

# Rebellious Elements

An interactive theatre piece about the climate crisis, for young people

by Robert Alcock, [abrazohouse.org/writing](http://abrazohouse.org/writing)

## INTRODUCTION

*Rebellious Elements* is a play that deals with the stories we live by, often without even realising it. It asks: can we change the outcome of these stories, and if so, how? These questions become urgent and topical in the context of the global ecological emergency.

Four young people are involved—some intentionally, others by chance—in a mass protest/demonstration, which is brutally suppressed by the police. All four escape to a warehouse where they meet an enigmatic storyteller who tells them four traditional folk tales, each relevant in some way to their (and our) predicament. But can they control how the stories are resolved, or are they caught in the storyteller's web?

## SETTING

The very near future; a disused warehouse in a capital city somewhere in the industrialised world.

## CHARACTERS

THE STORYTELLER: An urban magician, ageless

THE MAGPIE: Their mischievous familiar

ALICE: 15, a school strike organiser, bright, fiery, at times self-righteous

KEVIN: 21, a bike messenger and budding entrepreneur, a bit cocky

DOMINIC: 17, at secondary school, intellectual, shy, awkward

SINEAD: 18, a student and climate activist, mature for her age, worries

### STORY ONE (The Fisherwoman and her Husband)

FISH: A prince enchanted as a talking fish

FISHERWOMAN (ALICE): A woman who just wants a quiet life

HUSBAND (KEVIN): Her discontented husband

BUTLER: A servant

### STORY TWO (The Twelve Wild Swans)

QUEEN: Who desperately wants a daughter

OLD WOMAN: Who curses her

YOUNGEST BROTHER (DOMINIC): Sensitive youngest son

ROSE (SINEAD): Daughter who takes on a quest

NURSE: Who reared Rose

ELDEST BROTHER: Angry eldest son

FAIRY QUEEN: Who appears in a dream

KING: Who marries Rose

KING'S MOTHER: Who hates Rose

SERVANT: Who does the dirty work

CROWD: Who are fickle

### STORY THREE (Dubh a'Ghiubais, or Fir Black)

PINE:	A visionary tree
FIR:	A proud tree
LARCH:	A sensitive tree
ADVISORS 1&2:	Scheming and untrustworthy
KING (KEVIN):	A powerful ruler with dark moods
PRINCESS (SINEAD):	Who wants to see her father happy
WISE WOMAN:	Who does magic
VILLAGERS 1-5:	Who want to save their home
LOCH BROOM MAN:	Who finds a way to do it
MESSENGERS 1&2:	Who bring sad news

### STORY FOUR (The Lindworm)

QUEEN:	Who longs for a child
OLD WOMAN:	Who helps her have one
MAN-AT-ARMS:	Who survives a massacre
KING:	Who rules the kingdom
PRINCE (DOMINIC):	Who has to save it
LINDWORM:	Who threatens it
GRANDDAUGHTER (ALICE):	Who knows how to save it

## ABOUT THE TALES

The play is structured around four traditional Northern European folk tales. Each of the tales relates to the ecological crisis in a different way. In each story, one or more characters is enchanted into the shape of an animal related to one of the four elements, respectively a fish, a swan, a fire-bird and a snake.

### **The Fisherwoman and her Husband**

Adapted from the Brothers Grimm tale "The Fisherman and his Wife". Similar tales are found in many cultures including Russia, Japan and India.

### **The Twelve Wild Swans**

Probably the best-known of the four tales. It appears as "The Twelve Brothers" in Grimm; Hans Christian Andersen wrote his own version, and others are known from Russia and North Africa. The number and type of birds varies. Our tale is adapted from *The Twelve Wild Swans* (2011) by Starhawk and Hilary Valentine.

### **Dubh a'Ghiubais, or Fir Black**

A traditional tale from the West Highlands of Scotland, which appears in *Scottish Myths & Legends* (1998) by K E Sullivan. "Lochlann" in Gaelic may refer to either Scandinavia, a Norse kingdom in Scotland, or (as in our version) a fictional kingdom.

### **The Lindworm**

A Scandinavian folktale collected by Asbjørnson and Moe. Lindworms appear in many European legends, and are normally represented as a dragon with two legs but no wings.

## **ORIGIN STORY**

Once upon a time, in another life, I played one of the main roles in a piece of children's musical theatre entitled *The Elements*, produced by the local music and drama workshop in my home town in Warwickshire. The outline of the story was as follows: at a time when the four elements of earth, air, water and fire are out of balance, causing multiple disasters, a wise elder figure (the Magician) brings together four young people and magically transports them into four archetypal stories, representing the four elements, in order to bring those elements back into alignment. The prophetic resonances of this story have returned to haunt me, and I feel that it has great transformative potential. The original script is long lost, and probably would be extremely dated even if it weren't, so I've taken the liberty of updating the play, with the help of Rebecca Kilbey, founder of Live Drama (<https://www.livedrama.co.uk>) and members of the Edinburgh Southside Community Centre Adult Theatre Group. My thanks go to them and to my partner, Maria Almudena, for their advice, feedback and suggestions; and to my daughter Sofia for pushing me, during a long and exhausting drive, to make this project a reality.

## PROLOGUE

*(I envision the PROLOGUE as an overlaid tapestry of sound, possibly including pre-recorded audio from natural disasters and protests, as well as several NEWSREADERS who will read the extracts from news reports about the unfolding climate and ecological emergency. As the play is set in the present or very near future and in a fictitious capital city, the news stories do not need to exactly represent what may have been happening recently in the real world, though clearly they do reflect a very real situation. It's a barrage of information, which the audience don't need to hear or understand every single piece of, as long as they get the overall impression of a world collapsing into ecological chaos, and protests against this which are brutally suppressed by the authorities.*

*Depending on where each audience member is sitting they may hear a different mix of information, but the whole picture will be clear to all. Also, the beginning and end of the readings will be done by one reader alone so everyone will hear this; careful timing is needed to ensure this.*

*I see the NEWSREADERS as figures dressed in black on a darkened stage. This is information that's floating in the ether. Perhaps they can be reading from clipboards with tiny reading lights.)*

### NEWSREADER 1:

Last night, bushfires continued to sweep across Australia. More than a hundred thousand people have now been evacuated from affected areas as the conflagration raged out of control for the fifth consecutive day. *[NEWSREADER 2 begins reading over the top of 1]* The towns of Eden, Broom Lake and Brigadoon have been destroyed in their entirety. Firefighters abandoned their heroic efforts to protect the three towns after more than seventy-two hours, and are now concentrating on protecting other towns and cities that lie in the path of the flames, including the centre of Canberra, the nation's capital, whose southern suburbs have already been engulfed by the flames. The state of emergency was extended yesterday to include the whole of three states and the Australian Capital Territory. Pictures taken after the fires had passed show millions of hectares of forest reduced to ash, with the carbonized bodies of countless animals scattered among the shells of houses and cars consumed by the ravenous maw of the fire. The prime minister, speaking from Bali where he has been addressing a conference of fossil-fuel producing nations, asked for the nation to remain calm and support the heroic firefighters in their heroic efforts to fight the fires, which he called a "natural disaster that could never have been predicted." When asked to comment on the links between the fires and the fossil fuel industry, he called anthropogenic climate change "a discredited theory, and not a very sexy one at that."

### NEWSREADER 2:

Today saw the third day of devastation across the mid-Atlantic states of the USA, as Hurricane Zachary continued to drift slowly north across the eastern outskirts of Washington, D.C. where it made landfall on Monday night. *[NEWSREADER 3 begins reading over the top of 1 and 2]* Low-lying areas of Maryland, Virginia and Delaware

have experienced unprecedented storm surges of up to eight feet in height, while winds of more than one hundred miles per hour have been registered as far away as Philadelphia.

More than two million people were without power for another day while emergency services were stretched to the limit. Gymnasiums and community centres across the region have been converted into refuges for those unable to return to their homes. The hurricane, which experts have already called "the most economically devastating natural disaster in US history", shows no sign of abating. The head of the US Meteorological Agency said that the best hope is that the storm will change course and drift back over the Atlantic, but there is little chance of this happening before the weekend. She added that the severity and frequency of storms was greatly exacerbated by man-made climate change, so it was inevitable that further storms of equal or greater intensity would appear in the near future, and the best hope was that "next time it won't hit an area with such a concentration of valuable infrastructure." Responding to her comments, the governor of Virginia called man-made climate change a "devilish hoax" and described the storm as "The Lord's punishment for gay marriage."

