



Skin Game
Fritch, Charles E.

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Transcriber's Note:

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"PEOPLE ARE basically alike," Harding said democratically. He sat idly against the strawlike matting of the hut wall and reached for a native fruit in a nearby bowl. "They're all suckers, even the smartest of them; in fact, the ones who think they're the smartest generally wind up to be the dumbest." Carefully, he bit into the fruit which resembled an orange and, mouth full, nodded approvingly. "Say, these aren't bad. Try one."

Sheckly shook his head, determined to avoid as many aspects of this culture as he could. "But these aren't people," he reminded, not happy with the thought. "They're lizards."

Harding shrugged and settled back, his grinning features ruddy in the flaring torchlight. "Humanoids have no monopoly on suckerhood. When it comes to that, we're all brothers under the skin, no matter what color or how hard the skin may be." He sighed, contemplating the harvest-to-be. "No, Sheckly, it'll be like taking candy from a baby. We'll be out of here with our pockets bulging before the Space Patrol can bat an eyelash in this direction."

Unconvinced, Sheckly stared glumly through the open doorway of the hut into the warm humid night, where a fire flared in the darkness and long shadows danced and slithered around it.

"It's not the Space Patrol I'm worried about," he said, after a while. "I don't mind fleecing humanoids—" he shivered, grimacing—"but lizards!"

Harding laughed. "Their riches are as good as anybody else's. The trouble with you, Sheckly, you're too chicken-hearted. If it weren't for me, you'd still be small-timing back on Earth. It takes imagination to get along these days."

Sheckly grunted, for he had no ready answer to deny this truth. While he didn't like the reference to his inability to get along in the world without Harding's help, the man was right about other things. It did take imagination, all right, mixed with a generous supply of plain ordinary guts; that, plus an eye focused unfalteringly on the good old credit sign.

He certainly could not get along without Harding's timing. The man knew just when Patrol Ships would be at certain spots, knew their schedules for visiting these small otherworlds, and always he was several steps ahead of them. They went into a planet, their rocket ship loaded with gambling devices—cards, dice, roulette wheels, and other cultural refinements—and set up shop which could be folded at a moment's notice if necessary. Natives seemed almost eager to be skinned of their riches, and he and Harding happily obliged them.

"Listen to them out there," Harding marveled, leaning forward to hear the sharp scrapings that represented music. "They must be having some kind of ceremony."

Sheckly nodded, shivering slightly, though the air was hot and humid. He wished again, as he often had in the past, he could have some of Harding's assurance, some of that unrelenting optimism that insisted everything would turn out favorably. But he didn't like these strange primitive worlds, he didn't trust them or their inhabitants. The lizard-people had seemed friendly enough, but by looking at a strange reptile you couldn't tell how far it would jump. When the Earth ship landed, the creatures had come slithering to them with all but a brass band, welcoming the Earthlings with the hissings that composed their language. One of them—the official interpreter, he proclaimed himself—knew a peculiarly good brand of English, and welcomed them in a more satisfactory manner, but still Sheckly didn't like it. Harding had called him chicken-hearted, and he felt a certain amount of justified indignance at the description. Cautious would be a better word, he decided.

THESE PEOPLE appeared friendly to the Earthlings, but so did the Earthlings give the appearance of friendliness to the natives; that was proof in itself that you couldn't trust actions to indicate purpose. But even more than that, their basic alienness troubled Sheckly more than he dared admit aloud. Differences in skin color and modified body shapes were one thing, but when a race was on a completely different evolutionary track it was a time for caution. These were a different people, on a different planet under a different star. Their customs were strange, how strange he could yet only guess, though he preferred not to. This ceremony now, for example, what did it mean? A rite for some serpent god perhaps. A dance in honor of the Earthmen's arrival. Or it might just as easily be a preliminary to a feast at which the visitors would be the main course.

"I just wish we knew more about the creatures," he complained, trying to shove that last thought from his mind.

Harding looked annoyed, as he drew his attention from the alien music which had fascinated him. "Stop worrying, will you? They're probably among the friendliest creatures in the universe, even if they do look like serpents out of Eden. And the friendly ones rate A-1 on my sucker-list."

Sheckly shuddered and cast an annoyed glance into the night. "How can anybody concentrate with that infernal racket going on out there? Don't they ever sleep?"

"Patience," Harding advised calmly, "is a noble virtue. Ah, here comes our interpreter."

Sheckly started involuntarily, as a scaly head thrust itself into the hut. The serpentman had a long sharp knife gleaming in one hand. "Pardon, sirs," the head said slurringly, as a forked tongue sorted over the unfamiliar syllables. "The leader wishes to know will you join us?"

"No, thanks," Sheckly said, staring at the knife.

Harding said, "We should join them. We don't want to offend these creatures, and if we're real friendly we might make out better."

"*You* go out then. I'm going to see if I can get some sleep."

Harding shrugged, his glance making it plain he knew Sheckly lacked nerve more than sleep. To the serpentman he said, "Tell your leader my companion is tired from our long journey and would rest now. However, I will be happy to join you."

"Yesss," the serpent head hissed and withdrew.

