

## The Man-Pond

He first saw it at twilight, the patch of brightness that told him there was water down there and it would be safe to land. The reflected light caught his eye, dazzled him slightly. It was a small patch of water, and quite close to the red brick man-nests, but there were grass and trees around it, and he thought, a few moorhens and ducks paddling around.

Fendrak never liked landing. He always put it off as long as he could. In fact, he disliked travelling generally. He'd thought the old lake was going to be his home forever. He shuddered at the memory of the men and their noisy machines.

Land he must though. And water was where he must land. Heart beating fast, Fendrak changed the angle of his wings, spread his webbed feet out and pointed them downwards. They touched the surface. Almost toppling over, he raised his wings ready to balance, managed then to find his sitting position and then glided more gracefully now across to the bank.

He crawled out. It was really almost dark now. Exhausted, he tucked his head under his wing but just before sleep came he remembered Gelda screeching and flaying her arms at the adult human male who had approached them. Why was she still trying to protect the two year-olds? High time they'd found a new flock. But she'd been adamant. The companion of the human male had leapt to his defence and attacked Gelda with that hard shiny tool. Then seconds later she was lying lifeless next to their old nest. The youngsters had fled.

The men came with their big machines. The noise. He remembered the noise. And the lake suddenly empty.

All the others gone. Too late for him to go with them. Too late for him to help Gelda. All he could do then was look after his own needs. So, he had run along the pathway, launched himself into the air and flown looking for water and dreading the landing on it.

He shuddered at all these thoughts. Then sleep came. Blissful, carefree sleep.

There was a frost on the ground the next morning, but the crisp clear air that brought was reassuring. Fendrak took stock. There was not much activity in man-nests. Maybe they kept themselves to themselves. There were fish, he noticed in this water. That might be a problem. That might bring the humans here with their dangerous wires. But there was also plenty of weed and other greenery for feeding on ... perhaps even for building a nest.

He heard the almost human cry of some passing geese. They flew straight across, though and did not swoop down to examine the water. Had there been one of his kind there before? Would there be another one again? Did they actually perceive and fear him?

It puzzled him a little, how the water came to this place. It didn't seem to be fed by any river or stream. There was an outlet, surrounded by man-bricks, where it might drain away but it didn't seem to doing that. He guessed the water just accumulated here when it rained, which is it used to do a lot in his old home. That wasn't so far away - he hadn't flown for that long.

There was plenty that he liked about the old place. Never hot enough in the summer to dry up the water and never cold enough in the winter to make it freeze over. And plenty of rain to replenish it. Would it be the same here?

A few humans wandered by during the day. Many of them had dogs that barked with them. Fendrak found himself a corner far away from the man-path, and if one of their unleashed dogs wandered near him, a flutter of his open wings was enough to send them on their way.

It looked as if this spot would do.

The days passed and still the geese flew overhead and didn't drop down to visit him, not even out of curiosity. The moorhens and the ducks still kept their distance but as time went by they ventured a little closer.

There must be another nearby, he concluded. He began to have a sense of a presence and as the time of year approached when the days are almost as long as the nights, when those instincts became sharper, he was convinced there was a female nearby. Then he began to glimpse flashes of white feathers between the straight green rods of the reeds on the other side of the pond. Had she also lost a mate? Or was this just wishful thinking?

She came to him at twilight on the day that is exactly the same length as the night. Her neck, Fendrak noticed, was a little longer and more slender than Gelda's. She moved more gently in the water. In that light that comes as the sun goes down her white feathers seemed almost purple and luminous. She was beautiful.

He sensed a maturity in her and also some sadness. She was, he guessed, an experienced mother and an experienced mate. She too had suffered a loss he was sure.

She swam up to him and stretched out towards him as if she were about to neck him. As he responded, she pulled away and swam quickly. Fendrak felt a familiar old excitement. More exciting perhaps than recent years with Gelda. Their love making had, of course, been perfect but it had also been familiar. This was new.