### NEWSREADER 3:

A report issued this week has highlighted the devastating loss of nature and wildlife all over the planet during the past 50 years. During this time it is reported that 60% of wildlife has been lost, including 83% of freshwater life. [*NEWSREADER 4 begins reading over the top of 1, 2 and 3*] This loss is being primarily driven by land degradation and overexploitation of natural resources, caused by the explosion in human population and consumption since the 1950s. Climate change is a secondary factor. Of special concern is the loss of insect biodiversity, including the pollinators that are necessary for production of nearly all our fruit and vegetables. Clearance of natural forests for agriculture and urban growth continues to accelerate, especially in tropical regions, while in temperate zones they are more likely to be replaced with forest plantations whose biodiversity value is low. Indigenous peoples, who continue to be displaced from many forest areas, often with the excuse of forest conservation, nonetheless act as stewards for more than 80% of the Earth's remaining biodiversity on only 5% of the land area. Freshwater ecosystems, which contain 10% of known animals despite only covering 1% of the Earth's surface, are among the most threatened by destruction of habitat, invasive species, overfishing, and pollution. Overall, the picture is of an unprecedented loss of wildlife and biodiversity across all the Earth's natural ecosystems. Species are being lost at a rate of 100 to 1000 times the natural background rate, leading many scientists to describe this as the sixth mass extinction of life on Planet Earth, comparable to the asteroid impact which wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

NEWSREADER 4:

The extent of sea ice in the Arctic reached record lows this week, as warmer temperatures drove the ice to break up earlier than in previous years. Decreases in sea ice will have knock-on effects to climate change, as the white ice, which reflects more of the sun's energy back into space, is replaced by dark ocean which absorbs that energy. *[NEWSREADER 5 begins reading over the top of 1, 2, 3 and 4]* Increases have also been observed in the rate of melting of the ice caps in Greenland and Antarctica, which in turn will lead to increases in sea level rise, displacing many of the estimated 1 in 50 people around the world who live within one metre of sea level. Plastic pollution has now been detected in all major marine environments worldwide, from shorelines and surface waters down to the deepest parts of the ocean, including the bottom of the Mariana Trench. 90% of the world's seabirds have plastic in their stomachs, compared with 5% in 1960. The so-called Pacific Garbage Patch, an area of floating plastic the size of France in the middle of the north Pacific, is just one of five such garbage patches around the globe. Meanwhile, ocean acidification has been happening at a faster rate than at any time in the past 300 million years. Tropical coral reefs, on which 200 million people depend to protect them from storm surges, are likely to disappear by the middle of this century due to a combination of warming and acidification. Mangroves, another coastal ecosystem that protects coastal communities while also sequestering five times as much carbon as terrestrial forests, have declined between 30 and 50% over the past 50 years. Overfishing is one of the main drivers of loss of biodiversity in the oceans, with 77% of fish being caught by industrial fishing fleets compared with only 3% by subsistence fishers.

NEWSREADER 5:

This week thousands of protestors blocked roads and government buildings across the capital, in a series of massive demonstrations against what they call "government inaction on the climate and ecological emergency." This marks the latest in a series of escalating protests organised by a coalition including civil society organisations, faith groups, school strikers and direct action movements. Traffic in many parts of the city was brought to a standstill during the morning rush-hour, with the mayor urging drivers unable to move their vehicles for more than five minutes to switch off the engines in order to reduce air pollution. The Prime Minister responded to the protestors' demands for dialogue with the following statement: "I fully sympathise with the protestors' objectives. I went into politics myself because I wanted to make a better world. But their methods are unacceptable. There are right ways and wrong ways to go about achieving political change, and this is definitely the wrong way. People who want to change things should go home and write to their representatives. Skipping school and blocking roads are illegal acts and will be punished with the full force of the law. We will never negotiate with those who break the law of the land." *[At this point the other newsreaders should have finished, so that only NEWSREADER 5 is still speaking.]* Thousands of police officers were

drafted in from across the country to maintain order, while protestors pledged to continue their campaign of non-violent civil disobedience until the government agrees to dialogue. The chief of police stated, "We cannot and will not allow disorder in the streets of the capital to continue any longer."

## ACT ONE: THE FISHERWOMAN AND HER HUSBAND

*(A space in the abandoned warehouse. The sounds of protest are audible from outside but sound muffled as if they are quite distant, and gradually fade over the first minute or so of the scene.)*

*ALICE enters, attempting to use her mobile phone. She is about 15 years old and is an organiser of the climate strike at her secondary school. Other than that, she's a studious and not especially fashion-conscious teenage girl, and dresses accordingly, but with at least one patch or badge indicating her affiliation with the climate strike movement. She is passionate and dedicated to the cause of climate action, even to the point of self-righteousness at times. She helped organise the huge demonstration that has just been taking place offstage. It's not her first demo by any means but it's the first time she's experienced anything like this level of police repression, so she is quite shaken and panicky, but also excited; let's face it, this is all very thrilling. We hear only her half of the conversation—which isn't really a conversation—interspersed with pauses.)*

ALICE: *(Into her phone)* Sam! Sam?? ... You're breaking up. Can you hear me? ... Are you OK? ... Did you see them beating people up? ... What? No, BEATING UP... What? I can't hear you! I think they must be jamming the signal! ... I said they must be jamming... Oh never mind, talk later!

*(She gives up in frustration and hangs up. Sitting down on a piece of rubble, she starts checking her messages, but realises nothing is getting through. She puts her phone down on a concrete block, takes a deep breath and looks around.)*

*At this moment the MAGPIE flies onto stage and perches at a safe distance, watching ALICE. The MAGPIE is either an actor in a costume that suggests its magical nature as a spirit animal; or possibly, a puppet manipulated by an actor.)*

ALICE: Well hello there, aren't you beautiful!

MAGPIE *(proudly)*: Beautiful!

*(ALICE is surprised, but takes this in her stride:)*

ALICE: Clever, too! I had no idea magpies could talk. *(She rummages in her bag and brings out a snack of some kind.)* Would you like something to eat?

*(ALICE rummages in her bag and brings out a snack of some kind. She breaks off a few crumbs and, getting up, puts them on the ground, a little bit away from where she was sitting, with the obvious aim of luring the bird closer so she can befriend it. But the MAGPIE has very different ideas. As soon as ALICE's back is turned, it swoops down, grabs her mobile phone in its beak, and flies up again to perch on a high beam! ALICE sees this and is shocked, but at the same time, slightly amused.)*

ALICE: What! Give that back.

*(The MAGPIE just flicks its tail at her and tilts its head. ALICE still doesn't treat this as a serious threat, so brings out the snack again and tries to tempt the bird closer, but it doesn't respond.)*

ALICE: Come on, you don't want my phone! Have a snack instead.

*(The bird doesn't take the bait. She gets up and approaches it, in an attempt to get it to drop the*

phone, but instead it flies past her and exits on the opposite side of the stage from where ALICE came in.)

ALICE: *(Yells and gives chase)* Hey, come back here!

*(The stage is empty for a few moments. Now we're in a different part of the warehouse, though without set changes. KEVIN, the second 'protester' character, enters. He's around 21 years old and is a casually dressed young man carrying a bicycle satchel. He isn't a protestor at all, but a young delivery worker who has been caught up in the protest, been chased by police and fled to this warehouse. KEVIN sits down on a different piece of rubble and catches his breath, perhaps inspecting his hand which might have been slightly injured. But in fact he's much more worried about his bike, which is parked outside in the street and God knows what could have happened to it by now.*

*To his surprise the MAGPIE flies onto stage and deposits ALICE's phone close to his feet, then flies up to a safe perch.)*

KEVIN: What the---?

*(He picks up the phone and looks at it. A few moments later, ALICE enters. The characters size each other up. KEVIN spots immediately that ALICE is one of the protestors, the people who have just ruined his day. ALICE, for her part, is understandably wary of KEVIN, especially considering their bleak surroundings and the fact that he's holding her phone.)*

ALICE: That's mine - can I... *(she holds out her hand to get it back)*

KEVIN: *(He looks at her, up and down. It makes her feel uncomfortable. He shakes his head in disgust)* You're one of those protestors.

ALICE: *(His evident disapproval makes her stronger)* That bird stole my phone. I want it back.

KEVIN: Well I wanted to get to work this morning!

ALICE: Give it back - please.

KEVIN: Why should I? Thanks to your lot I've been chased by the cops, my bike's been trashed and now I'm stuck in this dump. *(He holds the phone out to her)* Maybe I should keep this as compensation. Or evidence? I bet you're one of the ringleaders and there's a reward for turning you in. *(Now it's Alice's turn to look disgusted)*

ALICE: Oh, just give it here!

KEVIN: *(Sees that she is upset and tosses her the phone)* There's no signal anyway.

ALICE: They're jamming it. *(Attempting some kind of reconciliation)* Look, I'm sorry about your bike, but you can't blame us for what the police did, it was totally out of proportion.

*(Now that they are talking to each other, the MAGPIE takes this as its cue to flit away off-stage on its next errand.)*

KEVIN: They're just doing their job—trying to help ordinary folk go about

their business!

ALICE: But that's the trouble. Business-as-usual is what's killing the planet. It has to change. We're in a climate emergency, or hadn't you heard?

KEVIN: *(Exasperated)* And how's blocking the streets going to help? People need to work, make a living, pay taxes. Let the government sort it out, what do we pay them for?

ALICE: But they're not 'sorting it out', that's the problem! They keep building more roads, expanding airports! When's it all going to stop?

KEVIN: People need somewhere to live. They need to get around - they want to go on holiday... I bet your parents aren't short of a few quid. Where did you go last summer?

ALICE: *(Looks a bit guilty)* Well, OK, we flew to Spain. They said the ferry was too expensive and took too long - anyway, that's not the point. It's not just about individuals, the system needs to change.

KEVIN: That's easy for you to say. *(Slyly)* Got a signal on your iPhone yet?

