

Characters

Brother Dominic (M) - **Narrator**
Thomas (M) - **Monk**

It is intended that this script is performed as a monologue; one actor performing all characters. It could alternatively be played by more than one actor with an onstage or offstage narrator.

Scene 1 – The Travellers Rest

Dominic:

It is 1537 in the year of our Lord, and I, Brother Dominic, am travelling back to my former home of Stokes Abbey. I would be there still, were it not for the King wanting a new wife, and a male heir. What King Henry VIII wants, he gets; even if that means overturning the foundation on which civilisation rests; even if that involves throwing away the keys of St. Peter and appointing himself head of a Protestant Church of England! Now, a year after its dissolution, Stokes Abbey is in the hands of one of the king's favourites, and our small order thrown upon the mercy of the four winds. All but one, that is. All but one and his name is Brother Thomas. And he holds the key to something that belongs to us all.

I have never liked Brother Thomas. I never thought he took his vows seriously for a start. He was too fond of his food, his wine, his sleep and even it was rumoured, a wench. Yet, in the eyes of the Abbot he could do no wrong; it was maddening. It was not even as if he had the excuse of youth, he was forty if he was a day! Father Gerard our Abbot, seemed not to notice his stentorian snores at Matins, his gluttony at lunch, his disappearance after bedtime prayers at Compline. And where did he go, when he should have been praying and sleeping in his cell? When he was in, I adjacent would hear him whistling, humming, speaking aloud. And when not in, breaking our after-hours rule of silence, then Brother Thomas was out - breaking other rules, at the Travellers Rest!

The Travellers Rest was a source of pride and discord. Pride because our order provided hospitality for pilgrims and traders. Discord, because Brother Thomas who ran it, made it far too merry. While we monks courted only sleep, the strains of a lute, bars of a song, laughter, both male and female, would sneak into our cells, like snares for souls. Complaining to the Abbot and naming the culprit, I was chided for thinking ill of my fellow man! Me with none of the vices, and half the years of that rotund, after hours rambler! Drawing near the inn, darkness is falling and the windows flicker red, like the fires of hell. I know about hell; I make it my business to read about its paths! How else might I avoid its pitfalls?

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Thomas always falls on his feet. After the monastery was sacked by King Henry's soldiers, he stayed on at the Inn, making ale, catering for travellers. He probably served the soldiers on their way to sack other houses of God! Others of us have not been so fortunate. A few found their way to Rome. Some returned to their families and work as little more than farm hands. I myself get through goose quill pens by the score as a clerk. As for our old Abbot, he fares worst of all. He has been attempting to set up a small school. If he would concentrate on teaching the children of the rich, he would manage; instead he insists that education be open for all. I fear he is quite unsuited for outside life.

Now the Abbot has sent me on a quest; to locate the ruby eyed eagle thrown into the lake before the soldiers arrived by Brother Paul, our old Sacristan. Too ill to flee the incursion, he died in the weeks following. They say Brother Thomas nursed him to the end; but to whose end? The Abbot is naive about sin. He thinks if you look for the good in people, sin will settle for second fiddle. I, who have read a great deal about sin, know it always wants the upper hand. What I am here to discover is, did Brother Paul tell Brother Thomas where he let the eagle fall? If so, where? Its sale would help our little order set ourselves up in trades of our choice. Before I question Thomas, I will search for it myself. His appetite for treasure is, I am sure, as voracious as his other vices.

The first thing Thomas does when he sees me is to give me a bear hug! Immediately my suspicions are raised. I explain I am here because of a yearning to visit the old place again. He appears about to say something, but turns away, hands me a leather tankard of frothing ale. I do not trust him, and sip cautiously, tasting for unaccountable bitterness. He watches me curiously.

Tomorrow, I will go to the Abbey at dusk and begin exploring the lake's margins. Brother Paul was not strong enough to have thrown the eagle far. Because he died close to his old home, it is rumoured his ghost walks there. Therefore, I will dress in my old habit, so any that see me might flee. I don't want anyone to suspect there is treasure. Hanging my hat on the heavily filled coat stand in the snug, I make my way up the winding stair.

In my room, it is as if I am back once more in my cell, sweet Morpheus prevented by the raucous laughter and song drifting like aromas. I sleep late and spend the morning reading about sin in the snug. Thomas greets all guests like long lost friends; piling their hats and cloaks upon the stand. It is as if he had never been a monk, slipping back so easily to inn keeping. At midday, a comely wench serves bread and cheese. Thomas lays a hairy arm across her shoulders. I barely hide my revulsion. He is old enough to be her father!

At dusk, I am beside the lake at Stokes Abbey. Disturbed only by a serving maid, I flap my arms and hurry her along, screaming. Aided by a full moon, I work solidly until dawn. By trying different techniques with my stick, I cover a third of the lake's perimeter but do not locate the eagle. Hardly able to stand upright, I return late to the inn with left sided crick in my neck. One foot upon the stair, weed clinging to my walking stick, Thomas confronts me. He cries,

Thomas: Aha! And where have you been till this hour young Dominic? I was worried about you.

Dominic: Worried my foot! I think, but say, 'Walking and thinking Thomas. These are unsettled times for us all.' Climbing the stair, I notice his puzzled expression. The next evening, I am spotted beside the lake by a sturdy matron, but hurry her along with a loud groan. She too goes off screaming. Again, the moon is kind and I explore the second third of the lake's perimeter, but still do not detect the eagle. Bent double I return late to the inn. Thomas is waiting. He enquires in a mellifluous voice,

Thomas: Dominic. Is there something you wish to confide?

Dominic: Not in Christendom!' I think, but say, 'Just that I am weary Thomas, goodnight.' Noticing him eyeing beads of frogspawn on my stick, I add, 'It is boggy abroad. On the third evening, I cheer myself up thinking that by morning, I shall have completed the lake's inner circuit. Alack and alas, with no kindly moon, I slip into the lake, badly twisting my ankle. I call out, covered in mud, but succeed only in scaring a courting couple. They run off screaming. I lay a long time. Suddenly, strong arms grab me and half fainting with pain, I am borne to the snug of The Traveller's Rest. Inside Thomas calls to the wench for blankets and hot water. Noticing my look of disdain, he says,

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Thomas: This is my Joanna. Her mother died of the plague. I vowed if he spared my child, I would dedicate my life to God.

Dominic: His child! Suddenly I am conscious that everywhere is quiet. The cloaks have disappeared from the stand.

Thomas: Everyone left early for market.

Dominic: My gaze is drawn back to the cloak stand. My hat is on it, and cloak, but something glints below. Thomas sees me looking and lifts my cloak. Dizzy with fatigue, I nearly swoon when I see what is beneath. It is the ruby eyed eagle.

Thomas: The Abbot wrote you would be coming for it. I thought it safe to disguise it as a cloak stand; people tend to judge by outward appearances don't you think?