She swam swiftly and skilfully. He had trouble keeping up with her. She stopped suddenly though and pulled at something on the bank. It was, Fendrak saw, the remains of an old nest. He had not noticed it before. It had been covered by the long reeds that grow on the bank. So, she had lost a mate. And some time ago, by the looks of it. She held out towards him a mat of intertwined grass. He went to take it in his beak, but as he leant towards her, she

let the old nest part drop in the water. She stretched her elegant neck towards and rubbed it along his own.

Their love-making was urgent and exciting. It was different from with Gelda. He had to take a little more care with Frayla. He had to hold her head at a different angle from the way he had held Gelda's to make sure she did not drown. He fitted into her in a slightly different way which intensified his excitement. Her violent thrashing matched his own as their coupling came to an end he knew that they were going to become parents.

The nest building was a pleasant activity. She really did know what she was doing and yet was happy to let him show her some tricks. She'd showed him that she wanted to move to his part of the lake. She'd torn the old nest apart in a frenzied attack but then gave him some bits and pieces. It was her who led him back to the bank where he always slept and indicated that this was the spot where she wanted to build the nest. Fendrak felt his loneliness disappearing.

She produced three eggs and began to sit on them straight away. Fendrak found the tastiest bits of pond weed to feed her. He had every hope that they would become a happy family.

The days passed. As they became longer, more humans strolled around the lake. Occasionally some of the young males would throw stones at them, but Fendrak found he only had to raise himself up on his legs and spread his wings flapping them slightly and the young humans would go away.

Sometimes the humans brought food. It was not like the food that grew around the lake. It was soft and white and easy to digest. You wanted more and more of it even if you were full. It was tempting to overeat but they actually knew better than to do that. And it made feeding Frayla easy. He took his turn, too, sitting on the eggs. Then she would come to

him with some tasty morsel in her beak. She would pass it gently to him, letting her beak linger on his for a few seconds and stroking his neck with her own. Fendrak asked himself whether there might be time to mate again and produce a second brood.

Then the dangerous-looking young male humans came. Surely they would not do any harm? They were just children, though almost adults he guessed. They approached the nest. Frayla stiffened. Fendrak watched carefully. The youngsters were going towards Frayla. Fendrak sensed her fear. He swam over to the bank and hissed at the youths. One of them growled loudly at him, startling him and making Frayla panic. She leapt from the nest and plunged into the water. The youths started laughing. One of them started kicking at the nest. Fendrak watched in despair as it and the eggs all tumbled into the water. They could build a new nest, but they could not salvage the eggs.

It was a reason to make love again. He was more skilful this time. He had the measure of her. Again as they both screeched voicelessly in their excitement he knew they had succeeded.

They built the nest further along the bank this time. They salvaged some bits and pieces of the old one and found some new materials. There would just be time to raise a family before the cooler weather came.

Again Frayla sat proudly on her clutch. There were four eggs this time Fendrak worked hard to feed her. On the whole, the humans and their dogs left them alone and even remembered to bring some of the white food.

But then the youths came again. This time, they were even nastier. One of them jumped at Frayla and shouted. She hissed back, but the biggest of the youths picked up an old brick and hurled it at her. She sprang from the nest and plunged into the water. Fendrak also

hissed but it made no difference. The youths just laughed again. Fendrak saw them take the eggs from the nest. Their hopes of raising a family this season were gone.

He could not stop Frayla dragging herself from the water and back on to the nest. She didn't seem to notice that the eggs were no longer there. He stopped feeding her, tried to entice her into the water, but she would have none of it. He feared she would grow too weak, so he started to bring her the choicest of morsels again.

Only weeks later as the first leaves turned to yellow did she begin to venture from the nest and only when the leaves started to drop from the trees did she abandon it altogether.

