

# Duplicator

David Vickery

If you passed me in the street you wouldn't give me a second glance. But that's never bothered me. The fact is, I bring in three hundred fifty thousand, maybe four hundred thousand a year, while all those people not giving me a glance are struggling by on thirty thousand. And all that for a few weeks' work. But of course I tell my employers that it's not for a few weeks' work but the experience of a lifetime.

I am a duplicator. I come from a long line of duplicators. I suppose it's the ultimate in evolution: natural selection and mutation working hand in hand, creatively. Who cares? All I know is, on the grey world I come from there used to be lots of predators, but a few of us survived: not by standing out, not by fighting back but by merging in. And now there are no predators left – or they're all predators.

All that's the reason why I was having dinner with Kupfermann. Actually, there's no reason he'd agree to spend an hour or even a minute with me, someone he wouldn't recognise on an identity parade. But he certainly would be interested in dining with René Haas. So that's who I was: René Haas.

Kupfermann, the leader trader and de facto resistance head of Quito, sat opposite me. His chin had a greasy look, his eyes carried excess baggage. Everything seemed like an effort for him, and yet his eyes never left me. Brady was on my left, still the charmer, the eternal optimist for the cause. And then there was me – sorry, René Haas, one of the biggest independent offworld traders.

The meal was good considering I'd seen people in the city who looked like they'd done little else for the last couple of weeks but tighten their belts. Perhaps that's why he didn't say much apart from platitudes until the coffee arrived. Quito coffee's a trader commodity, so it surprised me when he leaned forward at that point.

"Enjoy your meal, Mr Haas?"

I nodded. "Sure. What can I do for you, Kupfermann?"

He made a lazy yet impatient gesture with his head. Brady got up and left. He settled back, looking satisfied.

"Now we can do business."

"I hope so," I said urbanely. "Let me guess."

His eyes half closed. "Go ahead."

"You want me to break the blockade of Quito using my armed freighters. Either that, or you want some of my people to run the blockade with traders to keep your people down here alive."

Actually, it didn't matter what he wanted; he was going to get something quite different. That scenario was what the boys in COMI thought, so I was happy to spout it. What interested me then was the slight pricking in my right index

finger. Kupfermann was wearing a Newton. I scratched my right ear a couple of times which triggered a subcutaneous signal to Renton. And I waited for Kupfermann's answer, which seemed a long time coming.

When he spoke, he kept his eyes closed. He seemed bored, but there was something eager behind that mask of a face.

"As to the first option: that would be very, very expensive. And when COMI is handling a blockade, or La Strada, or even Kalaharo, it's probably money down the drain. As to the second: also very expensive, and not very practicable. How many traders would we need? And in any case my people are prepared for the worst, believe me. They recognise it's futile to carry on. Keeping them going for a week – a month, at most – would be just raising false hopes. No, the best thing for them would be to accept the trade conditions of COMI and pay the reparations."

"Really?" I said. "I thought they were depending on you."

His eyes opened. "I'm not a fool, Mr Haas. Please don't treat me like one. Times are hard. In fact, they're brutal. I've done what I could for them and they appreciate it. But now it's time for other measures."

"So where do I come in?"

He smiled. "You're not a Quito trader. You can leave any time you like in that ultra-rapid scout of yours. You can take me and my cargo through the blockade: for a price, of course."

"Cargo? In a scout?" I finished my coffee. An itch in my left wrist told me that Renton was still on the job.

"I wasn't thinking of bulk commodities. Just a person – or maybe two people –" he smiled in a kind of abstract way – "and a few kilos of hand luggage."

"And what would be in the hand luggage, Kupfermann? Souvenirs of Quito?"

He looked around for the bill. "As I said, Mr Haas. Times are hard. Many's the producer planet out there having to struggle on without even the chance of a break. I think that I, with your help of course, could bring them some relief. And I'm more than willing to pay your price."

I doubted that: but the main point was, COMI had totally misjudged him. Whatever Kupfermann had once been, he was no tiger now. Far from spearheading resistance on this dust smear, he was taking the traders' funds and setting up a nice little operation of his own. Rainbow? Satori? It didn't matter – obviously it was something potent, concentrated and with a high market value. That explained the half-closed eyes. He'd been dipping into the merchandise.

