
Very strong. Extremely strong.

AERITH sat at the bar, sipping her cocktail. There were plenty of tables and private booths available, but she always enjoyed sitting right up at the counter, watching people come in and place their orders: it was much more interesting than just staying at the back by herself. She'd got quite good at guessing what sort of drink people were going to order just based on their appearance and mannerisms. Humans were predictable.

Her interest was piqued when someone who was definitely *not* a human entered and headed into the space at the bar next to her. The non-human in question appeared to be the real-life incarnation of a sort of cartoon porcupine, clothed in large white gloves and almost offensively garish shoes. It gave her an inscrutable glance, then clambered up onto the neighbouring barstool.

Craig, the barman – who Aerith had become mildly

friendly with on account of how frequently she visited – approached the newcomer and nodded. “All right, what can I get you?”

“Hello,” said the creature, its voice slow and surprisingly deep. “I would like ... one beer.”

“Uh huh, you’re gonna have to get more specific, buddy,” said Craig.

“Oh,” said the creature. “I was told this was the place to come to get beer. Was I misinformed?”

“No, that’s –” Craig began. He put down the empty glass he had been wiping with what seemed like unnecessary force: he was clearly losing his patience. “Look here, son,” he said, leaning on the counter. “I’m gonna give you the benefit of the doubt here, and tell you that *you have to choose from the list.*” He indicated the array of taps on the bar. “But no funny business.”

The creature blinked at the taps, then turned towards Aerith. “Excuse me,” he said. (Craig had seemed pretty confident that the newcomer was male, so Aerith decided to follow his lead.) “I think I have misunderstood this situation. Would you lend me some assistance?”

“You’re very polite,” Aerith couldn’t help saying.

“An echidna is always polite,” the stranger declaimed. He looked back at the taps again. “I am confused. What is the difference between these beers?”

“Well ...” said Aerith. “I don’t really go for beer myself. But” – she began to gesture at the offerings – “that one’s lighter, I think – these are supposed to be full-bodied ... that’s a popular one, maybe you could start there.”

“Then I shall,” he announced. “Barkeeper, I would like one measure –”

Craig was frowning. “Pint,” Aerith hissed.

“One pint,” said the echidna, “of your finest Heineken.”

“Do you have cash?” Craig asked suspiciously, and the echidna’s face fell.

“I’ll pay!” said Aerith hastily, handing over her card before things got ugly.

“Ah,” said the echidna wistfully while Craig was pouring out the pint. “I had forgotten about the money. There is no such thing in my world.”

“Really?” Aerith asked, intrigued.

He nodded sombrely, took the glass of beer, gave it a doubtful sniff and then sipped at it. “Ah,” he said. He drank a little more, and then added, “It is not very good.”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Aerith suggested. “But isn’t it what you came for? You said someone told you to come here to get beer, right?”

“True, but ...” The echidna looked down at his glass. “That was not my main reason. I wanted to see a fight.”

“A fight?” she echoed.

“Yes,” he said. “It has been so long since I saw a fight. My friends tell me there are other ways of having fun. But I am an echidna! Fighting is our purpose!”

“Uh huh?” said Aerith.

“You see,” he said. “I am very strong. Extremely strong. Observe.” He set about drinking the rest of his pint – the glass was still fairly full, so it took a good while, during which Aerith sat and waited politely. Once he had finished, he upended the glass, placed one of his enormous fists on top, and pushed.

Aerith watched in astonishment as the glass began to warp a little; then, a split second later, it broke clean in two. The owner of the bar had apparently invested in shatter-proof beer glasses: nothing but luxury when one came above the plate to drink.

Solemnly, the echidna withdrew his fist.

“What the hell are you doing!” Craig exclaimed from behind the bar. “I warned you – now get out!”

The echidna jumped off his stool immediately. “I see. Farewell,” he said, and made a hasty exit.

“What an asshole,” said Craig.

“You should be more open-minded, Craig,” Aerith scolded him.

Craig rolled his eyes and moved away to serve another customer.