

VESPERS RISING



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To all the young Cahills who helped
with the hunt — R.R.

For the fans, past, present, and future — P.L.

For Rose Brock — G.K.

For David, Rachel, and Mallory,
the best editorial team in the world — J.W.



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GIDEON CAHILL

1507

Damien Vesper didn't plan on killing anyone today.

It was a fine autumn morning. A crisp wind had blown away the fog, and sunshine sparkled on the Celtic Sea.

In the distance, the coast of the Irish mainland stretched out lush and green. All of that land, as far as Damien could see, had been controlled by the Vesper family for centuries. From this island, a mile offshore, Damien couldn't see his ancestral estate—a castle he hadn't visited in over a year. He couldn't see his peasants dying or hear them crying in their squalor and misery. He couldn't smell the stench of death. Far to the northeast, one pillar of smoke snaked into the blue sky—probably another village being burned—but otherwise everything looked peaceful and beautiful. No sign of the Black Death.

Damien sipped his mulled wine, enjoying the scent of clove and nutmeg. He found it ridiculous that in this modern age, the year 1507, he still had

to flee the plague—the same sickness that had cursed Ireland in his great-great-great-grandfather’s time. So many advances in the sciences since then, so many amazing discoveries, and still the plague hampered his plans.

But no matter. The Black Death couldn’t touch him here. He simply left his lieutenants in charge on the mainland to collect his taxes. He ignored their nervous reports about the hundreds dying each week, his peasants’ annoying pleas for help. He continued his work in peace, enjoying the acquisitions his agents sent him from across Europe.

He gazed at the woodblock-panel map now adorning his wall—a beautiful piece just arrived from France. Reports and sketches from Italy covered his desk. Damien searched the world for rare treasures and powerful secrets. Yet a single message whispered in his ear this morning by his neighbors’ housekeeper might be more important than any intelligence he’d ever received.

Was it possible that the most powerful secret in the world, a bit of information that could help Damien realize his wildest ambitions, was hiding right under his nose?

This morning, he intended to find out.

His eyes drifted to the new mosaic on his ceiling: a circle five feet in diameter depicting the Vesper coat of arms, but it was more than decoration. He’d recently installed the trap for his amusement. He’d thought to

try it out on some lazy servant or the next guard who fell asleep on duty. But now it would serve a much more important purpose. He would test his theory. If he was right, Damien Vesper might become the most powerful man in the world.

There was a rap at the door. His servant Balthazar stepped through, bowing low. “My lord, Gideon Cahill is here.”

Damien smiled. He didn’t plan on killing anyone today. But he did believe in being flexible.

“Show him in,” Damien ordered.



Gideon was dressed in his usual peasant clothes — quite unbecoming for a man of his talents.

His hair was a swirl of wild gray tufts like a bank of storm clouds. His rugged face was darkened from years of brewing mixtures in a smoky laboratory. Chemicals had turned his frock into a palette of stains, and his forearms were covered with notes in Latin — reminders that Gideon would write on himself when he couldn’t be bothered to find a piece of parchment.

Only Gideon’s gold ring, a family heirloom much too fine for a peasant, marked him as a man of worth. And his eyes — still fierce and bright as ever under bushy gray brows.

Those eyes had first caught Damien’s attention a decade ago, when Gideon Cahill stood up at the Christmas feast, at Damien’s own table, and dared to

correct him on a point of astronomy, citing some new work by a scientist named Copernicus.

Damien was not used to being corrected. He might have had Gideon flogged for his rudeness, but the intelligent gleam in Gideon's eyes gave him pause.

He remembered thinking: *Here is a man I could use. Not a sheep. A man of intellect.*

After the feast, the two of them had talked into the night, discussing learned subjects no one else in Vesper's miserable backwater domain could hope to understand. It had been the beginning of a rare friendship.

True, that friendship had frayed since the Cahills and Vesper and his household had fled to this island together. Sometimes weeks would go by as Gideon secluded himself in his lab, only sending notes to Vesper's manor when he needed supplies or money. If not for the Cahills' housekeeper, Maria, Damien would've been intolerably ignorant of Gideon's activities, but Maria was an imperfect spy at best.

The last time Damien had seen Gideon in person, about a week ago, Damien had been startled—even concerned—by how much his friend had aged. Poor, noble Gideon, who took the plague so personally and labored like Hercules to find a cure. He had looked no better than one of Vesper's serfs, broken from years of hard fieldwork.

