

I fill the order.

That's all there is to say, really. It's what I do. I fill the order

There's all kinds of hunger pangs. People have needs. They have wants. Desires. Urges.

Where there's a hunger, someone will find a way to sate it. It's basic economics. Where there's a demand, *someone* is going to come up with a supply. Economic pressures will outweigh moral ones, given time.

That's where I come in. I am not, precisely, a supplier. Rather, I consider myself a facilitator. I'm the middleman, the one who can connect the demand to a supply it didn't know existed. It's a thankless job, and not one that makes many friends. That's fine. Friends have never been my priority.

I don't ask questions. It's none of my business what people want with the things they ask for. Not my business, not my problem. I don't consider myself responsible for what they do with them afterward. I don't understand their needs, and frankly I don't care.

People don't care for me much, as a rule. They find aspects of my work distasteful. They try to impose their own limits on my business.

I've found, over the years, that everyone has limits. Even my customers have limits. The man who buys a death is disturbed that I sell a person's darkest secrets; the blackmailer finds it disgusting that I would procure a corpse of very exacting specifications; the necrophiliac draws the line at actually making corpses, and as easy as that it comes full circle back to the assassin. Each of them has limits, and each is convinced that the other's limits are just unnecessary restrictions imposed by society, while their own are valid moral boundaries.

So I say fuck them all, and fuck morality too. It's not like I've ever had much in the way of morals anyway. That's not what I was made for; my brain's not wired that way.

What I've got instead is professional standards. I've got good business practices. And while those standards can be phrased in a lot of ways, in the end it all comes down to one thing.

I fill the order. I *always* fill the order.

The man contacted me for a shipment of house slaves. His request had looser parameters than such often did. He wanted them human, warm, reasonably healthy, within a certain loose age parameter. That was all. No mention of sex, aesthetic qualities, or race.

It made my job easier. Some people got bizarrely specific. It wasn't my business why they wanted the qualities they did, but on some level I had to wonder. I understood that there could be a tendency to go overboard, once they were finally dealing with someone who could fit their precise specifications rather than taking what they could get, but still.

And granted, I could charge them more for it, but the excess work wasn't worth it. On the whole, I was just as glad to see that my job was going to be easy this time. It shouldn't be much work at all to arrange.

I picked up a phone and a bottle, and started dialing some people I knew.

Of course my business does harm. Of course it hurts people. I know that. I'm not a moron.

But the thing is that you have to think about how to apportion the blame. If you get stabbed, do you blame the knife, or the guy holding the knife?

My business is like that, really. It isn't like I actually *do* anything to people. I am, for all practical intents and purposes, a knife. I don't make the choice to hurt people. Other people make that choice. Left to my own devices, I know I'm not a great guy, but I'm not terrible. I mostly keep myself to myself and don't fuck with anyone else. Except for when I do, of course, but that's a business transaction as well. Everyone involved knows what to expect from the beginning. It's tidier that way.

It's only when someone else makes the choice that I do things that ruin people's lives. And it isn't like that's the only kind of work I'll do, or anything like that. End of the day, I'll do what people want me to do. All the choices, the agency, it's on them.

So no, I don't feel guilty. I don't regret what I do. Why the fuck should I? As far as I'm concerned the burden there is on the bastard that paid me. We all bear the burden of our own choices. I've got enough of my own to answer for that I don't need to claim anyone else's.

He met me in person for the pickup, which was actually the first time I'd seen this guy. He was reclusive, paranoid. Didn't leave his house for the most part, from what I'd heard. I'd been working with him for a couple of months now, but it was all information dealing, and that didn't require anything face-to-face. We'd set this one up by correspondence as well, but with this much in the way of a physical product he had to come out and pick it up himself.

I was grateful he hadn't tried to work out some fucking shenanigans with shipment or something. I'd been working on this for way too long now. If this setup hadn't worked, I might have lost it. What little it I had left anyway. It wasn't much anymore.