"Boy, will I be glad to get out of here," Sheckly muttered.

"Sometimes I wonder why I ever teamed up with a pansy like you, Sheckly," Harding said harshly, a disgusted look on his face. "There are times when I regret it." He turned and walked from the hut.

Sheckly stared bitterly after him. He felt no anger at the denunciation, only a plaguing irritableness, an annoyance with both Harding and himself. He should have gone out there with Harding, if only to show the man that he was not afraid, that he was no coward. And yet, as he sat there listening to the strange sounds creeping across the warm dampness, he made no move to rise, and he knew he would not.

Grunting disgustedly, Sheckly stretched out on the floor matting and tried to think of other things. He stared at the orange-flaring torch and contemplated putting it out, but the sounds from the outside drifted in upon him and changed his mind. After a while, he closed his eyes and dozed.

HE WOKE suddenly and sat upright, a cold sweat making him tremble. What had wakened him? he wondered. He had the vague notion that someone had screamed, yet he wasn't sure. In the faltering torchlight, he could see Harding had not returned. He listened intently to the noises outside, the scraping, the hissing, the slithering. No screams came.

I'm not going to stay here, he told himself. I'll leave tomorrow, I don't care what Harding says. I'll go crazy if I have to spend another night like this. Exhausted, he fell asleep.

Morning came, and the alien sun slanted orange rays through the cabin doorway. Sheckly opened his eyes and stared at the thatched roof. The torch had burned out, but it was no longer needed for light. Thank goodness for morning, he thought. Morning brought a temporary sanity to this world, and after the madness of the night it was a reprieve he welcomed gladly. He had not opposed Harding till now, but desperation was a strong incentive to rebellion. When Harding returned— Startled, he considered the thought. *When* Harding returned?

He sat up and stared around him. Harding was not in sight. Panic came, and he leaped up, blood racing, as though to defend himself against invisible enemies. Perhaps he'd gotten up early, Sheckly thought. But suppose he hadn't returned? Suppose—

He jumped, as the interpreter entered the hut behind him. "The Leader wishes you to join him for eating," the serpentman said.

"No," Sheckly said hastily. They weren't going to make a meal out of him. "No, thanks. Look, I've got to leave your planet. Leave, understand? Right away."

"The leader wishes you to join him," the creature repeated. This time the sword crept into his hands.

Sheckly stared at the sword, and his heart leaped. He thought there was a tinge of red on the blade's edge. Mentally, he shook his head. No, it was his imagination again. Just imagination. Still, the drawn sword clearly indicated that the invitation was not to be refused.

"All right," he said weakly. "All right, in a few minutes."

"Now," the other said.

"Okay, now," the Earthling agreed listlessly. "Where is my companion?"

"You will see him," the creature promised.

Sheckly breathed a sigh of relief at that. Harding was probably all right then. It made him feel better, though it would make the task of leaving much harder.

THEY HAD arrived at twilight the previous day, so they hadn't the opportunity to see the village in its entirety. They hadn't missed much, Sheckly realized as he walked along, for the grouped huts were unimpressive, looking somewhat like a primitive African village back on Earth. But the Earthling would have preferred the most primitive Earth

native to these serpents. In the distance, the slim nose of the rocket ship pointed the way to freedom, and Sheckly looked longingly at it.

At one end of the village was a small mountain of what appeared to be plastic clothing, milkily translucent—which was strange, since these creatures wore no clothing. The Earthling wondered at this but did not ask about it. Other thoughts more important troubled him.

"In here," the interpreter told him, stopping before the largest hut.

Hesitating briefly, Sheckly entered and the creature followed him in. Seated on the floor were the leader and his mate and several smaller reptiles that evidently were the children. Between them lay several bowls of food. Sheckly grimaced and turned hastily away as he saw small crawling insects in one bowl.

"Sit down," the interpreter directed.

Harding was not in evidence. "Where is my companion?" he asked.

The interpreter conferred briefly with the leader, then told Sheckly, "He could not come. Sit down—eat."

Sheckly sat down, but he didn't feel like eating. He wondered *why* Harding could not come. At a sudden thought, he said, "I have rations on my ship—"

"Eat," the interpreter said, gripping his sword.

Sheckly nodded weakly and reached out for the bowl of fruit, taking one that resembled that which Harding had eaten the previous night. It wasn't bad. The leader stuffed a fistful of squirming insects in his mouth and offered the bowl to Sheckly, who shook his head as politely as he could and indicated the fruit in his hand.

Fortunately, the serpentman did not insist on his taking anything other than fruit, so the meal passed without physical discomfort.

When they were through, the leader hissed several syllables to the interpreter, who said, "The leader wishes to see your games. You will set them up now."

Sheckly ran his tongue over dry lips. "They're in the ship," he said, and eagerness crept into his voice. "I'll have to get them." Once inside the ship, he'd never come back. He'd slam the airlock door and bolt it and then blast off as fast as he could get the motors going, Harding or no Harding. He got up.

"We will help you," the interpreter said.

"No. I can do it myself."

"We will help you," the interpreter insisted firmly. His eyes bored into the Earthling, as though daring him to refuse again.