Fendrak thought that maybe they should leave, find another body of water. Each time the geese passed over, he would look up, flap his wings and whisper gently. But Frayla ignored him. She seemed tied to this place. And after all, Fendrak hated flying. He felt uneasy but was also glad to stay.

Besides, there was no further sign of the youths. Plenty of humans wandered by, but on the whole, those with dogs kept their pets under control and they were left in peace. Some brought white food. Fendrak and Frayla enjoyed that. Fendrak knew that they should not eat too much of it. And in fact, as the days became shorter, the humans came less and less and hardly ever brought white food. Besides, Fendrak became aware of two older female humans who seemed to be watching him and Frayla carefully. He sensed some kindness in them.

Perhaps it was safe after all. Life became bearable and almost pleasant as they pottered around on the little lake. There was a good supply of weed and insects here. The rain refreshed the lake and it only went icy at the very edges. They could be content here, Fendrak realised.

The shortest day came and went. Snowdrops bloomed on the banks and leaf-buds swelled on the trees. Something began to stir in Fendrak. He sensed a growing excitement in Frayla too. Maybe this year they could become parents.

As the days became milder, the humans with their fishing wires returned to the lake. There was no sign of the youths, and although the sunnier weather had made Fendrak apprehensive, he began to relax as more and more days went by when the humans just left them alone. Always, though, the two adult females watched them carefully. Fendrak became content.

One day as they fed, Frayla accidentally got a piece of discarded fishing wire caught on her beak. She hissed as she tried to disentangle it from her mouth. Fendrak flapped around her, wanting to help, but not knowing how to. Eventually she was free of all but a little of it, but he could tell it hurt when she tried to feed. Her beak looked sore and swollen. Each day it looked worse. She was eating less and less. She would fade away soon if she could not eat. They might never have a family together. He might be all alone again.

The two female humans now came several times a day. Could he ask them for help? How would he do that? What could they do?

Some more humans came. They had nets and sticks and they looked strong. They started throwing the nets at Frayla. She hissed and flapped her wings. He circled round her and charged at the men with the nets. They waved him away but seemed to speak kindly. They persisted. They even waded into the water and surrounded Frayla. Fendrak hissed and flapped as hard as he could, but they mainly ignored him. He even managed to peck one on the arm but he had such a thick skin of clothing that Fendrak knew he could never hurt him.

The two females stood on the bank and watched and seemed to be making soothing noises.

But nothing could sooth Fendrak.

And Frayla, already weak for lack of food, seemed petrified with fear. She suddenly stopped struggling. The net was over her head and two of the men were taking her from the pond. Fendrak watched as they carried her away, put her into their white van and drove off with her.

They had his Frayla. He was alone again. He sat on the water, not moving, stunned. He was aware that the two females were watching him. They said little. As it began to grow dark, they turned away from him and walked away form the bank. Fendrak pushed his head under his wing and slept and forgot.

He awoke to find the sun streaming on to the pond. Where was Frayla? This was going to be a glorious day. They should share the joy of it. Then he remembered the men and the nets. Frayla was gone. It would be better to die as well. He sunk his head into the water, hoping to drown. He couldn't do it though. The urge to breath was too great.

The two human females came and offered him white food but he turned away. He would try not to eat again, to starve himself to death. He didn't want to start again. He didn't want to find a new waterway. He didn't want a new female to come here. He just wanted Frayla back. But the humans had taken her and she wouldn't be back. Every time, though, hunger got the better of him, and he would nibble just enough weed to take the edge away.

He tried to sleep as much as he could, but he could not sleep all of the time. Noises and hunger woke him. But each time as he tucked his head under his wing, he hoped he would never wake again. He was getting weaker and he did sleep more and more. Still he woke every day, though.

On the seventh day when he awoke the sun was already high in the sky but he sensed something familiar and exciting and something of which to be afraid. The white van was at

the edge of the lake again. Perhaps they had come to take him. Good. Then he could die, too. He would even swim out and meet them. He tried to edge towards them.