Now, of course, I could have just gone home. But COMI had paid me to do a job. And I told myself I always earned my money. I was looking forward to doing a proper job this time.

"Well, Kupfermann," I said as he keyed in for the bill, "I believe I can accommodate you."

As we drove back to Kupfermann's apartment, I reflected that he was only doing the logical thing. I'd seen it time and time again: these small operators like Quito

didn't have a chance against the multiglobals like COMI. If he'd made a stand, they'd have crushed him and enjoyed it before moving on to the rest of the world in their anaconda style. But it didn't make what he was doing any more edifying.

That brought me on to me. The real me, that is. And that didn't leave any too pleasant a taste either. Perhaps that's why I coat myself in these multilayered personalities. But it never quite works. Here I was, a free agent admittedly, but getting all my money from the multiglobals. I told myself that at least I was taking them for all I could get. I told myself that they'd win anyway, with or without my help. I told myself to think about something else.

In another life I might have been an assassin. There's something romantic, almost heroic, about the old assassins. Silent in the dark, eluding all defences, clean cold steel. But assassins have no place in sophisticated society; they have a tendency to create martyrs. And as COMI and the rest have long known, the exchange rate for martyrs is about a hundred live opponents.

But what about a live opponent who suddenly throws in the towel, or better yet, betrays his friends? No one mourned for Benedict Arnold. That's where I come in: ready to create Benedict Arnolds to order.

Brady stayed in the car while we went up to the apartment to talk. Kupfermann wasn't being brave or foolhardy. He had nothing to fear from René Haas, that was for sure. And if there had been the slightest doubt in his mind, his Newton would have dispelled it. That's where people like Kupfermann make their mistake, depending so much on manmade defences. Nothing's ever been created that didn't contain within it the seeds of its own countermeasure. Me, I prefer to depend on myself.

Kupfermann powered up the apartment with a wave of his lazy hand. He offered me a drink and I chose anise vodka. I took the glass in my hand and swirled it, savouring the creamy purity of the drink's texture. Needless to say, Kupfermann wasn't drinking. Rainbow and booze are pointless companions.

"Okay, Mr Haas. Ready to talk details? Or would you prefer to just give me your price?"

I looked up at his relaxed, watchful gaze. "Don't you trust me, Kupfermann?" I said.

He smiled, but I could feel him tense up. "As much as I trust anyone. You know how times are."

"It's just that I feel uncomfortable when business partners don't trust me." He was starting to speak, when I cut in. "That Newton of yours, for instance."

"Newton?"

"Cute name. Some jokey reference to the old equal and opposite reaction law, so they tell me. I know they're only a millimetre thick, but seriously, wouldn't you be more comfortable without it?"

He was looking wary now. Can't say I blame him, especially when I slid out the neural freezer.

"And anyway, it won't work. Not in here. There's a slight change of field: can you feel it?"

He was scrambling out of his chair. "What do you want?"

I hit him with the freezer before he'd finished standing up. His face was a savage curtain halfway torn back. We're all animals under the skin. I got up and walked over to him.

"What do I want? Just a little personal contact, Kupfermann. Everyone says that's what's wrong with society these days: not enough personal contact."

When I touched his face I could have sworn he flinched, even though I knew it was technically impossible. My fingers, gentle as a child cradling a butterfly, thorough as a surgeon deleting a tumour, defined his features, the length of his nose, the shape of his ears, the very texture of his skin.

And as they did so I could feel my own face adjusting, the jaw squaring, the skin sagging under the eyes. It's not unpleasant; like stretching when you wake up. And every time I did it, I knew I was going to wake up as someone new. Even my "hair" was changing, bushing out here, thinning there. I focused closely on his, and imagined rather than felt the broad streaks of grey pushing back through the temples like tired fingers. But I knew it must be so. Finally I held his gaze in lock, eyeball to eyeball with nobody blinking. It was like looking into eternity. And when I broke the contact, I knew my irises were brown no longer but a moody blue-grey: a rainy day over the ocean.