ALICE: *(Defensively)* It's two years old.

KEVIN: *(Now he has her on the back foot)* What you don't realise is that most people have to struggle every day just to get by, and they want a decent life. The people at the top just want more power and more money—if they didn't they wouldn't be where they are. And what about the billions of people in China, India, Africa—are you going to tell them they'll never have what *you've* got? How are you ever going to stop it?

ALICE: *(Upset)* I don't know! I haven't a clue. I just know we have to, somehow, while we still have a planet to live on.

KEVIN: *(Considering, but rejecting it)* Yeah, but what's the point? We're all going to die in the end. Let's enjoy life. Think I'm still going to be running deliveries when I'm thirty? I've got a business with my best friend, we supply sound systems. He's tech, I'm logistics. We get to hear a lot of good bands, too. It's still getting off the ground but people always want a good time, so the sky's the limit.

*(The last phrase hangs in the air for a moment. As if on cue, the MAGPIE flits back on stage.)*

ALICE: *(Repeats thoughtfully)* The sky's the limit...

*(Following the MAGPIE, the STORYTELLER enters the room. The STORYTELLER is an urban magician of either sex and indeterminate age, though clearly of mature years. ALICE and KEVIN are surprised and not a little alarmed at his arrival. The MAGPIE perches near the STORYTELLER, who strokes it.)*

STORYTELLER: *(to the MAGPIE)* Well done! Now go and bring the others.

*(The MAGPIE wags its tail with pride and flits off to exit again. The STORYTELLER turns to the*

*other characters.)*

STORYTELLER: Welcome to you both. Welcome to my home. Please relax. This place is protected. The police can't come here.

ALICE: Was that your bird? It stole my phone!

STORYTELLER: She's a bit of a devil, isn't she? Your device won't work here, anyway. Like I said, we're in a protected place. I asked her to bring you in, for your safety.

ALICE: Well, thanks... I guess.

KEVIN: That's all very well, but I've got to get to work.

STORYTELLER: You can't go back out there now. Wait until it's died down.

ALICE: Who are you, anyway?

STORYTELLER: You could say I'm a storyteller.

KEVIN: What kind of stories?

STORYTELLER: Yours.

KEVIN: *(Perplexed)* Ours?

STORYTELLER: Yes, yours. The seeds you bring with you in your pockets, stuck to your socks, in the treads of your shoes. They always end up growing, even if you don't realise it... *Especially* if you don't realise it. But now you're here, where it's quiet, maybe you can hear them grow. And maybe, who knows, you might find that you can change them. There's always a chance. So please, relax. The first story begins.

*(The STORYTELLER begins to narrate the FIRST STORY: The Fisherwoman and Her Husband. As the story begins, ALICE and KEVIN find themselves drawn into the narrative, without being able to stop themselves. ALICE, of course, is the Fisherwoman, who attempts to limit the greed of her husband, played by KEVIN.)*

STORYTELLER: Once upon a time there lived a fisherwoman and her husband. They were very poor and lived in a damp and dilapidated caravan on a patch of waste ground near the sea. Their only wish was for a decent home.

*(TABLEAU - CAST represents the caravan. ALICE / FISHERWOMAN and KEVIN / HUSBAND stand on either side)*

STORYTELLER: One fine day when the sea was calm and smooth, the fisherwoman went fishing in her little boat.

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: *(To KEVIN / HUSBAND)* I'm off then. *(He ignores her, staring disconsolately into the distance)* Try to fix the shutter on the window while I'm gone?

*(KEVIN / HUSBAND sighs and exits; ALICE / FISHERWOMAN sets off on her journey; CAST represents the calm sea)*

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: *(As she casts her net)* Not a breath of wind today. Beautiful!

STORYTELLER: She hauled in her net and, to her surprise, found that she had caught a fish wearing a small golden crown. She was even more amazed when the fish spoke.

FISH: I am not really a fish, but an enchanted prince! Release me, I beg of you, and I will give you your heart's desire.

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: Well there's no need for such a fuss! We're not going to eat a talking fish, anyhow.

STORYTELLER: And with that, she let the fish swim away and thought no more of it. But when she returned home that evening... *(CAST re-form as the Cottage)*...

KEVIN / HUSBAND: *(Excitedly)* I was just searching for a nail - and suddenly our horrible damp caravan had turned into this sweet little cottage! *(Proudly)* It's got a kitchen garden!

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: And roses round the door. He didn't lie! This IS my heart's desire!

KEVIN / HUSBAND: *(Suddenly suspicious)* Who didn't lie?

STORYTELLER: The Fisherwoman told her husband about her encounter with the talking fish. They were both delighted with their new home, and lived together in contentment... for a while. But after a few days, the husband began to feel dissatisfied, and said to his wife:

KEVIN / HUSBAND: Why should we settle for just a cottage? That magic fish could just as well have given us a nice townhouse.

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: *(Thinking he is joking)* What use have we for a townhouse?

KEVIN / HUSBAND: I could BE someone in a townhouse.

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: You ARE someone in our little cottage!

KEVIN / HUSBAND: Not the person I should be. Ask him for a townhouse. *(She hesitates)* Go on! It's no less than we deserve. *(ALICE / FISHERWOMAN sets off, reluctantly)*

STORYTELLER: This time the sea was not so calm as before, and it had a weird, oily sheen to it. *(CAST represent the sea less calm than before)*

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: *(Calls to the Fish)* Fish? Prince?

STORYTELLER: Immediately the fish came to her. When he learnt that her husband was not satisfied with the cottage and now desired a townhouse he replied:

FISH: Go home, and you will find that you already have what you desire.

STORYTELLER: So she did - and found that the cottage had been replaced by a tall, elegant townhouse (*CAST represents the townhouse as the STORYTELLER describes the features*) With iron railings - a big imposing front door - original period features - and a large garden with sea views.

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: Well! This is nice!

KEVIN / HUSBAND: It's more like it, for sure, but still...the garden's a bit pokey.

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: It's more than big enough for the two of us!

KEVIN / HUSBAND: And, I can't help feeling the neighbours are too close.

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: I think it might be nice to have neighbours for a change!

KEVIN / HUSBAND: No, I think what we need, what we really deserve, is a large Highland estate!

STORYTELLER: As before, eventually he wore her down and she agreed to go out on the water and speak to the fish again. This time the sea was rough, purple and green, with lumps of waste floating on it.

*(CAST represent the rough, polluted sea)*

STORYTELLER: As before, the talking fish answered her call and learned that the fisherwoman's husband now wanted a Highland estate.

FISH: Go home, and you will find that you already have what you desire.

*(ALICE / FISHERWOMAN returns home as the CAST represents the woodland driveway to the estate. As the STORYTELLER talks, they act out the journey through the estate.)*

STORYTELLER: This time when she went home, she found that instead of the townhouse, they had been given an extensive Highland estate with panoramic views over a sea loch including several private islands, and a driveway that wound for miles through woodland populated with their own herd of deer, leading to a magnificent Scots baronial mansion with a small but dedicated staff of servants and ghillies.

*(CAST represents the mansion. The door opens and a BUTLER steps out to greet them)*

BUTLER: Champagne madam? Sir? *(They accept, in wonder, looking around the place as they drink. As the STORYTELLER continues, KEVIN / HUSBAND's expression changes from wonder to disapproval, to disgust)*

STORYTELLER: And yet her husband seemed less content than ever. He felt trapped in the giant mansion and hated the dark silence of the trees. He became convinced the staff were whispering about him. He even came to resent the sun and moon, and told his wife:

KEVIN / HUSBAND: I can't bear the way they rise and set whenever they please, with no care for my feelings. I must have power over them. Go and order

the talking fish to make me as God.

ALICE / FISHERWOMAN: Husband -

KEVIN / HUSBAND: Go!

STORYTELLER: She knew he would not be denied, and with a heavy heart went once more to the seashore.

*(CAST represent the stormy-tossed, heavily polluted sea)*

STORYTELLER: A storm was raging, with high winds and huge waves that dwarfed her small boat, and the water was polluted with vile-smelling oil and foam. When the fish answered her call and learned of this latest request, he replied:

FISH: Go home, and you will find you have what you deserve.

STORYTELLER: So she returned home and found her husband crying outside the damp, dilapidated caravan on the patch of waste ground.

*(CAST represent the caravan again, this time even more dilapidated than ever)*

STORYTELLER: And as far as I know, they're still there.

*(The FIRST STORY concludes. The CAST and STORYTELLER exit, ALICE and KEVIN remain on stage, one on either side, sadly contemplating the conclusion of their story. They are—initially at least—mere spectators in Act Two, but during the SECOND STORY they find that they have the power to intervene.)*

## ACT TWO: THE TWELVE WILD SWANS

*(DOMINIC is the first character to appear. He is 17 years old and at secondary school. He's shy, geeky, intellectual, with his head always in the clouds or the internet. He wouldn't have been at the protest but was dragged along by his elder sister, Rose. They have become separated in the chaos following the police charge, and Dominic has fled into an abandoned building. He is completely outside his comfort zone, on the edge of panic and has no idea what to do without Rose. He wants to find her but he certainly doesn't want to attract the attention of the police or anyone else. He doesn't worry whether Rose is OK—it wouldn't cross his mind to imagine that she wouldn't be—but he knows he needs her. NB: We never meet Rose but we will get an idea of her character, and her relationship with DOMINIC, from the dialogue.)*

DOMINIC:                               *(Off, weakly)* Rose?