I met him in Detroit, in the warehouse district. The flight sucked five kinds of ass, of course. I had the cash to spring for first-class, but it still didn't have the room to be anything that wasn't terrible, and the attendant cut me off after the second bottle.

I was already in a bad mood, and that sure as hell didn't make it any better. I was *really* looking forward to getting this job over and done with. When I first agreed to this request, I thought it would be

a nice break in routine, just enough of a challenge to pique my interest. If I'd known how much of an ordeal it would turn into, I'd have told the buyer to shove it where the sun doesn't shine.

I stopped and bought a fifth of vodka, drinking it on the way. Nobody gave me a second glance. People pretty much *didn't*, when I didn't want them to. It was an old trick, one of the oldest in the book, but it got the job done.

The warehouse was locked, which was a nice touch. Unnecessary, but I reminded myself to pay the local factor extra. Attention to detail was sadly rare anymore. Always had been, really, but there were more details to pay attention to than there used to be.

I looked at the people inside, and liked what I saw. They fit the request—aged nineteen to thirty, physically intact, no permanent diseases, no glaring mental deficiencies. I'd have known. They looked scared, nervous, unsure of themselves. Each was kneeling on the ground, hands tied behind their backs, heavy black tape across their mouths.

Each of them but one.

"All right," I said, settling in to wait. "Not much longer."

And of course sometimes I feel bad about the way things go. I can talk a good game about how I don't have morals, but those pesky standards do get in the way sometimes. Everybody's got limits. I'm not an exception to that. Normally I don't take jobs that cross my hard limits, but sometimes things don't go the way I planned. Sometimes I underestimate how far things are going to go.

When they do, I finish the job anyway. It's what I do. I don't have a lot of self-respect, don't have a lot of *reason* for self-respect. But I've got that. If I commit to a job, I do it. Doesn't matter whether I enjoy it or not. I keep my deals. When I say that I'll do shit, shit gets done.

I feel guilty about some of the things I've done for the sake of keeping those deals. But not half as bad as I'd feel if I hadn't kept them. You've got to hold on to something, after all. Come what may, you have to hold on to *something*.

The guy walked in about five minutes after I got there. I wasn't a great believer in showing up early, didn't care for it. But I'd come early this time.

"Good evening, Jacques," he said. "I look forward to concluding our bargain."

I snorted and took another drink of vodka. I was most of a gallon into it, much more than should have fit into the bottle I'd bought, and it was only halfway gone. That much remained to me. "You have no fucking idea," I told him. He winced at my breath. People often did.

People closed the doors and locked them. They were my employees, not working for my local factor. You want good hired help, you take care of that shit yourself. Other people aren't reliable.

In the crowd, the one person who this was all about stood up. She was the only one not bound and gagged, the whole reason we were here. The rest? Just camouflage. I didn't want him to hit the door and realize that something was wrong. Actors weren't cheap, but compared to the hassle of starting this job over again? They were a fucking *steal*.

She pulled a knife out of her pocket and started forward, clutching an iron amulet in her other hand. It was a cheapo defense, the kind of thing you used when you only needed magic not to touch you for a few seconds. I'd bought it from a dealer in Tibet and sold it to her at a markup, back in the initial planning stages for this job.

The guy turned towards me. "You sold me out," he said, sounding more shocked than scared. "I thought you kept your deals."

I punched him in the gut.

I don't look like all that. I'm not all that, not compared to what I was back in the day. Back then, I'd have broken him in half if I hit him while I was that angry. Just one hit and *snap*, like a fucking twig. I was a *beast* back then.

What was left was enough to pick him up off the floor and throw him backwards. He hit the floor hard, retching and gasping for breath.

"Fuck you with your pants on," I said, walking over to where he'd landed. "I always fill the order. In this case, that order was *you*. And with how you just insulted me, I'm inclined to hand you over to her on a silver fucking platter." I grabbed him by the lapel and picked him up, holding him off the ground for a moment before slamming him face down on the floor.

"But why?" he asked, struggling to breathe.

"The hell should I care?" I asked, holding my hand out. One of my people slapped a fresh roll of tape in it, and I pulled the guy's arms behind him and started taping.