A man jumped out of the van and slammed its door. Fendrak jumped and swam away. He wanted to die but he was afraid of the pain they would inflict on him. He watched from a distance. Another man got out of the other side of the van. The two females were now walking down the path from the road. They shook hands with the two men. One of the men opened the back of the van. Then the two men took out a large cage.

Fendrak suddenly felt excited. It reminded him of how he felt when he first became aware that Frayla also lived on the pond. He had the odd impression that she was nearby again, but how could that be? The men had taken her away and killed her, hadn't they?

One of the men opened the cage and signalled to the other humans that they should stand back. Something white struggled out. Could it be? Surely not? It looked like her, but how could that be?

It was her! She scuttled down to the water, clumsily dived in then gracefully glided over to him and began rubbing his neck. By now, more humans had gathered around the lake. They all clapped. Even the ducks and moorhens seemed to stop what they were doing to stare at Frayla's return.

Oh, he loved her. He wanted to make love to her there and then, but not with this audience. Besides, he knew he was too weak. But she looked glorious. Her beak was completely healed and she was well fed. Her feathers glistened with health. So, the humans hadn't killed her. They'd worked some magic on her and she was fit and well again. He was the poorly one now. That wouldn't last long, though. He would feed properly now.

For four days, they pottered on the lake. They found delicious new weed and beetles and insects and even indulged in some small fish. They had a little treats of white food from

the two human females who now came several times a day to the lake. The humans seemed to respect though that they should not give them too much. Every so often, Fendrak would try to make love to Frayla, but she would turn and swim away. How wise she was! He knew it really. Only when his strength had returned fully would he be able to make a family with her. But she would rub her neck affectionately along his and he was content and knew that he was no longer lonely, would probably never be lonely again: they seemed to have an aptitude for overcoming disaster.

On the fifth day, after a long necking session, she allowed him to hold her head above the waters as he entered her from behind. This time it was perfect as their excitement rose in harmony and they peaked at exactly the same moment. Fendrak knew that he was a father again and he was sure that she knew she was a mother.

When they were done, she led him to her old nesting ground in the reed bank. She was right, he was sure. This was far away from where any human could touch them. What did he care if she shared that area with her previous mate? If it meant their family would survive, then so be it.

Frayla produced five eggs. Fendrak was proud. A couple of times he and Gelda had managed seven, but not all of the cygnets had survived. In more recent years there had just been two or three. Five was a respectable number.

The five weeks seemed to last forever. Fendrak was afraid the youths would come back. The days went by. There was no sign of them. He relaxed, felt the joy of approaching fatherhood and took care of his lady.

The day came at last when the first egg cracked. Soon a little grey head poked out towards the sky and the first gently chirping started. Atil. Though he'd got through the alphabet twice with Gelda, Fendrak still always found it an exciting moment when the first

one pecked his or her way out. It had always been a male, the first one, in the broods he'd raised with Gelda and Frayla seemed happy to carry on the tradition.

Before two days and two nights had passed the others followed: Bella, Callum, Danik and Esmee.

They were ugly at first, as Fendrak knew they would be. The moorhens and the ducks came and stared. They had young, too, but their young just looked like smaller versions of themselves. No one can ever look at one of Fendrak's children and believe that one day it will become a graceful swimming bird that actually belongs to the Queen or King of England. Atil, Bella, Callum, Dana and Esmee started off like all cygnets white and fluffy and clumsy. Then they became grey and fluffy and clumsy. Then the fluffiness gradually disappeared. The greyness would eventually turn to white. They would be short-necked for a while but eventually they would become as elegant and as handsome as their parents, though they would remain unsure of themselves for a while yet and would need Fendrak and Freya to guide them. In the end they would even lose their clumsiness.

The humans came to stare at them as well. Then, Fendrak and his family would put on a little show of behaving how swans are supposed to behave. They would swim in straight line: Fendrak, Frayla, Atil, Bella, Callum Dana and Esmee. More humans would now bring the soft white food. Sometimes, though, they would just bring too much. Then Fendrak and Frayla would guide the little ones away.