*(There is no response.)*

DOMINIC:                               *(Off, a bit stronger but more panicky)* Rose?

*(Again no response. DOMINIC enters and repeats his call, getting louder but also more panicky.)*

DOMINIC:                               Where are you? Rose!

*(Nothing. He is terrified and alone but at least there doesn't seem to be any immediate danger here. The adrenaline of the protest is wearing off and he is exhausted and on the edge of tears. He slumps against a wall and looks around blankly.*

*At this point, the MAGPIE flits onto the stage. It perches at a safe distance, tilts its head and regards DOMINIC, who looks at it warily. Suddenly the MAGPIE croaks:)*

MAGPIE:                               Rose!

*(DOMINIC is surprised and continues to watch the bird warily.)*

MAGPIE:                               *(Insistent)* Rose! Rose!

*(The MAGPIE flits around the stage, in a way that suggests it wants to lead DOMINIC somewhere. He asks it directly:)*

DOMINIC:                               Where is she? Where's my sister?

MAGPIE:                               Rose! Sister!

*(The MAGPIE flits around once again, trying to get DOMINIC to follow.)*

DOMINIC:                               *(Fighting his own disbelief)* You... you want me to follow you?

MAGPIE:                               Follow!

*(DOMINIC pauses, trying to convince himself he's not going mad.)*

MAGPIE:                               *(Insistent now)* Follow! Rose! Sister!

*(And the MAGPIE flies off. In a panic, DOMINIC jumps up.)*

DOMINIC:                               Wait for me!!

*(And he runs off stage after it.)*

*After a pause, SINEAD enters, looking lost and alone, and after seeing that this seems like a safe enough place to rest, flops down exhausted.*

*SINEAD is 18 years old and a student. She dresses and acts like a very normal teenager, not like a "radical"/protestor/activist, though she is probably wearing a couple of protest badges.*

*She's emotionally mature for her age and spends a fair amount of time and energy worrying about the state of the world, which has led her to get involved in the climate movement. She has naturally fallen into the role of caring for others within the movement—today she has been handing out food and drink, for example. Her predicament is essentially the same as DOMINIC's, but her response is the opposite: she is not primarily concerned about herself but about her friends, who have all become lost in the chaos. She feels bad about having fled to safety and fears they have all been arrested or worse.*

*The MAGPIE enters and perches on a beam. It is not surprised to see SINEAD and looks at her steadily. SINEAD looks at the bird with a mixture of surprise and relief that there's another living thing here.)*

SINEAD: Hello! At least there's someone else here!

*(DOMINIC enters, sees SINEAD, and stops, eyeing her warily while keeping his distance.)*

DOMINIC: (To MAGPIE, ignoring SINEAD) That isn't Rose!

*(The MAGPIE tilts its head at DOMINIC and gives a cheeky flick of its tail, as if to suggest—if that's possible—that it knows very well that this isn't Rose, but that it told a lie deliberately to bring him here. To emphasise this it stays put and croaks:)*

MAGPIE: Follow! Follow!

DOMINIC: Yes, I did follow you, and now I'm here, and that *isn't* Rose!

MAGPIE: Wait!

*(Seeing it has successfully brought the two characters together, the MAGPIE flits off to continue its mysterious errands.)*

DOMINIC: *(In the wake of the disappearing Magpie)* Where is he going now?

SINEAD: *(Having been dumbfounded by surprise, now speaks up)* Hi, sorry, I'm Sinead, who are you? Are you OK?

DOMINIC: *(As if becoming aware that there is a person in front of him)* I'm Dominic.

SINEAD: Were you at the protest?

DOMINIC: Yes, with my sister. She said I had to come, and now I can't find her!

SINEAD: Oh dear, I am sorry. I hope she's OK. I've lost my friends, too. When the police charged at us, the food cart got turned over... and

then I saw them beating people up and I just panicked.

DOMINIC: So you don't know Rose at all?

SINEAD: No, I'm afraid not. Have you tried calling her?

DOMINIC: There's no signal.

SINEAD: Do you think we should try and find our way back?

DOMINIC: And run into the police again? Not bloody likely.

*(SINEAD tries to think of something to say or do, but can't, so she stays silent.)*

DOMINIC: I don't know what she's so fired up about, anyway. What's it all supposed to achieve?

SINEAD: What, the protest?

DOMINIC: What's the point? We're probably doomed anyway. Unless we can fly off to Mars before then. Mass extinctions have happened before.

SINEAD: *(With quiet determination)* I don't know. I think there's still hope, if we can learn to take responsibility for ourselves.

DOMINIC: Responsibility for ourselves? We didn't make this mess. Why should our generation have to be the ones to sort it out?

SINEAD: Anyway, I'm not going to Mars. I'd rather stay here and try to make the Earth a little better.

*(The MAGPIE re-enters.)*

DOMINIC: And now that bloody bird's back, too.

*(Following the MAGPIE, the STORYTELLER enters.)*

STORYTELLER: Welcome to my home. You're safe here. No danger from outside can enter.

SINEAD: Thank you very much for letting us stay. I wonder, do you know if our friends are safe?

STORYTELLER: *(As if continuing a train of thought)* But you also bring danger with you, of course. The seeds, the stories.

SINEAD: I don't understand. What stories do you mean?

DOMINIC: What are you talking about? Who are you? Look, I just want to find my sister. I just want to find Rose.

STORYTELLER: Rose... Of course. You are her youngest brother, aren't you? *(DOMINIC nods in assent.)* The one that flew away, the one transformed, the one she has to save. So you *(turning to SINEAD)* must be Rose. Your story is starting to unfold. Remember, there is

still hope while the ending is unknown.

*(The STORYTELLER begins to narrate the SECOND STORY: The Twelve Wild Swans, and DOMINIC and SINEAD find themselves drawn into it against their will.)*

STORYTELLER: Once upon a time, there lived a queen who had twelve strong young sons, but who longed more than anything else for a daughter.

QUEEN: If only I could have a daughter, I wouldn't care what happened to my twelve sons.

STORYTELLER: An old woman who was passing heard the Queen and said:

OLD WOMAN: That is an ill wish, and to punish you, it shall be granted.

STORYTELLER: Sure enough, the Queen conceived a child. As the time approached for her to give birth, she remembered the old woman's curse.

QUEEN: Lock the princes in the tallest tower of the castle, where no harm can come to them!

DOMINIC (as Y BRO): But why, mother?

QUEEN: Please, just do as I say.

STORYTELLER: But at the moment the Queen's daughter was born, her sons turned into swans and flew away, never to be seen again. The little girl grew up not knowing about her twelve brothers, until one day, when she was sixteen years old, she went to speak with her old nurse:

SINEAD (as ROSE): Nurse, if I ask you something, will you answer me truly?

NURSE: I'll do my best, my love.

SINEAD (as ROSE): For years I've suspected there's a dark secret here in the castle. Mother and Father have always been so sad but refused to talk about it. Then yesterday, in the attic, I found an old chest full of men's embroidered shirts in all different sizes. Who did those shirts belong to?

NURSE: *(sighs)* I was told never to speak of this. But you're old enough now, and you have a right to know. The shirts belonged to your twelve brothers.

SINEAD (as ROSE): *(shocked)* My brothers?

NURSE: Yes. Somehow a curse was laid on your birth. On the night you were born, your brothers were turned to swans. Nobody has seen them from that day to this. *(she cries)*

SINEAD (as ROSE): I knew there was *something*, but I never suspected... My twelve brothers, enchanted!

NURSE: Yes. Don't say I told you, please!

SINEAD (as ROSE): *(resolute)* Don't worry, Nurse. I am leaving the castle this very day, and I will not return until I have found my brothers and freed them from the spell, no matter how long it takes.

NURSE: Oh, my dear... Goodbye, and do take care!

STORYTELLER: Rose wandered for days until she came to a small hut by the seashore. As the sun was setting, twelve swans flew down towards the beach. With the last light of day, they landed and changed into men.

SINEAD (as ROSE): *(running towards them)* I am your sister!

ELDEST BROTHER: What ill fate is this! We have sworn to kill the first girl we meet, because a girl was the cause of our enchantment.

STORYTELLER: And there on the seashore the brothers killed Rose, the only person who could have freed them from the spell.

*(Until now ALICE and KEVIN have been watching the story from their places in the audience. But at this horrible turn of events, ALICE starts to her feet.)*

ALICE: What? No! You can't end the story like that.

*(The action freezes as the BROTHERS are about to kill ROSE.)*

STORYTELLER (to ALICE): No? What do you think should happen, then?

ALICE: It wasn't her fault! They never should have made that stupid vow in the first place!

STORYTELLER: But they did make it.

ALICE: Then they should break it!

STORYTELLER: As you say...

*(ALICE, a little taken aback at how easy that was, watches as the story resumes... )*

DOMINIC (as Y BRO): *(Stopping his brothers)* She is our sister! Let us break our foolish vow.

