took her by surprise, as it did in this case.

Her smile didn’t stay gone long, though perhaps a bit dimmer than before, when she directed it at Andy again. “The usual?” She probably didn’t even need to ask.

“Yeah.” Andy put her hands on the counter, fingers drumming for a second. “Well, no. You can forget Vinnie’s. She’s not at the shop this morning.”

Vivian gave a small nod and began prepping the coffee. Three to-go cups—all with milk and sugars

—for the girls at Embers & Ashes.

The scent of fresh brewed coffee was strong, wafting throughout the diner. It was one of the many things that made the place seem warm today, Andy thought, even if Vivian's smile had seemed to cool the atmosphere down a bit. She didn't blame her though. The whole thing with Glen was fucked up and Andy was still deeply sorry about it. Apologies had been given and the mending process was underway. She hesitated though, wondering if she should—No, probably not a good idea. Pissing off a werewolf—especially the alpha of the local pack was a bad idea. It had been a while, yes, but digging open a still healing wound wasn't how she wanted to spend her morning. And Glen wasn't here to act as a barrier, though given the circumstances, she wasn't sure if he'd hold off his cousin or not. The hurt was still too fresh.

She debated, watching Vivian add the milk to the cups. Finally, she came out with it, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. "How's Glen?"

Over the scent of warm coffee, she could smell a mixture of herbs covering Andy's nervousness. It had a scent like sweat—salty, sharp. She'd rather smell the coffee, but close proximity and her heightened senses didn't afford her much choice.

Vivian paused to clean up some milk that had sloshed onto the counter. Her lips pressed together, forming a thin line for just a minute. "He's okay." Andy asked once in a while. Maybe she was trying to ease some of her guilt, maybe she was genuinely concerned. Whatever it was, there was a pattern to it—she wouldn't ask every time, and she always was direct about it, which was something Vivian appreciated. She'd rather someone drive right to the point of something, instead of trying to be delicate about it. She understood sometimes tact was important, but not for something like this. They both knew what it was. It didn't have to be delicate.

At least not too delicate. "He's fine," she said again, when she realized her tone might've indicated her cousin was anything but fine. Vivian placed the cups into the cardboard carrier and placed it on the counter, tilting her head up to view the much taller woman's face.

It seemed like Vivian wanted to say more, and Andy actually hoped she would. Maybe elaborate on how he was okay. Maybe give her a clue about what was going on in his life. But Andy didn't deserve to know, not really. She'd blown her chance and she knew it.

"That's good," she said, mustering up a smile. She passed the bills to Vivian before her fingers found a hold on the carrier. "Tell him I said 'hey'."

Another thing she always added. To say 'hey', or 'hi', or 'tell him I'm thinking about him'. Vivian hadn't yet figured that out. It was either kindness or desperation. Andy was trying to do her part, but maybe trying too hard. But what did she know? She nodded anyway, smiled, counted out the change. "Sure. I will." She rarely did.

Andy's smile turned more genuine as she pocketed her cash. "Thanks. Appreciate it." Her gaze swept to the side, taking in the smattering of customers, feeling the strangeness of it all, and noting how the place no longer felt as it had before. It had shifted again. Maybe it was because she was leaving, or maybe it was because of the exchange with Vivian. Either way, the diner didn't feel so welcoming now.

"See you tomorrow," she said, as she flipped hair over her shoulder and backed her way out the door, balancing the coffees carefully—with just a little bit of telekinesis to ensure she didn't drop them.

Vivian watched her go before she released the inside of her lip. Andy's heart was in the right place, she thought, but it would be a while before she could accept that any good would come from it. With a sigh, she grabbed her rag and started to wipe down the counter.