But now . . . just as the housekeeper had reported, something about Gideon Cahill had changed

drastically. Gideon stood straighter. His shoulders seemed broader. Was his hair actually darker? It seemed impossible, but Gideon Cahill seemed healthier, younger.

He's made something in that evil laboratory of his, m'lord, Maria had whispered nervously. Sick for a while, he was. But now he's changed—turned stronger, quicker, even his hearing is uncanny! I heard him talking to himself about a formula, a concoction. He's taken to witchcraft, I fear. M'lord, it's not natural, the things I seen him do!

Damien did not believe in witchcraft, but Maria's tone had been sufficiently alarming to get his attention. She'd spied on the Cahills' household for him for years but never once come to him in such a state of panic. Now, seeing Gideon in person, Damien's suspicions deepened.

"My dear Gideon." Damien clasped his friend's calloused hands. "Come, you must see my new acquisitions!"

Gideon scanned the room warily before stepping inside. Damien felt a twinge of annoyance. Another change in the past few months: Gideon seemed increasingly mistrustful, *actively* avoiding Damien's company.

Damien couldn't abide the idea that Gideon might be hiding something.

He cloaked his anger with a broad smile and shepherded his friend into the study until Gideon stood just beneath the new mosaic crest on the ceiling.

"You see?" Damien leaned over his desk and spread out half a dozen charcoal sketches. "These are only

quick studies, of course. But my agent in Florence tells me this artist, Leonardo, is a master and also quite an inventor of mechanical devices — which, as you know, are my passion. Leonardo just completed a portrait of Lisa del Giocondo. He calls it the *Mona Lisa*. I thought I might commission him to do a portrait of me, and while he's here, I can pick his mind for mechanical secrets. How does that sound?"

"Expensive," Gideon murmured.

Vesper chuckled. Gideon was never easy to impress, which just made Damien more determined to impress him — even if today might be the last time.

He pushed aside the Leonardo sketches. "Perhaps you're right. But surely you must admit *this* was worth the price."

Damien gestured grandly at his new wall map — a series of twelve woodblock panels showing the entire globe brightly painted in blue and green. "The newest, most accurate map *anywhere*, Gideon. It's an exact replica of one just commissioned in the duchy of Lorraine. Fellow named Waldseemüller created it. What do you notice?"

Gideon's keen eyes studied the map for no more than a heartbeat. "The new continents. He has labeled them . . . America?"

"Yes, after that explorer Amerigo Vespucci. Seems a silly name to me, but no matter. Our world has officially expanded, Gideon! Don't you find that exciting? Think of all those lands to conquer, all those kingdoms of

savages with riches beyond imagining. Spain is already becoming wealthy, you know, bringing back shiploads of gold and silver. I tell you, if a man had enough power, he could set himself up as an emperor in the New World. It could as easily be called Vesperia, eh?"

Gideon frowned. "It seems to me, Damien, that we have enough trouble caring for the lands we already have. Forty-three more of our villagers died this week, you know. We must find a cure for the Black Death, and I doubt the answer lies in this . . . *America.*"

Again, Damien kept his annoyance in check. Gideon was the only one who would dare speak so boldly to him. In years past, Vesper had found his honesty refreshing. He even allowed Gideon to call him by his given name.

But now Damien wondered if he'd allowed Gideon too much familiarity.

Our villagers? These lands belonged to Vesper alone. And when had his friend become so narrow-minded? Vesper showed him the new continents full of thousands of would-be subjects—a world to be conquered—and Gideon was concerned about forty-three plague-ridden peasants.

"Well," Damien said breezily, "a cure would be admirable, of course, which is why I've provided you quite a substantial amount of funding. How goes your research?"

There it was again: that slight hesitation. Gideon was definitely hiding something. The look in his eyes

was almost *fear*. And yet physically he seemed so full of energy, standing tall and straight. He fairly *radiated* health.

A formula, a concoction, the housekeeper had said. Interesting . . .

"It goes slowly," Gideon said at last. "The mercury is too poisonous. The iron solute does not balance the humors of the body as I'd hoped." He looked up, as if just noticing the mosaic crest above him. "More new artwork?"

Damien ignored the question, though he was conscious of the trap's release button built into the floor, just a few inches from his left boot. If things went wrong, Gideon was in the perfect position.

"Perhaps if you used live subjects," Damien suggested, "human volunteers, as I proposed—"

"No, Damien."

"We have more than enough to spare. And it would speed your work "

"Never."