*(The brothers agree and welcome Rose with open arms)*

STORYTELLER: That very night, Rose had a dream in which a fairy queen appeared -

FAIRY QUEEN: If you want to free your brothers from the enchantment, you must gather wild nettles, spin them into thread, and weave twelve shirts from them; and during the whole time you must neither speak, nor cry, nor laugh, nor sing. When you put the finished shirts on your brothers, the spell will be broken. Do you accept the task?

SINEAD (as ROSE): Yes!

STORYTELLER: When Rose awoke the next morning, she immediately set to work.  
*(ROSE mimes gathering nettles and stinging herself, setting up the loom, etc.)*

ELDEST BROTHER: What can Rose be doing, so busy all of a sudden? And why doesn't she speak?

DOMINIC (as Y BRO): I don't understand either, but something tells me it is for our benefit. Let us help her by keeping house and gathering food, during the hours of darkness when we have the shape of men.

STORYTELLER: And in this fashion, they all lived together as the months and years passed. Then one morning, as Rose sat spinning in the sunshine outside the little hut on the seashore, who should ride by but the king of a neighbouring country.  
*(The King rides by, sees Rose, stops and turns back)*

KING: Good morning to you, fair maid.  
*(ROSE smiles, nods her head, but goes on with her weaving)*

KING: You're very busy, I see.  
*(Again, ROSE smiles and nods, but goes on with her weaving, although a little slower now as she, too, is interested in the KING. He paces, awkward, not sure how to proceed with the conversation. As he paces, ROSE gradually stops weaving. When he finally turns to continue, she is staring at him, rapt expression on her face. He kneels to offer his hand in marriage. She accepts. He tries to lift her onto his horse but she will not go without her weaving. He scoops up her work and together, they walk into the sunset.)*

STORYTELLER: Despite her silence, Rose and the King fell in love and she returned with him to his kingdom where they were soon married. The people of the kingdom were delighted with their new queen—but the same could not be said of the king's mother.

KING'S MOTHER: I fear my son has made an imprudent match. There is something about this girl that does not sit right with me.

STORYTELLER: Now, at court, the only place where Rose could gather wild nettles was in the churchyard, which she did at night to avoid prying eyes. One night, the King's mother followed her to see what she was doing.  
*(ROSE sets out for the churchyard, followed by the KING'S MOTHER who witnesses it all)*

KING'S MOTHER: I knew it! She IS a witch!  
*(Startled, ROSE follows the KING'S MOTHER back to the castle. The scene changes to the throne room)*

STORYTELLER: She confronted the King with what she had seen.

KING: Nettles? In the graveyard?

KING'S MOTHER: Ask her yourself if you don't believe me! *(The King turns to ROSE who does not answer)*

KING: That does not make her a witch, mother. *(The KING'S MOTHER turns on her heel and leaves as ROSE and the KING embrace)*

STORYTELLER: Time passed, and Rose continued her work in silence. Soon enough, to her joy, she gave birth to a baby boy. But as Rose slept, a servant paid by the old Queen stole the child and smeared Rose's mouth with blood.

SERVANT: Horror! The Queen has devoured her baby!

CROWD: What a monster! She ate her own child!

KING'S MOTHER: I told you she was a witch!

STORYTELLER: This time the King was unable to prevent Rose from being tried and condemned for witchcraft. As before, she refused to defend herself, so she was thrown in jail along with her nettle shirts, and a bonfire was prepared.

*(ALICE has been getting angrier and angrier during this speech, and finally she bursts out:)*

ALICE: Oh come on! You can't expect Rose to let herself be burnt alive.

STORYTELLER: No?

ALICE: This story is so... unfair. Why should Rose have to go through all this, for the sake of her brothers? Who were ready to kill her! She wasn't the one who turned them into swans, was she? And why's it always women who have to suffer in silence, anyway?

STORYTELLER: So you think she should speak up?

KEVIN: *(Surprising himself)* But she had a vision. She should stick to it. Who else can save her brothers, if not her?

ALICE: *(Still angry)* So she should stick to her course, no matter what? Look how well that turned out in our story.

KEVIN: *(Embarrassed)* Well... that was different.

*(At this point, if there is no possibility of audience participation, the storyteller can say:)*

STORYTELLER: Why don't you wait and see how the story turns out?

*(And the story continues with ENDING TWO.)*

*(If audience participation is possible, then the Storyteller turns to the Audience and says:)*

STORYTELLER: So what should Rose do? Should she keep to her vow, or is it time for her to speak up and save herself? It's your turn to decide. Who thinks she should remain silent and keep to her vow? Who thinks

she should speak up and save herself?

*(Depending on how the vote turns out, choose one of two endings:)*

### **ENDING ONE**

STORYTELLER: At the sight of the old Queen, waiting to light the bonfire, Rose finally broke her silence.

ROSE: It was YOU who stole my baby! You have lied and spread rumours about me since the day your son brought me to his kingdom!

KING: Why did you not speak of this before?!

ROSE: I swore to keep silence, to free my brothers from an enchantment.

STORYTELLER: Rose was released, and the old Queen banished, after being forced to reveal where she had hidden the baby.

*(The KING'S MOTHER is led away)*

STORYTELLER: Rose never saw her brothers again; but every once in a while, she saw a flock of wild swans on the wing, and with a pang in her heart, asked herself whether things could have turned out differently.

*(A pause while this sinks in.)*

KEVIN *(to ALICE)*: I guess we'll never know the answer to that, will we?

ALICE: Maybe not... But at least she survived.

### **ENDING TWO**

STORYTELLER: Even as she was being taken in the cart to the place of execution, she still kept silent and kept at her work. The twelve nettle shirts were finished now, all except one, which was still missing an arm. She and the shirts were placed atop the pyre, and the fire was lit. But, as the flames were leaping up toward her, the sound of wingbeats was heard in the distance. The twelve wild swans flew down and beat out the fire with their wings, and the flames changed into roses. Rose took up the twelve shirts and threw them over her brothers, and they were restored to their human form. At last Rose was able to tell her story. The old Queen was forced to reveal where she had hidden the baby, after which she was banished. All the others lived happily ever after; but as the last shirt was unfinished, the youngest brother remained with one human arm and one swan's wing.

*(A pause while this sinks in.)*

KEVIN *(to ALICE)*: I knew it! The brothers wouldn't let her be burnt alive.

ALICE: She was brave, that's for sure. But in real life the cavalry doesn't always ride up at the last minute.



## TRANSITION to THIRD STORY

*(As the actors remain frozen on stage, ALICE suddenly recognises SINEAD from the protest.)*

ALICE *(to SINEAD)*: Wait a minute... Haven't I seen you before?

*(As ALICE speaks to SINEAD, the actors break their tableau, and SINEAD and DOMINIC are released from the spell of the story. SINEAD takes a moment to realise where she is and who the person in front of her is.)*

SINEAD: Sorry, did you say something?

ALICE: I'm sure we've met somewhere...

SINEAD: Oh... yes, I remember...

ALICE: At the briefing?

SINEAD: Of course! Aren't you Alice?

ALICE: Yes, that's right, and you're...

SINEAD: Sinead. And this is Dominic, he was at the protest too. Wait, didn't I see you on the telly too?

ALICE *(quite pleased)*: Oh well, yes, they did interview me about the school strikes. A few times.

SINEAD: You're doing an amazing job. So how did you end up here?

ALICE: Honestly, I'm not sure, but at least we're safe. This is Kevin, by the way. We bumped into each other when we got here, there was this bird that took my phone. Then we ended up in a story, somehow. With a talking fish. It didn't go as well as yours, to be honest.

DOMINIC: A talking fish?

KEVIN *(sardonic)*: Believe it or not.

SINEAD: So you've just been watching our story? With the swans?

ALICE: Yes, and I want to say, you were magnificent. Both of you.

SINEAD *(embarrassed)*: It was nothing, really. I felt like the story was telling itself through me, somehow.

DOMINIC: But we didn't see your story. So you two must have been here for longer than Sinead and me.

ALICE: I think so, but it's hard to say. I've lost all track of time. It almost feels like it isn't passing.

SINEAD: I know just what you mean. Maybe it sounds silly, but I've had this feeling like we're lost in a forest.

KEVIN: *(scoffs)* We're in a disused warehouse, this neighbourhood is full of them.

SINEAD: Yes, I know, but you know that feeling you get in the woods, like time is happening in a whole different way?

KEVIN: Can't say I do. I don't spend a lot of time in the woods. Trees are boring. Seen one, you've seen them all. Give me the city any day of the week.

ALICE: We wouldn't survive without trees!

KEVIN: There you go again!

*(The STORYTELLER has been listening to their conversation all this time, and now speaks up:)*

STORYTELLER: You've reminded me of another story.

SINEAD *(cautiously)*: What story?

STORYTELLER: This one starts in a forest.

KEVIN: Oh, great.

### **ACT THREE: FIR-BLACK (DUBH A'GHIUBAIS)**

*(The remainder of the cast, as TREES, begin to fill the stage.)*

STORYTELLER: Hundreds of years ago, the West of Scotland was covered in a great dark forest of fir, larch and pine, where people made their homes among the trees.

PINE: Good morning, friends. How goes the day?

FIR: It is a fine morning. The sun is just rising over the mountains. I can sense the warmth of his first rays on my topmost branches.