I stopped then for a moment and left him half crouched in that unnatural position to check the mirror. I must say, I preferred Haas. Kupfermann was no oil painting, that was for sure. Yet when he wasn't dragging his eyelids down and mentally sneering, there was something there, some vestigial integrity.

Naturally, there was more to be done. Not just the obvious things like hands and teeth, height and weight. I pulled down a strip of flesh on my throat and started to adjust the laryngeal equalisers to harmonise with my recordings of his conversation during the meal.

Some people, watching me at work, have accused me of being a robot, an android, or at any rate half human. As to that, I'm proud to say I'm not any fraction human; without my ancestry, I'd be out of a job. But I'm certainly no cyborg. These implants, sensors and so on – they're just tools, handy aids. I'd have mastered the voice in time on my own, probably in a day or so. But when you haven't got the time, why scorn labour-saving devices?

Body odour's another case in point. It's true that humans have a terrible sense of smell. But it's also true that everyone's got his own personal odour; ask any bloodhound. If that hadn't been right, someone would have begun to have doubts. Again, I'd have got it myself, in time, but as things were I fixed it with the fragrancener. And so on.

By the time I'd finished, I was Kupfermann. At least, I was everything outward that made him who he was. I managed to drag him into an empty room and left him sprawled bizarrely on the floor, touching the surface only at three or four points. If I chose not to unlock his motor nervous system, he'd die in a day or two. At that moment I hadn't decided.

I walked back to the lounge and checked the main panel of the apartment. As I thought, the car was locked on to a narrow waveband. I keyed the intercom and told Brady to pick me up tomorrow at ten. Then I hit the bed.

Next morning I was up at nine. It was a well-found apartment; obviously being a resistance head has its compensations. After a shave and a shower I breakfasted on juice and French toast, courtesy of my host. Pity he was in no position to join me.

Over some more of that excellent coffee I keyed up Renton. He didn't answer, just input the agreed security code. That was all I needed. I transferred ten thousand to his specified secure account number and hung up.

A lot of people, a lot of operators, might have said that was too much for just doctoring an apartment's field for one night. Those are generally the ones not operating any more. In this business you have to have insiders you can trust, and Renton had never let me down. Funny thing was, we'd never even met. Naturally it wouldn't have bothered me to meet face to face, although he might have found it confusing at first.

Brady showed up promptly at ten. In his face there was a hope, an optimism, now that I saw it in the daylight, which even a beard and a heavy Quito tan couldn't disguise. The lines on his face showed that he'd been through it, not least during the last few weeks. But there he was, still hoping against hope.

"How'd it go with Haas, Chief?" he asked as we drove away from the apartment block.

"No go. He wanted to make a private deal with me, turn me into a Rainbow dealer. I put him on ice."

Brady laughed. "Guess he doesn't know you too well, huh?" he said. He was in the front, I was in the back, and he didn't turn round. But the way he said it told me that *he* wasn't sure about Kupfermann any more either. Yet somehow I knew that he'd stick with Kupfermann whatever he did. And I didn't know whether that impressed me or depressed me.

According to Brady, the leading traders were showing up at eleven that night. Sounded like they weren't expecting too much either. In the meantime, I had the day to myself. Brady dropped me off at the main building in town, a campaign headquarters of a kind, though you could see as soon as you walked in the door that the campaign was going nowhere. I knew from my recon that he frequented Mike's bar, so I suggested we met there at eight.

My new name was on the door of an office, so I pushed it open and walked in. I thought I'd take it easy for a while; but standing in front of my desk was a girl. I mean a lady. A well-built dream, clearly no junior. Her brown hair fanned around her face as she turned at my entrance. It was the face that struck me most. A combination of guileless beauty and pain where no pain should be. It tugged at parts of me I'd forgotten existed. Suddenly I wanted to take that pain away for good and leave her as she was always meant to be.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. It's one of my standbys. In a new situation you can learn a lot about the person – and about the identity you've adopted – with those few words.

"You asked me to check on the subscriptions," she said. Bitterness in her voice, but the bitterness of disappointment. Even though it was directed at Kupfermann, it hurt me. She moved to the door.

"Don't go," I said.

"I'm sure you have plenty of other things to do. In fact I saw one of them outside fixing her makeup. And anyway I promised Malcolm I'd go sit with his wife."