Damien pursed his lips. After all these years, Gideon Cahill still mystified him. So dedicated to finding a cure, and yet he refused to do the logical thing and experiment on peasants. Unless, of course, he had already tested his cure some other way. . . .

"Then you have made no breakthrough?" Damien asked.

Gideon hesitated. "I have found no cure."

"Ah. But you've found something."

Gideon twisted his gold ring. "My lord?"

So now he addresses me correctly, Damien thought.

"I've known you for ten years, my friend," Damien said. "You are a man of many talents, but deception is not among them. You are a poor liar. You've found something important, using *my* fortune, using equipment and ingredients that *I* have provided from the far corners of the globe, using this refuge island in *my* territory."

"This island is Cahill family land, my lord," Gideon corrected, "granted to us centuries ago by the Gaelic kings. We invited you here, gave you the use of this manor house—"

"Yes, yes." Damien waved aside the technicalities. "But it is still in *my* barony, and you owe me allegiance. At the very least, you owe me the truth. What have you found?"

Gideon locked eyes with him, and Damien took an involuntary step back. Gideon looked terrified, but Damien realized Gideon wasn't scared of *him*. Gideon Cahill was scared of what he'd discovered.

"I would tell you, my lord," Gideon promised, "if I had discovered anything that would do you good. Believe me, I have not."

"I see." Damien felt his pulse slowing, as it always did when he had to use force. The anticipation of violence had a calming effect on him—like a form of prayer. "That's unfortunate, my friend. I don't claim your skill with alchemy. But I do conduct my own

research with mechanics, as you know. Unlike you, I have no problem testing my inventions on live subjects. Let me demonstrate.”

Damien stepped on the release switch, and the ceiling above Gideon collapsed.

It was one of Damien’s simpler creations but still impressive. The attic above the Vesper seal held three limestone columns set a hand’s breadth apart, each as thick and heavy as a ship’s mast yet perfectly balanced, so that only the slightest linchpin was needed to keep them in position. At the flick of a switch, gears turned, an iron rod retracted, and the Vesper seal crumbled. The columns crashed down like the fist of God.

The sound was terrible. The columns shattered. Shards of rubble flew everywhere, shaking the entire manor. Underneath the collapse, Gideon should have been smashed flat.

Yet when the dust cleared, Damien saw Gideon Cahill standing five feet behind the wreckage, unharmed except for scraped and bleeding knuckles on his right hand.

My God, Damien thought. *It’s true*. Despite himself, he laughed with delight.

He realized his mistake too late. Gideon moved almost faster than Damien’s eyes could register. In a heartbeat, he had Damien pinned to the wall, his fingers around Damien’s throat. Damien was not light, but Gideon manhandled him as if he were a straw-stuffed scarecrow.

"You try to kill me, my lord?" Gideon's eyes flared. "Then laugh about it?"

For a moment, Damien was too shocked to speak. Laying hands on a noble was punishable by death, and yet Gideon — the gentlest man Damien had ever met — seemed quite ready to break Damien's neck. Gideon's thumb and fingers pressed under his jaw. Damien's pulse throbbed. His vision began to darken. With a flick of his wrist, he managed to slide a knife from his sleeve, where he always kept it.

"Is it — worth the price — Gideon?" Damien gasped, barely able to speak with his windpipe constricted. He pressed the tip of his knife gently against Gideon's ribs. "Think carefully."

Gideon's grip tightened. His eyes were still full of murderous rage.

"We'll die together," Damien croaked. "But — won't end there. Your mother — in Milan. Your brother — in Dublin. Your wife and children . . ."

Damien watched Gideon's face as the meaning of his words sank in. It was risky, threatening an angry man, but Damien had to remind him whom he was dealing with. Damien's network of spies and assassins extended far beyond Ireland. He had many friends and many more well-paid lackeys who would not take kindly to their patron's death. Gideon knew that. If he killed Damien Vesper, the entire Cahill family would be wiped from the earth.

There was an urgent pounding on the door. Balthazar

burst in, sword drawn. “My lord, is everything—”

“Stay your hand!” Damien barked. He fixed his eyes on Gideon. “Everything is fine— isn’t it, Gideon? A small disagreement. Nothing more.”

Damien counted to five, wondering if each heartbeat would be his last. Finally, Gideon’s angry expression turned to disgust. He released his grip and stepped away.

Damien sheathed his dagger.

He swallowed, struggling for composure. “You see, Balthazar? Now leave us.”