PINE: Indeed, Fir, you are blessed with great height. And you, Larch?

LARCH: I have felt the pattering of the animals' feet with my shallow roots. Last night a badger passed under my shade, and just now a human went by, gathering fallen branches for firewood. And you, Pine?

PINE: I had a troubling dream.

FIR: Tell us your dream, friend Pine.

PINE: I dreamt that a great fire came and burnt us all, and left nothing but a barren wasteland.

LARCH: I am sorry to hear this. You don't think there's anything in it?

FIR: Fear not, Pine. The humans are our friends, and are careful with their fires, for they know the risks. And this is not the season for thunderstorms.

PINE: Let us hope you are right. Well, I can feel the sun going down over the ocean, his warmth is turning to the cool of night. Sleep well, my friends.

STORYTELLER: Meanwhile, far across the sea, in the land of Lochlann, the King in his great palace was greatly troubled.

*(The THRONE ROOM in the palace of Lochlann, where the KING (KEVIN) is consulting with two ADVISORS.)*

ADVISOR 1: Sire, I have worrying reports from the tribute nations.

KING (KEVIN): Well?

ADVISOR 1: Troublemakers are stirring up resentment against your royal love and protection.

ADVISOR 2: They point to the Highland people of Scotland, who pay tribute to no king, yet are well defended.

ADVISOR 1 *(cunningly)*: If only there was a way to bring them to heel. But with their forests to hide in, they think themselves invulnerable.

KING (KEVIN): *(considers)* Leave me.

ADVISORS: Sire. *(They move off, talking together so the KING may not hear:)*

ADVISOR 1 *(to 2)*: The merchants wish to enlarge the timber trade still further.

ADVISOR 2: Yes, and the Highland tribes still refuse to cut more trees. We must convince the King to invade.

*(They exit. The KING (KEVIN) paces, worrying. The PRINCESS (SINEAD) enters, with a backward, distrustful glance at the ADVISORS who have just left.)*

PRINCESS (SINEAD): Good day, father.

KING (KEVIN): I doubt it, daughter.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): What ails you, father? Long have I been troubled to see you in these dark moods. Would that I could help.

KING (KEVIN): You cannot.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): Shall I call for musicians? Or your court jester, perhaps? I remember the story he told last week about the talking animals, that made you laugh so much.

KING (KEVIN): I am not in the mood for such frivolity. Serious matters trouble me.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): Tell me. I would do anything within my power to ease your mind.

KING (KEVIN): Would you, daughter?

PRINCESS (SINEAD): I would. I swear it, father.

KING (KEVIN): But what can you do, a mere girl, when my advisers cannot find a solution?

PRINCESS (SINEAD): Perhaps I can, if you tell me your worries.

KING (KEVIN): It is Scotland that troubles me.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): But why? Scotland lies across the sea, and is no threat to us.

KING (KEVIN): It is. They flaunt their so-called freedom, and the other nations that pay us tribute hear about this, and become restless.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): Are you sure these are not the fancies of your ambitious advisers, who seek to profit from further war? You know you have fought the Highland people before, and many died on both sides, but they fled into the trees and could not be defeated.

KING (KEVIN): Exactly. We have no forests here in Lochlann. Always and everyday I hear people praising Scotland for her great forests, and desiring to trade with Scotland for timber. I hate the Highlanders, but I hate their trees even more! If only I could destroy their forests, I could break them, once and for all.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): You truly believe you must do this?

KING (KEVIN): I must. There is no other way. And remember, you have sworn to help me in any way that is within your power.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): *(sadly)* I have.

KING (KEVIN): Then go, and do not return until you have found a way to destroy the forest.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): Yes, father. If it is truly your will, I will do this.

KING (KEVIN): It is, daughter. It is.

*(They exit.)*

STORYTELLER: The Princess wrestled with her conscience. She did not wish to disobey her father, or break her solemn vow, and she wanted more than anything in the world to see him happy. Yet finding a way to destroy the trees of Scotland seemed a high price to pay.

*(At this point, there can be a discussion about what the PRINCESS should do. No doubt the audience will tell her to disobey her father. But tragically it's a foregone conclusion: she depends too much on his approval, and cannot go back on her word, so:)*

STORYTELLER: But eventually, the Princess's vow and her desire for her father's approval won over her doubts, and she went to see a powerful witch.

*(The WISE WOMAN is stirring a cauldron over the fire when the PRINCESS enters.)*

PRINCESS (SINEAD): Excuse me, wise mother, but I need your help.

WISE WOMAN: Yes? What is it?

PRINCESS (SINEAD): My father the King has been greatly troubled in spirit for many months. He wishes me to find a way to destroy the great forests of Scotland. Nothing else will calm his mind. You will be handsomely rewarded if you succeed.

WISE WOMAN: And if I refuse?

PRINCESS (SINEAD): You would make an enemy of my father?

WISE WOMAN: *(After a moment's re-think)* You are ready to face the consequences of your actions, no matter what may befall?

PRINCESS (SINEAD): *(Steels herself)* I am.

WISE WOMAN: *(considers)* Then there is a way. I will make a magic draught that will give you the form of a white dove. In that form you can fly across the sea to Scotland.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): And what am I to do once I get there?

WISE WOMAN: Did you know that our land of Lochlann, also, was once covered in

great forests? But they were cut down long ago, all except for one tree that is hidden by magic. This (*holding out a stick*) is a twig from that tree, and it holds the power of destruction. Every tree you touch with it will burst into flame and be consumed. A great fire will rage that will turn the forests of Scotland to a wilderness of ash.

PRINCESS (SINEAD): (*horrified at what she is about to do, but seeing no alternative*) Very well. I am ready.

ALICE: (*interrupting*) But this is horrible! Stop the story! She can't just go and burn all the forests. Just think of the devastation she'll cause, all to please that miserable father of hers!

STORYTELLER: I'm sorry, but the Princess has already made her choice. Nothing can protect her from the consequences. The story cannot be stopped now.

ALICE: I won't sit by and watch her do it! Stop her!

STORYTELLER: Neither you nor I have the power to do that.

*(And as ALICE struggles to rise from her seat, she finds that she is unable to do so, and the story unfolds before her horrified eyes. The WISE WOMAN draws a cup of magic potion from her cauldron; the PRINCESS drinks it and the transformation into the DOVE takes place. Then, taking up the magic wand, the DOVE flies away. The FOREST returns to the stage, and the DOVE begins to burn the trees, as the STORYTELLER narrates:)*

STORYTELLER: The beautiful white dove flew across the sea and came down in the West of Scotland. As soon as she landed she began to touch the trees with the magic wand, and before long a great forest fire was raging. The smoke and soot quickly turned the dove's feathers as black as coal. The people saw a black dove flying around from place to place, and wherever she landed new fires sprang up. They determined to kill the bird, which they called the Dubh a'Ghiubais, or Fir Black, by whatever means they could; but it was not an easy task.

*(Enter the VILLAGERS, talking with animation.)*

VILLAGER 1: We must stop this fire demon in the shape of a bird!

VILLAGER 2: But how? She flies so high, and no-one can tell where she will come to earth next. Before long all our forests will be gone.

VILLAGER 3: And our houses, too. We must flee to higher ground before we are all destroyed.

VILLAGER 4: What's the point? Sooner or later the fires will reach there, too. We must catch the bird.

VILLAGER 5: Here's a fellow from Loch Broom, he says he had an idea.

VILLAGERS: What is it?

LOCH BROOM MAN: My young son was one of the first to see the bird, before the fires

started. He says she was not black, but as white as snow, and in her eye there was a look of great sadness, as if she was sorry for what she was about to do. I think the bird has a compassionate heart, and we may be able to trap her if we appeal to that heart.

VILLAGER 2: I know! Let's take all the young animals and separate them from their mothers. If the bird has a tender heart as you say, the wailing of the young beasts will draw her near.

VILLAGERS: Great idea!

VILLAGER 4: *(to LOCH BROOM MAN)* Why don't you climb to the top of the tallest tree with your bow and arrows? When the bird hears the piteous cries of the animals and flies down, you can shoot her.

LOCH BROOM MAN: Very well.

*(And the scene of the killing of the DOVE unfolds. ALICE and DOMINIC are disturbed and ALICE cries out:)*

ALICE: Can't we make them change their minds? Does she really have to die?

STORYTELLER: Like I said, her choice was made long ago. We cannot protect her from the consequences.

*(The DOVE is killed by the arrow, and in death reverts to the shape of the PRINCESS.)*

*(The scene shifts once more to the Palace of Lochlann, where the King is looking out over his balcony, distraught. Two MESSENGERS enter. In the background the action of the attempted retrieval of the body unfolds as the MESSENGERS narrate it, as if the KING is seeing it in his mind's eye.*

KING (KEVIN): What news?

MESSENGER 1: Sire, we have confirmation of what the Wise Woman told your grace. The princess *did* fly to Scotland in the shape of a dove, and burn the forest there.

KING (KEVIN): And where is she now?

MESSENGER 2: I am sorry, sire. She was shot by an archer. Your daughter is dead.

KING (KEVIN): *(tries to keep himself under control)* Send a ship at once! Bring my daughter back to her own country for burial!