"I caught her wrist. "What's the hurry?"

"What's the point? You're not interested any more."

I looked into her frosted blue eyes. "Who says I'm not?" I said. She matched my stare, half wanting to believe, half deriding her own foolishness.

Finally she spoke. "Who are you trying to kid? We both know you're planning to jet out and leave everyone hanging."

I sat down on the edge of the desk. Her wrist in my hand like warm marble. This was my cue, my COMI cue, to say something like, dead right sister. But I was suddenly tired of performing to other people's cues. Could it really be time for me to play myself? It would certainly be a novelty.

"Do we?" I asked. "Only a fool would leave all this behind." I traced a curve of cheekbone with my finger. She looked away.

"You used to talk like that," she said quietly.

"Nothing's changed."

"No? What about Suanna?"

"Nothing about her." My opinion of Kupfermann continued to spiral downwards. Which was funny, because I thought it was already on the floor. Half of me was wondering what the hell I was doing. If I went ahead with even half of what was crossing my mind, my days of gainful employment were over. But I didn't dwell on that.

"So what are you saying?"

"Can you be here at midnight, ready to leave?"

There was something in her face, something I couldn't quite read. "You mean – you want to take me with you? After all you've said lately?"

"Of course," I said. "I've been under a lot of pressure. I wasn't seeing things clearly." I released her wrist reluctantly. "What do you say?"

The elusive something in her expression came into the open: contempt. "What do I say? I say no thanks. You're running out like they said – and you want me to go with you. I'll stay here with the traders. But I'm sure Suanna would be happy to use my ticket."

The warmth inside me burned brighter. "You're half right. We're leaving, but I'm not letting down Quito. Do you think I could do that to my friends?"

She didn't answer. I'm no telepath, but it was easy to see that she was weighing up the definite "no" of yesteryear with the possible.

I smiled. "Okay. I suppose I deserved that. But by midnight you'll have all the proof you need. And then we can make a new start."

I glanced into her eyes. She wanted to believe. And I wanted her to believe too.

"See you at midnight," I said.

On my way out I ran into another girl. This time girl was definitely the word. A slickette with all the latest functions. But all the hermetics couldn't conceal the quartz hardness of her eyes. Something told me this was Suanna, Kupfermann's

latest toy. Interesting how some people, like the lady I met earlier, appeal to some and not to others. Whereas old Suanna had whatever it is that most men want. But it was all surface.

She stopped me with a gesture. "Everything all right for tonight?"

"Why not?"

"Just that I saw Katrina hanging around your office. You're not going to fall for any of that, are you?"

I smiled. "What do you think?"

She shrugged and turned to go. "Men are weak," she said. "I'll be ready, soon as you give the word."

I spent a few hours toying with some local brews and watching the screen over the bar. But all the time my eyes were on the set I was pondering my choice. It wasn't too late; I could skip the planet and leave Katrina and the rest of Quito to their fate. I could unfreeze Kupfermann and he would do everything COMI wanted without my having to lift a finger. The slick ship COMI had supplied me with as part of the Haas cover would take me anywhere I needed to go. Was that the COMI homeworld, my paycheque and my next assignment? Or was Katrina the excuse I hadn't realised I'd been looking for, to get out of this sorry mess once and for all?

A news item on the screen caught my attention. A propaganda piece, obviously made by COMI but equally obviously real, bounced down to the planet in a jamming band. A trader, trying to run the blockade, scraped the energy field of one of their ships and broke up. Spectacular stuff, full holo-colour. You could even see the hawk decals on their fins. There followed a statement of regret and condolence in a smooth voice.

Benedict Arnold came to mind again. Yes, he'd betrayed his country: but he'd acted with valour before that, and then come to feel he had genuine grievances against the military authorities. Neither mitigating circumstance applied to me. I was glad at that moment that I couldn't see the real me even by looking in a mirror. I realised I'd subconsciously been thinking that way for a long time.

Brady showed up with his apologetic air, ordered a round of drinks.

"How about a game while we wait?" I suggested. He seemed surprised.

"Sure," he said, waving me towards the VR console.

"I feel like chess."

"Chess?" he said. "Okay, whatever you say. It must be five years since we played. I thought you'd quit."