Balthazar looked at his master in disbelief, then at the gaping hole in the ceiling and the shattered ton of limestone on the floor, no doubt wondering how this constituted a small disagreement.

“Y-yes, my lord,” he stammered. He quickly retreated, closing the door after him.

Gideon kicked at the rubble, scattering mosaic tiles from the Vesper crest. “I once thought better of you, Damien. I thought we were friends.”

“But we *are* friends.” Damien spoke with more ease than he felt, knowing he must turn the situation quickly. “The columns were only a test that I knew you would pass. Tell me . . . how did you dodge them?”

Gideon balled his fists. “If you threaten my family again, if you lay a hand on them—”

“No, no, of course,” Damien said hastily. “Spoken in a moment of anger! But back to the point—no man is so agile. Your bleeding knuckles . . . you actually *pushed* one of the stones aside?”

Gideon still looked ready to attack, but his civilized nature seemed to be reasserting itself, as Damien had hoped. Given a choice, Gideon Cahill would almost always choose talk over violence.

"I deflected a column," Gideon allowed, "barely. Or it would've crushed me."

Damien shook his head in wonder. "You instantly assessed how the stone was falling—its mass, its momentum, how best to apply force to change its course—"

"A simple calculation," Gideon grumbled. "You could do the math as well as I."

"But not so quickly," Damien said. "Not in a heart-beat. You demonstrated unnatural speed, strength, mental acuity. . . . What has changed you, Gideon? What concoction have you made?"

Gideon blanched. "How . . ." His expression hardened as the truth dawned on him. "Of course—Maria."

"Do not be too angry with her," Damien said. "She needed the silver. And her husband . . . well, he's been a guest in my dungeon for years. She really had no choice."

Gideon brushed the dust from his shoulders. "I should have known," he said bitterly. "Even with me, you use spies."

"Your mind is agile," Damien said. "You have apparently found a way to increase your perception. But even this cannot change your fundamental nature, my friend. You are too trusting. You see the best in

people. It is your most glaring weakness. Now tell me, what secret have you uncovered?"

Gideon glowered at him. "I once believed you supported my work because you wanted a cure for the plague—because you wanted to help your people and build a better world."

"I *do* want a cure," Damien assured him. "It might safeguard my own life, for one thing. It would also be a valuable thing to sell. But what you've discovered is obviously of even greater importance. As for helping the peasants out of the goodness of my heart—please! If the Black Death has taught us anything, it is that life is cheap."

"It teaches us life is precious!"

"Bah. I am not interested in stopping death, only in . . . directing it. This cure of yours . . . well, it was potentially valuable, but now you seem to have stumbled on something quite amazing—something that could help me immensely. I am interested in weapons, my friend. Power! *That* is how I'll build a better world."

Slowly, Gideon's face turned waxy with horror. Damien had seen that look before on the faces of his test subjects as it slowly dawned on them that they would never be leaving his workshop. "You are truly evil."

"That goes too far, Gideon. Even for you. This alchemy you've discovered, the process for strengthening the mind and body—it could give me an army powerful enough to drive the English from Ireland at

last. King Henry is old and weak. His lapdogs in Dublin have been powerless for years. With your formula and the weapon I'm working on, Gideon, I could invade England itself. And after that . . ." He swept his hand across his newly acquired map. "A whole world awaits."

Deadly silence.

Gideon wrapped his bleeding knuckles in the hem of his shirt. His hands were beginning to shake. Damien made a note of that, as he might with a test subject. Perhaps a side effect of Gideon's formula? He would have to find out.

"Damien, I'm going home now," Gideon said. "I think you should return to the mainland in the morning. You're no longer welcome on my family lands."

Damien felt a twinge of regret. So this was what it felt like to lose a friend. Such conversations they'd had in better times! Such excellent dinners! Peasants were easy to replace. Gideon Cahill would not be.

"You've known me for ten years, Gideon," he said. "Have I ever failed to get what I want?"

"Good-bye, Lord Vesper."

"Before I am done, you'll wish those stones had crushed you," Damien warned.

Gideon met his eyes one last time, but his expression held no more anger — only disappointment — as if he dared to believe this break was Damien's fault.

Gideon left without another word.

Damien cursed and overturned his desk. Secret reports and Leonardo da Vinci sketches fluttered

through the air, slowly settling in the rubble of his limestone trap.

Damien had tried. Truly, he had tried to be reasonable. But sometimes even the best plans must change. Tonight, Balthazar might get to use his sword after all.