"It has to do with my sister," the buyer said, bouncing the knife in her hand. "Emily? You remember her? You remember what you *did* to her?"

"Well, there we go," I said, finishing up and checking that the bonds were tight. They were, enough to cut off circulation, and probably start doing some nerve damage. I'd really cranked those suckers down. Not that it was likely to matter. The buyer didn't give the impression of planning for him to be around long enough to really object.

Magic stirred, hot and heady, and the buyer was enveloped in vivid green flames. Not real fire, but a good enough imitation for government work.

The amulet did its work, and she didn't burn. "You want me to gag him?" I asked, as elsewhere my people started letting the actors out and giving them their bonuses. I paid in advance, but a bonus was good business.

"No, we're good," the buyer said, getting an iron chain out of her pocket. That was another of the purchases I'd arranged for her, something like the amulet in reverse. It would take a hell of a lot better of a mage than this guy to get any magic through with that thing on him.

"All right," I said, getting up and grabbing my bottle again. "You've got my last payment?"

"It's in the mail," the buyer said, approaching with her knife out and a wicked gleam in her eye. "Thanks. You did a good thing here."

I shrugged. "Whatever," I said, walking away.

I wasn't in the mood to be bothered on the way back, and airport security sounded like a bother. So I flicked my fingers, and their minds were clouded, their senses fogged at the critical moment. I waltzed right past, finally tipped the last of the vodka down my throat, and tossed the bottle aside. It landed in the trash, for someone to explain later. If they even noticed.

Little magics, but fuck it. They were better than nothing. I could get by on what I had left. Obviously.

I was a little fish. I knew that. I'd always been a little fish. It was a lot easier to be a little fish when you had a big fish with you, though. Back then I'd always had the option of saying, "Yeah, you can eat me, but do you really want to fuck with *him*?" And the answer was always no, because nobody wanted to fuck with him. Who would? Even if you could win, my boss was going to be more trouble than he was worth. That was his whole *thing*.

It had taken a while to get used to it, when I lost that. A hundred years, maybe two. Maybe I'd get it back someday. It'd be nice. Until then, I had to get used to working with what I had.

Back in Milan, I walked through the streets to the store by my building. They gave me my usual order, a crate full of clinking bottles, and I carried them up to my room.

I'd chosen this place very carefully. Close enough to my old home that I could fit in, far enough that the enemies I'd made there wouldn't find me. Of course, the distance had been larger back then, before the world got small. Most of those enemies were dead now, of course.

Beyond that, though, Milan was a good city for my kind of business. It wasn't huge enough to attract the really big players, but it was *close* to big places. I wasn't that far from Rome, or Paris. Back when I chose the place I'd been thinking of Florence and Venice as well, but those cities weren't all they had been.

Anyway, Milan was a good city for me. I'd been here for a long time now. I'd changed neighborhoods and buildings, making sure my home was always the right sort of place, but I'd stuck with the same city. There was something to be said for staying consistent. It was good for business.

Back in my room, I closed all the curtains and sat on my couch. The usual depression, the feeling of pointlessness that followed a successful job, was setting in. Was this all I could do? Was this all I could achieve? All I aimed for?

Fuck. Probably.

I opened the bottle of Everclear first. It was the good stuff, 190-proof. It was the kind of shit you sold with a liability waiver on the receipt. You weren't supposed to drink it straight. You weren't really supposed to drink it at all, but especially not straight. Two sips of that shit could lay a guy out.

I poured half of it down my throat in one go, and barely felt a buzz at all. It didn't have much of a kick to it, not from where I was coming from. None of the stuff I could get down here did. Once you've had the real shit, you can't go back to thinking the imitation is good enough.

"Fuck you, Dionysus," I said to no one as I prepared to drink myself into a stupor again, chasing something I couldn't get back. "I fuck up one time, and you do this to me. I was great once. I was *great*. And now look at me."

I thought I heard laughter. It probably wasn't my imagination. My god was never known for being kind, or gentle, or good. I mean, hell. He made *me*.