MESSENGER 1: A ship *was* sent. But a mighty gale prevented it from returning with the body.

MESSENGER 2: With the trees gone, there was nothing to break the force of the gale. Three times the rowers tried to leave the mouth of Little Loch Broom, and three times they were pushed back by the wind.

MESSENGER 1: They laid your daughter's body at the mouth of the loch, under a

grassy hillock, in the shade of a single fir tree.

FIR:

So, Princess, we are forever alone together. You burned the great forest, leaving only a few lonely trees like me to mourn our brothers and sisters. As for you, you are parted forever from your own land across the sea, and from the father who never deserved your love and loyalty.

(END OF THIRD STORY)

## ACT FOUR: THE LINDWORM

*(The tale of Dubh a' Ghubais ends tragically. SINEAD and KEVIN are frozen on stage in the final scene, while ALICE and DOMINIC are seated in the audience. DOMINIC breaks the silence to ask the STORYTELLER:)*

DOMINIC: I don't understand. When Alice intervened in my story, we managed to stop the brothers killing Rose. Why didn't it work this time?

STORYTELLER: Well, there are things that even a storyteller can't do. What would you say if the Princess rose from the dead at the end of the story, for instance? Or if the forest was magically restored?

DOMINIC: I'd say it was totally implausible. Those things happened, you can't just reverse them.

STORYTELLER: Exactly. They're part of the story, for good or ill. We can't change the past. And this story, unlike the others, is a history. It really happened in your world, though maybe not in exactly this way.

ALICE *(sadly)*: He's right. This story *is* a part of our past.

DOMINIC: If only it were the past! Stick that king and his advisors in a suit and tie, they could be running a corporation.

STORYTELLER: And yet, it *was* only a story. Look! Your friends are fine.

*(As he speaks, KEVIN and SINEAD break their frozen poses.)*

SINEAD: That was awful! I felt so... powerless. Like I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn't help myself. As if I was under a spell.

KEVIN *(surprising himself)*: If you want to know the truth, I felt the same way.

ALICE: What?

KEVIN: You think I *wanted* to destroy the forest? I *knew* those advisors were a couple of snakes, and that my daughter loved me, but I felt cornered. I had to be the king, use my power. I couldn't show weakness. *(pause)* I used to think that if I had a position of power, I'd use it for good. But now I'm not so sure.

ALICE *(supportively)*: I know what you mean. You can't tell what you'd do when you're put in that situation.

KEVIN: No—I *know* I'd do it wrong every time. But you know what's really unfair? Everyone feels sorry for the princess in the end, even though she was the one who actually destroyed the forest. Nobody cares about the King, who has to live with the knowledge.

*(There's a pause while they all digest this. Then Dominic changes the subject.)*

DOMINIC *(to STORYTELLER)*: Hang on a minute. You said our friends are fine. But what about my sister, and all the others? It feels like we've been here for an eternity. What's been going on outside? When can we get out of

here?

*(NB: Unlike earlier in the story, when DOMINIC's concern for Rose was mainly self-centred, it now seems much more genuine. His role in the Wild Swans story has made him re-evaluate her importance to him.)*

STORYTELLER: I can't be sure. You may find things have changed, a lot.

DOMINIC: Changed how?

STORYTELLER: It all depends. You see, this place is like a chrysalis. You come in as one thing and leave as something else. You've already seen how people can be transformed—into a fish, a swan, a firebird. Well, it may be that the same thing is happening to the world outside, but we have no way of knowing exactly what will emerge. In a sense, I think, what happens out there depends on what happens in here.

SINEAD: So when *will* we be able to go back out?

STORYTELLER: Not just yet. It would be disastrous to leave now, like tearing open a chrysalis before it's ready. Besides, there's still one more story to tell.

KEVIN: Well then, I suppose we don't have much choice, do we?

STORYTELLER: There are always choices.

*(The actors move to prepare for the final story, The Lindworm. For the moment, ALICE and DOMINIC remain in their seats, because they don't take part in the story until later on; SINEAD and KEVIN also take their places in the audience.)*

STORYTELLER: Once upon a time, there was a kingdom in which there were many fine and beautiful things. Yet, even so, all was not well within it.

*(The KING, QUEEN and any other members of the court sigh disconsolately)*

One day, as the Queen was out walking, she found herself on the very edge of the great forest that surrounded the kingdom, which stretched in every direction, for as far as a man could walk in a day, or a week, or a month.

There, just on the edge of the forest, she met an old woman, all in rags and tatters.

OLD WOMAN: My dear, why are you so sad? What ails you?

QUEEN: My husband and I have been trying for years to have a child, but nothing seems to work.

OLD WOMAN: May I ask: where do you and your husband sleep?

QUEEN: *(Surprised at her directness)* In the great tower, at the centre of the palace.

OLD WOMAN: Ah, well. That could be the problem. What you need to do is this.

Have the servants carry your bed down into one of the sheds in the garden. And tonight, take a bath and pour the water on the earth under the bed. Then, in the morning, when you get up, you should find two flowers have sprouted: one red, one white. Eat the white flower, but whatever you do, do NOT eat the red one.

STORYTELLER:

The Queen did as the old woman had said, and lo and behold, in the morning, there were the two flowers. As she reached for the white flower, though, a strange urge gripped the Queen, and her hand instead plucked the red flower which she gobbled up in an instant. Then she picked the white flower and ate that as well.

Time passed, and the Queen did indeed conceive a child. But when her time came, she delivered instead... a small black snake!

The midwife took one look at it, threw it out of the window, and resolved to tell not one soul about it. (*SINEAD as the MIDWIFE mimes this action*). Moments later, to her great relief, the Queen gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

There was great joy in the kingdom at the Prince's birth, and as the years went by he grew into a strong, healthy and wise young man.

*(DOMINIC enters from the audience, as he is to play the part of the prince.)*

When he came of age, the King sent word to all of the neighbouring kingdoms that his son was ready to choose his bride. But before long, the royal wedding plans took a very sinister turn.

News came to the palace of a fearsome monster that stalked the land: a great black snake that people called the Lindworm. It killed and ate anyone who dared travel. The King sent out a troop of soldiers to kill the monster.

*(A MAN-AT-ARMS staggers into the throne room, very much worse for wear)*

QUEEN: Good heavens!

KING: What's all this? What happened to you, my good man?

MAN-AT-ARMS *(in shock)*: Your majesties, I... I have seen the Lindworm. *(he shudders in horror)* .

KING: Did you defeat it? Where is your commanding officer?

MAN-AT-ARMS: I'm sorry, your majesty, but the monster was too strong for us. It was horrible. I am the only survivor. *(More gasps as those in the throne room clutch each other for support)*

KING: The kingdom is in chaos. People are too terrified to leave their homes! *(To the audience)* What can we do?

*(There can be a discussion at this point, involving the audience, about what could be done to deal with the Lindworm. Hopefully, someone will suggest opening dialogue with it, cueing the PRINCE)*

to say:)

PRINCE (DOMINIC): Father, if we cannot fight the Lindworm, maybe we can try talking with it? I will go out myself and ask what it wants of us.

QUEEN: No! *(To the King)* Send someone else!

PRINCE (DOMINIC): *(Gently)* I think it must be me, mother.

*(After a pause the King nods, reluctantly. The Queen sobs, and the Prince takes his leave)*

STORYTELLER: So the Prince rode out to where the Lindworm had last been seen. As he approached the spot and witnessed the devastation of the battle, with dead men and horses strewn all around, his heart failed within him.

*(The Prince sinks to his knees in despair)*

PRINCE (DOMINIC): How can this hideous beast ever be appeased?

*(There is a rumble of thunder. The Prince springs to his feet as he spies the LINDWORM)*

PRINCE (DOMINIC): Great Lindworm! What do you want of us? What can we do to make peace between us?

*(The voice of the LINDWORM is that of all the cast except the PRINCE, and should be quite terrifying.)*

LINDWORM (ALL): A bride for me before a bride for you.

PRINCE (DOMINIC): *(Nonplussed)* What?

LINDWORM (ALL): A bride for me before a bride for you.

*(The LINDWORM retreats and the PRINCE returns to the palace to tell his parents about his encounter.)*

KING: *(After a pause)* But what can it possibly mean? *(He looks at the QUEEN)*

QUEEN: I don't know - unless...

KING / PRINCE: Yes?

QUEEN: *(In an agony of indecision)* If only I hadn't eaten the red flower! *(A look of confusion from the KING and PRINCE)* I shouldn't have done it. She told me not to, but I couldn't resist.

PRINCE (DOMINIC): *(Struggling to keep up)* I'm sorry, mother, but what does a red flower have to do with that revolting...disgusting...grotesque creature that I met out on the causeway?

STORYTELLER: Seeing no alternative, she told them of the black snake which had preceded the arrival of the baby Prince.

PRINCE (DOMINIC): And you think...

QUEEN: I do! I think that thing - the Lindworm - is your elder brother!!

KING: Our eldest son. *(There is a long pause while they absorb the implications of this terrible news)* I'm afraid you may be right, and if you are, then the Lindworm, as our eldest son, must be the one to marry first. *(He cuts off the PRINCE who would disagree)* Custom dictates it! Before you can take a wife, we first have to find a bride for the Lindworm.