"I've taken it up again. Of course, if you're worried about losing – "

He grinned. "I can handle it, Chief. So what'll it be? Quatro? 3-D? Hexachess?"

"How about chess?" I said.

"What, you mean with a board and real pieces and all?" he said, more and more surprised. He went over to the bar again. "Hey, Mike, you got a chessboard?"

It took Mike a while, but he located a stained board and some tacky plasticised pieces. But what the hell.

“Hit me,” I said. Brady opened up with e2e4 and I bit back with d7d6, the introduction to my own variation in the Pirc-Robatsch complex. And then time stood still while our own private war raged around us. It was ages since I’d played a human, and it felt great to engage real intelligence again. What’s more, Brady was no dolt over the board. But gradually I began to get the upper hand. His centre was an impressive edifice and then it fell apart like a house of cards.

As he resigned, he looked up at me with respect and something else. Something rekindled, that was for sure. As for me, the game had made my mind up, more than the news item or even Katrina herself had done.

“That’s how we’ll beat this blockade,” I said.

“What do you mean, Chief? Surely it’s a crush?”

“No,” I said. “It’s like this game. We’re lying low, but we’re not finished.”

He paused for a moment at that. Then he said, “That’s how you used to talk. Back on Delta Cephei IV, you remember? Busting that trade ring? And on Mira II – “

I smiled at his enthusiasm. “Stop living in the past, Brady. The future’s still out there, isn’t it?”

I broke up the gathering of traders quickly. I wasn’t sure they believed me completely, but something in my manner must have given them a burst of new hope. They scattered in a dozen different directions, heading back to their loading bay areas.

So, all in all, I was feeling pretty pleased with myself when I opened the door to Kupfermann’s apartment. That feeling lasted about half a second: the time it took for the door to slam behind me and the lights to flash on. There was Suanna, standing against the door with some sort of automatic in her hand. And next to her was old Kupfermann, his skin a nasty red flare from the re-fired nerves and muscles. He wasn’t looking any too pleased either.

“Serves me right,” I said. “I always did have too kind a heart. I should have finished you yesterday, Kupfermann.”

He glared back at me. “That’s not one of my failings,” was all he said, but the slight gesture he made to Suanna was more eloquent. My hand was moving up to cover my eyes, but long before that the room was full of blinding light. When I could see again Suanna was a glucky smear against the wall. And Kupfermann was standing there like a zombie.

“Too bad,” I said. “Probably only two Newton shields in all of Quito, and they had to be in your apartment.”

He dived for a knife on the table, about the same time as I threw myself at him. The blade, cold as any assassin’s, pared through my upper left arm as though it were a ripe avocado. I wasn’t that bothered, though, even though it stung like a bitch. What took my mind off the pain was the fact that I’d managed to get into my pocket with my right hand. And now Kupfermann was once again frozen where he stood.

I pushed him over to get to the panel. It needed a wipe or two before I could access the communication stack. I cleaned off my wound, and while I took care of that I was doing what I do best, which is rearranging my features. I'd taken on the role of Yefim Buono, president of La Strada, several times with his permission, so it was no problem to recreate him now. Naturally it wouldn't be perfect in this limited time, but I figured it wouldn't matter across the plate.

On my way back to campaign headquarters, disguised once more as Kupfermann, I stopped and looked up as the night sky of Quito brightened like a hundred firework displays. It would have been considerably less charming and more hectic above the atmosphere, of course, as plasma generators tore into the unsuspecting blockaders. I saw several traders lift off to take advantage of the diversion, and no doubt several more would shortly be doing so.

Like all the main oligopoly members, La Strada and COMI were more or less equally placed. COMI's blockade was a big one, as well. But I figured La Strada had surprise – and shock – on its side. Those boys hadn't fired a shot in anger at each other for a long time. And sorting out this mess could take just as long.

In the end, they'd probably sit down and thrash out their differences: there being so much at stake. But in the meantime the Quito traders and maybe quite a few other worldlets would be back in business, perhaps with a little help from me. And Katrina and I would be keeping our spirits up.

There was one good thing in the whole crazy stew. If they came looking for me, I was going to be pretty hard to find.