Fendrak was charmed by his new family. They were all so different. Atil was the serious one considered everything he did very carefully. Bella lived up to her name, and even though her grey, fluffy, clumsy state, anyone could see that she was beautiful – perhaps even more beautiful than her mother. Callum was the one they had to watch. He'd been the first to bottom up in order to feed but had forgotten to hold his breath and Fendrak had to pull

him back up by the neck. Callum always wanted to try new things before he was ready. Dana was practical and wise beyond her days and Fendrak already guessed that in a couple of years' time she would be the first that he and Frayla could happily encourage to join another flock. Esmee was timid and needed looking after. She, he guessed would be the last to go or might even be one of those swans who never left the parental flock. Flock! Maybe he and Frayla would breed again next year and there would indeed be a small flock of swans on this small lake. Sweet indeed.

One day a small human came with, Fendrak supposed, a grandparent. As far as Fendrak could tell, the child was younger in human terms than his five were now and the adult much older than he and Frayla. The humans had white food with them. Today's treat, then. Fendrak lead his family to the bank where the humans stood. But as the white food hit the water, Fendrak realised that something was wrong. There were blue spots on the bread. He remembered vaguely a long time ago white food with blue spots and Gelda's very first cygnet, Aisla, dying. This stuff was dangerous. And of course, bold as ever, Callum was making right for the first pieces.

Fendrak scuttled out of the pond and hissed at the humans. The child whimpered and the adult pulled him towards her. They backed away.

Frayla seemed to understand and was now circling round Callum, trying to stop him eating the white food. It would be impossible, Fendrak, realised, with Callum, but maybe they could stop the others coming to any harm.

Suddenly there was a large splash behind him. Fendrak turned to see a fully-clothed young male human diving to towards the spotted white food. Callum was pecking and hissing at him and Frayla was hissing and flapping her wings. The other four cygnets just sat and

watched and the ducks and moorhens had also stopped what they were doing to see what was going on.

Fendrak realised what was happening. This wasn't one of the youths who had been here before to destroy their nest or steal their eggs. This youth was collecting up the spotted white food. The child and the grandmother had wandered back to the road now. That danger was over. And on the bank was one of the females who visited every day, her hand over mouth and concern on her face. The youth was no doubt with her.

Callum would hurt him soon if he didn't do something, Fendrak realised. He slid back into the water and guided his family away. Frayla seemed a little puzzled at first but then she and all of the cygnets, even Callum accepted without question. Soon they were all happily feeding on the delicious weed which grew on the east side of the pond.

The youth, Fendrak noticed, had collected all of the poisonous food. He had got out of the lake and he and the older female were now laughing. Yes, he did look silly, even for a human, with water dripping from his clothes. They usually take most of them off when they go in the water.

The sun suddenly came out from behind the dark clouds. A faint breeze rippled the surface of the water and gently tickled Fendrak's feathers. It seemed like a sign that all would be well from now on.

Fendrak was pleased to see the child and its grandmother join the two females in visiting the lake every day. They all seemed to be friends now. Only sometimes did they bring white food and never any with blue spots.

Fendrak realised something else. This was a man-pond. Humans had made it for some reason. That's why there were red bricks at the side. But they didn't need it anymore and they'd left it for the swans and the ducks and the moorhens and everything else that could

live in and around it. Those men who had come and taken Frayla away had been trying to help and they had helped. She would have died if they hadn't come. The youths hadn't been back since the two females started coming.

Yes this was a man-pond, but it was a fine place to live and the humans were keeping an eye on them and keeping their distance. Frayla swam up to him and rubbed her neck along his. He felt the excitement growing. Was there time this season to raise another family? He looked at the light. A little weak, perhaps. Well, there was always next year.

Fendrak was at home.