PRINCE But who could possibly want to marry... that?

KING *(holding letters)*: Well, we have all these letters from princesses wishing to marry our son. Let us choose one from a distant kingdom. We don't need to give her any details....*(to the others, by way of justification)* It's not a lie - exactly...

QUEEN: *(Jumping in to support him)* You're right, my dear. I see no other way.

STORYTELLER: So the King and Queen invited a princess from a faraway kingdom, many leagues off, on the other side of the great forest, to come and marry their eldest son.

When the unlucky princess arrived, they took her to where the Lindworm was.

A hasty marriage ceremony was performed, after which, the terrified girl was left to her fate.

*(After the wedding ceremony, the guests leave and become the LINDWORM which devours the PRINCESS, leaving a pile of bones in her place. As the horrified PRINCE, begin to dispose of these gruesome remains, the LINDWORM returns.*

PRINCE (DOMINIC): What do you want now?

LINDWORM (ALL): A bride for me before a bride for you.

PRINCE (DOMINIC): There isn't an endless supply of princesses, you know. *(He returns to his parents to give them the bad news)*

STORYTELLER: Although the King and Queen wrote back to a number of other distant kingdoms, strangely enough, all of the princesses replied, with regret, that they were no longer available.

KING *(holding letter)*: Here's another one... This princess has stubbed her toe and can't travel...

QUEEN *(holding letter)*: And this one has just had another offer of marriage from a neighbouring kingdom. Well, really! *None* of these girls wants to marry our eldest son?

KING: News travels fast, I suppose. We'll just have to try a commoner.

QUEEN: But everyone around here knows the situation. No girl is going to willingly marry the beast!

KING: Unless...what if we offer her whatever she asks for...? Within reason, of course.

QUEEN: Of course! Very well, we can but try.

STORYTELLER: So the word went out. The old midwife told her cousin, who as it happened, was the very same old woman who had advised the Queen how to conceive a child in the first place.

The old woman laughed quietly to herself and went to see her granddaughter, a clever young woman who lived in a small hut at the edge of the forest.

G'DAUGHTER (ALICE): Welcome, grandmother. What brings you here?

OLD WOMAN: You're a brave girl, aren't you?

G'DAUGHTER (ALICE): I think so.

OLD WOMAN: Do you want to stay in this hut forever, or would you rather live in the palace?

G'DAUGHTER (ALICE): Well, since you put it like that...

OLD WOMAN: Here's what you have to do... *(whispers to her. The Granddaughter looks a little bemused but duly sets off for the Palace to meet the King and Queen)*

G'DAUGHTER (ALICE): I will marry the Lindworm.

KING: *(Nervously)* And what is your bride price?

G'DAUGHTER (ALICE): Twelve fine embroidered nightgowns, a bath of lye, a bath of milk, and a wire scrubbing brush, all brought to our bedchamber in the palace on the wedding night.

QUEEN: What *is* lye?

G'DAUGHTER (ALICE): It's made with ashes and water. They use it for scrubbing floors and making soap and so on.

KING: *(Relieved)* That seems very reasonable.

STORYTELLER: So everything was prepared for the wedding. After the ceremony, the bride went to the bridal chamber, where everything had been prepared according to her instructions. She put on the twelve nightgowns, one after the other, and waited for the Lindworm.

*(The Lindworm slithers into the bedchamber. KEVIN is at the centre, with the rest of the cast (other than the KING and QUEEN) surrounding him. As the scene goes on, the voices become less terrifying, with less actors speaking the lines until in the end, only KEVIN is left)*

LINDWORM: Take off your nightgown.

G'DAUGHTER (ALICE): Take off your scales, first.

STORYTELLER: Somewhat taken aback, the Lindworm did as she asked, and with much screaming and struggling, shed a layer of scales.

LINDWORM: *(Less terrifying voice)* Take off your nightgown.

*(GRANDDAUGHTER removes the first of her 12 night dresses and then returns her steely stare on the LINDWORM who, after a pause, begins the process of shedding the next layer of scales. When the last actor has dropped away from KEVIN / LINDWORM, the STORYTELLER continues)*

STORYTELLER: When she was down to her last nightgown and the Lindworm had no more scales remaining, she plunged it into the bath of lye and began to scrub it with the wire scrubbing brush. The beast screamed louder than ever, but she paid no heed and did not stop until finally, it fell silent, serpent no longer, a handsome prince in its place. The prince then washed the lye off in the bath of milk that had been requested by his bride earlier.

*(ALICE and KEVIN look at each other for a moment, completely absorbed in the story and unrecognisable from the bickering pair we met at the start of the play. They know it, too, and smile.)*

In the morning, to their joy, instead of the Lindworm and the young woman's bones, the King and Queen found their eldest son, in his true form at last, together with his bride.

And they all lived happily ever after.

*End of the Fourth Story*

## EPILOGUE

*(The MAGPIE enters—or it may have been on stage all along, in an inconspicuous place—and perches near the STORYTELLER, who speaks to the four protest characters:)*

STORYTELLER: It looks like it's time for you to go back out there. It's not going to be easy. Things may have changed more than you can imagine. But I think you're ready to go.

MAGPIE *(to STORYTELLER)*: Ready to go!

*(The STORYTELLER turns to look at the MAGPIE, considering, and pauses for a moment before speaking:)*

STORYTELLER *(to MAGPIE)*: Really? Are you sure?

MAGPIE *(to STORYTELLER)*: Sure! Sure!

STORYTELLER: I'll be sad to lose you. You've been a faithful assistant. But you're right, it's time.

MAGPIE *(to STORYTELLER)*: Time!

*(With a flourish of some kind, perhaps with the STORYTELLER passing a veil over the MAGPIE, the bird is transformed into a human being, to the astonishment of all the other characters. The MAGPIE turns to the others and tells his story. He has not spoken in many moons, so his words come out in a halting fashion.)*

MAGPIE: I came here like you, long ago, and chose to stay. The Storyteller said I could, but only if I assumed the form of a bird, and gave up the power of independent speech. But now, I think, it's time for me to go back out there.

ALICE: So you're coming with us?

MAGPIE: Yes, and I'll do whatever I can to help.

KEVIN: That's great. We're gonna need all the help we can get.

ALICE: What do you mean, *we*?

KEVIN: Only that you placard-wavers need people like me and Magpie here in your movement. People who know how to get stuff done. You know. Logistics.

*(SINEAD looks to ALICE, then speaks to KEVIN and the MAGPIE.)*

SINEAD: Well then, I guess we can say, welcome to the rebellion. And what about you, Dominic?

DOMINIC: First things first—I've got to find Rose and talk to her about it.

SINEAD: Fair enough.

STORYTELLER *(to MAGPIE)*: I'll miss you. But you know all my stories now. Use them wisely, and remember you can always find your way back if you need to. *(They embrace)*. And a safe journey to you all.

*(The STORYTELLER moves to the back of the stage, in some way the movement suggesting that his power is being withdrawn, and the characters are starting to return to ordinary reality.)*

ALICE *(pulls out her phone)*: Hey, I'm getting a ton of messages. *(scrolling through)* What? Oh my God. *(turning to the others)* You won't believe what's been happening while we've been gone.

MAGPIE: Why don't you tell us on the way?

*(They exit, talking animatedly, while the STORYTELLER remains in a tableau.)*

THE END

## CAST LIST:-

### CHARACTERS

THE STORYTELLER: Pacian  
THE MAGPIE: Evy

ALICE: Sara  
KEVIN: Hamish  
DOMINIC: Gregor  
SINEAD: Lidia

#### STORY ONE (The Fisherwoman and her Husband)

FISH: Evy  
FISHERWOMAN (ALICE): Sara  
HUSBAND (KEVIN): Hamish  
BUTLER: Joseph

#### STORY TWO (The Twelve Wild Swans)

QUEEN: Rebecca  
OLD WOMAN: Sara (not Alice's voice!)  
YOUNGEST BROTHER (DOMINIC): Gregor  
ROSE (SINEAD): Lidia  
NURSE: Evy  
ELDEST BROTHER: Paul  
OTHER BROTHERS: Joseph, Robert, Neil or Pacian (not storyteller's voice!)  
FAIRY QUEEN: Rebecca  
KING: Cameron  
KING'S MOTHER: Maria  
SERVANT: Joseph  
CROWD: All

#### STORY THREE (Dubh a'Ghiubais, or Fir Black)

PINE: Evy  
FIR: Maria  
LARCH: Robert  
ADVISORS 1&2: Cameron & Paul  
KING (KEVIN): Hamish  
PRINCESS (SINEAD): Lidia  
WISE WOMAN: Abigail  
VILLAGERS 1-5: Paul (1); Rebecca (2); Cameron (3); Maria (4); Joseph (5)  
LOCH BROOM MAN: Neil  
MESSENGERS 1&2: Evy (1); Joseph(2)

#### STORY FOUR (The Lindworm)

QUEEN: Maria  
OLD WOMAN: Evy  
MAN-AT-ARMS: Cameron  
KING: Joseph  
PRINCE (DOMINIC): Gregor  
LINDWORM: Hamish with the cast  
GRANDDAUGHTER (ALICE): Sara