

What is best in life?

By Tom Portegys

Long ago a splinter group of Hssft wandered space in search of a new home. They found a world covered by warm forest. And it was good. This world was the home of the Falmador, who lived in the forest. The Falmador were themselves once space wanderers, but this was very long ago and nearly forgotten.

The Hssft established a single city next to a river, leaving their ship in orbit, accessible by teleport. The city was built by egg-shaped mechanical servitors, and the Hssft set about exploring their new home, sending out parties into the forest.

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This one watched the Hssft encampment from hiding. They were all asleep. It was day and that was their way after all. No wards, no watchers. Just lazy insouciance. A bunch of those plush inflatable huts they seemed so fond of. A few tawny forms sprawled out in the sun and in the shade.

The Hssft came from the stars many cycles ago to this one's world. These ones had forgotten that the stars were suns. The Hssft city they built was a larger version of the haphazard encampments that sprinkled the landscape. The streets of the city weren't even paved, although there were a few higher structures here and there. The Hssft mostly got around on foot, sauntering lazily along.

There was a lot of fear at first of course. Crushing the Falmador, driving these ones into extinction. Or worse maybe slavery. But what the Hssft wanted was nothing like that. They had no interest in conquest.

These ones watched them to learn their ways. Swarms of floating black eggs teleported whatever they wanted from their ship and provided services on the ground. The Hssft did no work themselves it seemed.

The males were huge swaggering bipedals with sharp claws, speaking in hisses to each other, and often roaring and tussling among themselves. The eggs kept them from massacring each other by distracting them with grooming, treats and entertainments.

The females were smaller and constantly made irritating mewling noises which after long observation were determined to be just what it sounded like: complaining about nearly everything. They also went after each other with claws outstretched. A great number of eggs were required to sooth their discontentment.

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The hunts began soon after their arrival. At first tentatively, in groups of a dozen or so, as though feeling out the opposition. Then later with more confidence, sometimes a single Hssft, sometime in groups of two or three. They hunted animals as well, but preferred these ones.

In the early days, even the many times greater numbers of these ones were no match for their ferocity. These ones have been at the apex for time unmemorable and had become soft and complacent. Spears, bows, and clubs had always been sufficient, using skills passed down for ages. The Hssft hunted only

with claws and teeth as weapons. Yet that was more than enough. Over time these ones withdrew from vulnerable areas and into higher and more rugged ground, becoming crafty and furtive. Better at fighting. At last these ones won as many as lost and the raids dwindled.

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This one has marks that tell some tales. And one tale in particular this one will now tell.

On a darkening day this one was perched in the trees above a shallow ravine, chosen to be on the downwind side of a cross-cutting breeze that was slivered with hot and cool streams of air as the day waned. Three Hssft came down the glooming corridor below on this one's right. Eyes, ears, and nostrils ready to trigger a furious charge of killing teeth and claws. They weaved back and forth as they came. This one became one with the tree.

Those ones were hidden on this one's left, martialled along the sides of the ravine just within signaling distance. Short wooden spears at the ready. Once the Hssft were abreast, this one would call for the attack.

As the Hssft passed below, misfortune struck this one. The branch in this one's grasp broke sending this one tumbling down into the midst of the trio. The air slammed out of this one, but fear galvanized a quick scrambling upright, spear ready.

After leaping back, the Hssft moved in close to crouch around this one, heads down, eyes up and blazing. Then after a few hisses, two of them backed away, leaving this one to face a single Hssft. But instead of launching immediately, the Hssft first rose to its full height of over eight feet, forearms up, and began to roar out a rhythmic chant, echoed by the others in muted volumes.

Then it dropped to all fours and once again gazed directly at this one, dipping its head slightly as if to ask if this one was ready.

This one knew that no one could match the terrible burst that the Hssft was capable of. So this one left fate to the gods, nodded to the Hssft, and immediately dropped off to the right. In an instant the Hssft's left claws raked across this one's belly as it flew over, tearing a lethal wound. This one screamed and tried to scramble up to at least strike once before the end. But this one's spear was gone.

Guts slowly oozing from this one's belly, almost fainting, this one waited, now almost hopefully, for the Hssft to deliver death with a bite to the neck. Yet the Hssft was down, writhing on the ground. Then this one saw the spear protruding from its eye. In moments the Hssft was still.

Now there were these things that happened. The other two Hssft gathered close to their fallen comrade, oblivious to the approach of those ones who had descended and come up the ravine. Spears were poised to dispatch the Hssft who had taken to joining forearms over the body, heads touching, eyes closed.

Then the air shimmered and an egg appeared in front of those ones who continued to advance cautiously. A beam of blinding light scored a deep burning trench in front of them and those ones halted. Then those ones saw this: the air again shimmer and the Hssft and this one vanish with the egg, leaving a scent of oncoming rain in its wake.

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A small yellow egg floating in the corner of the room slowly came into this one's view. Glancing down, this one boiled in a pot of offal and lost consciousness. Returning to awareness, opening this one's mouth to scream, yet no sound came. There was no breath. There was no pain. Seeing this one's struggles, the egg spoke in this one's language: "that one's life is in the balance".

