

The door to the pool hall opened slowly and a thin man stepped in from from the lonely desert night. His name was Marion, but everyone who knew him

called him "Slim". He carried a case under his arm; inside was a two piece pool cue with his name engraved on the forearm. He came all the way out

to this no name bar in the middle of nowhere for one purpose. He came to settle a score with someone claiming they were better than him.

The bar held the usual suspects, bikers, transients, outcasts and the general lonely. Slim didn't pay them any mind, he was there for

the hustlers, and here there was only one. Slim rubbed at his narrow, hatchet face, feeling the days worth of beard growth as he scanned the crowd

for his rival.

"Jake," Slim said, letting his case thud onto the table. He smiled, he knew he had this in the bag.

"It's Jacob. No one calls me Jake," the rival said without taking his eyes off the drink in his hand. The rival was a coyote, not the

kind that snuck immigrants over borders, the literal kind. One of the rare few zoanthropes this far out of the cities and the neighborhoods they

had for themselves. He wore a quiet shirt and a loud tie,

the kind that was hard to avoid looking at if you gave any sort of attention to the pool

sharp.

"My mistake," Slim replied with a laugh in his throat. "So, Jacob, word got to me you've been hustling people out here. I'm here to set

you straight. How's a little wager you don't have it in you to take me?"

Jacob sipped his drink through a straw. He still hadn't looked any higher than Slim's stomach. "You can't afford my wagers," he said

after a moment to enjoy his drink.

Slim inclined his head. He felt the cold rush in his chest. "Listen, fuzzy, I can afford more than you know." He dug into the pocket of his jeans

and dropped an old roll of bills, tied tight with a cracked and aging elastic band. "Five hundred to start."

Jacob's ears perked forward at the sound of the money hitting his table. "To start," he said. "Yeah, that's a good start." He sipped his

drink. "Go rack. I'll be there in a second."

Slim took his money and stuffed it back into his pocket. He adjusted his leather vest, took his cue, and picked out his table. He collected the

billiard balls from the table and began to rack. As he did, he looked toward Jacob, but the coyote wasn't at the table anymore. He frowned, and

nearly started when he found Jacob already standing at the table, using an old switch knife to notch the butt of his cue stick.

"Bit confident?" Slim asked, smiling inside. He knew that overconfident hustlers made for easy money once you've put their pride on the line.

Jacob nodded. He pointed his knife at the cue ball. "You can take break."

Slim walked around the table, swept the cue ball into his hand and placed it on the felt. He leaned over the table and lined his shot.

One round and the coyote would be out of this town with his reputation in tatters.

"Just one more thing," Jacob said, nearly causing Slim to scratch the felt. He smiled at Slim and offered his hand. "Just so we know

that you agree to the wager. Starting at five hundred and going how ever long our egos last?"

Slim scowled at Jacob. "Deal," he said as he took the offered hand into a vise grip. Jacob winced and Slim grinned.

The break sent three in. Slim took stripes. Two more went in before Slim scratched. He gave a look to the coyote.

"Your shot, fuzzy."

"We don't all have fur," Jacob pointed out as he lined up his shot.

Four down. Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump. Then his shot went wide.

"You missed on purpose," Slim growled. "Don't you try your crap on me. I get the game, Jake."

Slim leaned over the table. He lined up his shots. In a matter of minutes he proved his point. Eight ball, corner pocket, across the felt.

"Looks like you win, Slim," Jacob said with a lackadaisical shrug. "Looks like I owe you five hundred dollars. Well. Guess I'll be

heading home now, king of the hall."

The mockery brought the cold knife in Slim's chest again. The coyote hadn't even tried. He just pissed money that easily and wanted to

walk out while Slim looked like the fool for losing his cool. So he did just that.

"Don't give me that," Slim snarled, cue pointed at Jacob. "You and I go again, this time put yourself into it. I won't take a roll over."

Jacob looked up from counting a roll of bills. "You want me to put my all into it?" he asked. "Only if you do too."

"Deal," Slim said. "You rack this one. Take break, too. No holding back. Pride is on the line."

Jacob nodded and folded the bills back up. "And don't call me Jake."

Jacob racked, he broke, he had solids this time.

As he rounded the table and eyed the lay of the balls, Jacob looked at Slim with an inward grin. The man was good. Real good. Jacob had

thrown the game and Slim saw right through the obvious ploy, but Slim was fiery as he was talented. Just, Jacob thought, that he needed a few

adjustments now that the real bet was on. Slim was about to learn you never wager with a stranger.

An easy shot and a miss on a risky lean later and Slim walked to the table. He put a hand to the velvet and leaned down low. He stopped

a moment to scratch at a stray itch on his smooth cheek. He paid no thought to it as he lined up his shot.

In with a clack.