Sheckly's mouth felt dry once more. "Where's Harding?" he demanded. "Where's the other Earth man? What have you done with him?"

The interpreter looked at the leader, who nodded. The interpreter said gravely, "It is too bad. It is the season for the shedding of skins. At the shedding feast last night—"

"The shedding of skins!" Sheckly said, remembering the pile he'd seen at one corner of the village; "those translucent things were your cast-off skins." He recalled that some reptiles back on Earth had regular seasons of shedding. That intelligent creatures should do it made him feel slightly sick.

"Your friend joined us last night," the serpentman went on. "But he could not shed properly, so—"

Sheckly felt his blood turn to ice.

"—so we helped him."

"You *what*?"

"We helped him out of his skin," the serpentman went on calmly. "We try to help those who are friends with us. Your friend had trouble getting his skin off, but with our help—"

"No!" the Earthling cried, trying to reject the thought.

The full realization of what had happened struck him at once. Despite himself, he could picture Harding struggling, trying to convince these creatures that Earthlings don't shed their skins. His struggles must have convinced them only that he was having trouble shedding, so they "helped him." They had come to skin the natives, but the reverse was happening—only literally.

"Where—where is he?" he asked finally, though he knew it didn't really matter.

"We will take you to him," the interpreter said.

"No," Sheckly cried. "No, I—I'd rather not."

The serpentman nodded. "As you wish. He does not look pretty. I hope that tonight you do not have as much trouble."

Sheckly's eyes went wide. "What do you mean?"

"In your shedding," the serpentman explained. "We will try to help you all we can, of course."

"Of course," the Earthling agreed weakly, licking cottony lips. He wondered how he could just stand there so apparently calm, instead of letting out a shriek and running as fast as he could for the rocket ship. He decided it was some sort of paralysis, the shock of finding himself in the middle of something so alien his mind told him it couldn't possibly be.

KNEES WOBBLING, Sheckly went to the door and out into the morning. That he had gotten that far surprised him pleasantly. The tall rocket ship was in a clearing several yards beyond the edge of the village. He headed for it. He thought of running, but his legs felt like rubber, his blood like ice. He walked past the pile of drying skins on the ground without looking at them, and he was followed by the interpreter and several others whom the serpentman had motioned to join them. Except for their swords, they had no weapons, he noticed. Poor Harding, he thought, and wondered if the Earthling's skin were somewhere in the pile; he felt sick, thinking about it.

"You'd better stay outside the ship," he suggested testily. "I'll lower the equipment to you."

"I will go aboard with you," the serpentman said.

"But—"

"I will go aboard with you."

Sheckly shrugged, but he hardly felt complacent. He felt as though a giant icy hand held onto his spine with a firm paralyzing grip. He trembled visibly. Got to think, he told himself desperately, got to plan this out. But fear jumbled his thoughts, and he could only think of Harding back in the village minus his skin, and of what was going to happen that night if all went as these creatures planned.

The second thought was the more terrifying, and when they were within a hundred feet of the rocket ship, Sheckly broke into a frantic run.

"Stop," the interpreter cried.

Sheckly had no intentions of stopping. His glands told him to run, and he ran. He ran as fast as he could and didn't look back. He imagined the serpentman was on his heels, knife poised, and he ran even faster. He reached the rocket ship and went up the ladder, scrambling, missing his foothold, pulling himself up with clutching hands. He threw himself through the airlock and slammed the massive door behind him.

He ran through the metal corridors to the control room. They must be on the ladder, he thought, prying at the airlock with their metal swords. He pressed switches, slammed down on the throttle, and the sweet music of the rockets came and pressed him into his seat.

He looked down at the planet dwindling into space below him and he laughed hysterically, thinking of the narrow escape he'd had. No more planets for him, no more trying to skin anyone.

"**T**HERE IT goes," the Space Patrolman said, watching the rocket rise.

Harding trembled with helpless rage. "That blasted fool Sheckly'll lead you right to the money, too," he complained.

"That's the way we planned it," the Patrolman smiled. "I must compliment our native friends on their fine acting. Your pal took off like a scared rabbit."

"Yeah," Harding grimaced, clenching his fists as though wishing he had someone's neck in them.

"Don't blame your friend too much," the Patrolman advised. "Whether you realize it or not, the fact that you were consciously avoiding our schedules caused you to follow a pattern in your visits to these outer-space planets; we just figured a bit ahead of you and posted hidden patrols on all the inhabited planets in this sector, knowing that sooner or later you'd land on one of them. We spotted your ship last night and hurried over by 'copter so we wouldn't be seen."

"Forget the synopsis," Harding growled. "You walked in when these blasted lizards were making believe they were going to skin me alive. They didn't have to act so realistic about it."

"You're wrong about one thing," the Patrolman said. "The act didn't start until after we arrived to direct it."

Harding looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean by that?"

"We arrived, as the books say, just in time," the Patrolman told him. "They *weren't* making believe." He offered a bowl of fruit to his prisoner. "We'll be here for another hour yet. Eat something."

Weakly, Harding shook his head no. He sat down, suddenly pale at what the officer had said.

He didn't feel very hungry.

... THE END

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