Time passed.

This one came to awareness as two Hssft appeared through a door. They were two of the three from the ravine. Taking hold on either side, they proceeded down a corridor, down a ramp, and out into the street, into a huge gathering surrounding an open space. A release was triggered and the pot slid away smoothly, its contents including this one slumping onto the ground. This one sat dumbly in the reeking mess, and looking down saw that this one's wounds were healed.

Now one came forward, beating a spear on a drum that this one recognized as this one's own. It was inset now with symbols. Now the other came forward, bearing a chain from which hung a Hssft canine tooth, which was placed over this one's head. The two then on either side bore this one upright.

The Hssft began chanting and swaying in Haka-like rhythm. They encircled him, keeping their distance, although a few young ones slipped through to pounce, grapple and gently bite at this one's legs and feet. All of this continued for some time.

Then the small yellow egg floated down the ramp toward this one. "Warrior of the Falmador, I serve that one".

And so it was that this one was held among the Hssft as a great warrior in one-to-one combat against a great fighting male of the Hssft. The city was open to this one, and this one learned much. Food and drink were lavished. Magical things were everywhere.

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Time passed.

Now a female was brought forth, the egg explaining that this was the mate of the one who was defeated, and her grieving was over. It explained that the Hssft custom is to take the female and children of the slain into the care of the victor. This one thought quickly to avoid awkwardness and bowing offered his spear to the female. After a deliberative hush, this was accepted with roars approval by all, including the female, as satisfaction.

There were thoughts that later strayed into this one's mind that another choice might have been taken, and this one asked the egg about this. It replied that although the female seemed to be welcoming to the union, that one would not survive long, despite my interventions, and despite that one's prowess among the males.

At some point this one decided to go home to those ones in the forest, and this was understood. The egg hovered docilely behind this one as this one commenced from the city. But not wanting to panic those ones, this one released the egg from service.

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Time passed.

Life in the uplands was hard, but these ones thrived and multiplied. Only the most fey Hssft dared to attack a war party of those ones when they met in the forest.

One day the yellow egg appeared to this one and bid this one to come to the Hssft city to hear of new things. The egg took this one directly into the presence of a few Hssft that this one recognized as elders.

Their eyes looked down to their feet as they told this one of new ways that were coming. The planet was now part of something called the Amalgamation, with many peoples joined together for mutual peace and harmony. From now on, the Hssft and Falmador must be friends.

And so it was that there were no more hunts, and trophy heads were taken down, and dwellings for Falmador built near the Hssft city, and those ones encouraged to come and live within them and share life together, Hssft and Falmador, as friends. The eggs were instructed to help with this, making sure that safety and security were the highest priority.

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Time passed.

One day this one arrived for work at the recreation center and found it locked. Three young Falmador were waiting outside making unhappy noises. The assistant manager, an indolent female Hssft, must have overslept again.

Entering the center, this one activated the lighting and temperature controls, and apologized to the three as they walked on to the gaming area.

Next this one checked the schedule and ran quickly to the outside area, making sure the turf was ready for playing croquet and that the equipment was in good order.

The Hssft, forbidden to hunt Falmador, had been introduced by the Amalgamation to croquet, a game originating from the planet Mud, home of the Tricksters, a monkey-like race. The Amalgamation's psychologists predicted that the Hssft would seize upon croquet with zeal as a substitute for hunting. They did. Now games and tournaments were everywhere in the city.

Two Hssft teams were scheduled for a match today. One team, the "Wooden Balls", this one knew. The other, the "Smelly Pelts", this one did not know.

When the Smelly Pelts arrived this one's eyes opened wide. There was one of the Hssft that was there that day when this one passed into Hssft legend.

The Hssft recognized this one immediately, roared and crouched to attack. This one ducked behind the equipment desk and grabbed a croquet stake as a spear.

Then this one faced the Hssft, while the young Falmador emerged from the gloom of the game room to see what was happening.

Then came the charge, and this one played the part, dropping off to the right. The Hssft's claws, retracted except for the very tips, scratched tracks across this one's belly. Coup was counted.

As this one looked back, the Hssft's left leg gave out, smashing him into a refreshment cart lined up against the wall. He lay there for just a moment before leaping up on his good leg, gushing blood from a scalp flap that hung over the side of his head, declaring himself victor, and ready to play some croquet.

Now eggs appeared to take the injured Hssft away, and shut the whole center down for several hours to sanitize it, declaring a biohazard from the blood that had spattered everywhere, including out on the croquet court, as the Hssft had gone out there to begin his practice swings. This did not sit well with either the Smelly Pelts or the Wooden Balls, nor with the Falmador juveniles who were forced to leave.

Before the he was taken away, this one awarded his "spear" to the wounded Hssft, who accepted it with genuine grace. This one made a mental note to account for the loss of the stake in the Miscellaneous Goodwill category, which was sure to satisfy the Amalgamation auditors.

Time passed.