Slim rounded the table again, taking slow steps, eyeing everything with care. Jacob had the lead and Slim wasn't about to let the coyote

hustle him so easily. He leaned down on the table, his long, fine fingers wrapped around the cue, laying out his index finger and aligning his

eyesight with the sharp black claw at the end.

Another ball sunk.

Slim smiled at Jacob. He moved to the next shot and lined up. His vest bunched and he moved it down, tugging at it. It wasn't as big as

it was before, but Slim chalked it up to the table, not in his torso stretching out, the bare of his belly beginning to show. He had a game to win

and dignity to preserve.

Another ball sunk.

Now Slim was feeling confident. He nearly strutted around the table, each step showed a longer and longer leg. More on his toe, rising

up with his steps and leaning over the table with ease. He narrowed his eyes, blinked, and his pupils narrowed to cold, reptilian slits.

Slim missed.

"Shit," he hissed and turned from the table. He had this thing, and mucked up an easy shot.

"Now who's going easy on me?" Jacob asked with a grin as he took to the table. He looked at Slim, now a good deal taller than he had

been a few minutes prior. Jacob took stock of the bar, most of the patrons were watching. They came out here for the show, after all. This one,

though, was special. Slim was the first one that Jacob felt some fear against. The shot Slim had missed on was one that Jacob knew he couldn't have

made himself. He took the easiest line he could and sank a ball quick.

Jacob took a deep breath and considered his next shot. A look toward Slim confirmed that as the game went on, and was in his favor, the

bet would stand. Another ball in. And another. Then a scratch.

"Fuck."

"So close," Slim said with a grin. His face was longer and growing longer with each passing second. He stepped toward the coyote and

spun his cue around in a flourish, drawing it slowly down his hand as he lined up a quick shot after getting cue placement. With a laughing

stretch, his back popped and the rippling bumps of soft scales on his back showed their diamond pattern to any who were watching. His shirt has

joined his vest in being much smaller than it had been in entering. It barely covered his chest and shoulders, and showed off much of his new scale

pattern.

Slim lined up a shot, stood on toe, one leg out

behind him. His boots split at the toe, threads popped, but still Slim aimed on. Three

wicked claws grew, spread, and settled onto the floor. Slim wouldn't leave his toes any time now and even as he took his second shot and sunk the

thirteen, his boots had reformed as a pair of sturdy and styled leather guards over his much longer feet.

The shot slipped in with little trouble.

The next shot saw the ball crawl to the pocket and teeter on the brink. Slim hissed and the tip of his long, sinuous tail rattled in

frustration. It was a terrible tell and always gave Slim away, but he tried to hide it by tightening his tailtip around his foot like an anklet.

"You're up, Jake" the rattlesnake said as he stalked from the table and adjusted his tight denim shorts to fit better around his hips.

Jacob nodded. "Don't call me Jake," he reminded with a small grin. He stepped lively as he settled in to take aim. Time to put this one

in the bag.

"What?" Slim shouted, stood up, and circled around the table. He ran his clawed hand over his scaled scalp. "You jumped my ball. Just

going to start pulling out the trick shots?" He tapped his

finger on the felt. "One more game. Two out of three to settle this," he demanded.

Jacob couldn't pass this one up. "Same wager as before," he said, knowing it was only a matter of formality as Slim was caught up enough

he was sure to agree.

Slim took racking. He took care. He aimed. He missed. The soft mounds of his chest rising against the table put him off. He'd never had

issues with his boobs before, but this coyote had had him flustered. He tried to avoid rattling his tail, but his tongue flitted of its own accord

to show his growing nervousness.

Jacob took his time. He made all the right shots. Each one to sink what he needed to sink, each one to place the ball in an advantage

for Slim when he needed. Slim entertained him. There was a good pool player underneath the ego and the hot head. Jacob wanted that to stick around

a bit longer, and with this game, he knew how that would happen.

Slim found each shot getting easier when Jacob missed. She started to see the end of the coyote in sight. She took long, proud strides

with each shot sunk. She leaned deep over the table in her

crop top vest, putting her rear out where Jacob could be distracted. Slim had this and

finally she'd put that smug coyote in his place. Even if he did pull some impressive tricks here and there. But, she grinned, thinking on their

wager. She'd have his attention at least. She could learn some of those tricks to add to her technical play. All she needed was this one, final

shot.

She was named Marina, but Slim was what everybody called the lithe rattler. Queen of the pool hall. The eight ball dropped into the

pocket. "Called, game, two out of three," she said, resting her claws on the tip of her cue. "Now then, how about you pony up the cash you owe me

so I can buy us some drinks. I got to learn a thing or two from you about that jumper you pulled, Jacob."

Jacob shrugged and sighed and counted out his money to pass on to Slim. "You're the winner," he said with a laughing smile. "Oh, and, you can call me Jake."