

THE FAX MAN
by Dean Whitlock

Jared Terrol coalesced into life in the fax booth. He blinked and shook his head, disoriented for a moment by a feeling of *deja knew*. He knew who he was and where he was and why he was, but he also knew what he wasn't. He wasn't really Jared Terrol. Not *the* Jared Terrol, who was back in his office at World Products Unlimited, Ltd., about to go into a top-level meeting about the acquisition — read takeover — of Lunar Resources, Inc. This Jared Terrol ("Me," he said to himself. "I.") was a fax man.

His mind cleared, and with it, his purpose. Jared Terrol smiled, stretched, and stepped out of the booth, ready to do business. He had three hours before this copy ("Me," he reminded himself) expired. Three hours to get into the meeting with the boys from Western Conglomerates, squeeze them for everything they were worth, and report back. Three hours. Plenty of time for a man like Jared Terrol.

He found his clothes in the changing room outside the booth and quickly slipped them on. Arriving nude didn't bother Terrol — it was either that or mix his jeans with his molecules — but he hated wasting the time dressing. His secretary had faxed ahead an understated steel-blue jumpsuit and a maroon-on-yellow foulard. Power colors. Terrol checked himself in the mirror and adjusted his tie. He was Terrol completely, in look and feel.

Some people couldn't handle faxing. They couldn't take the concept of a carbon copy working on its own. Or they couldn't deal with dissolving after the three-hour limit. Or they couldn't handle arriving nude. People like that still flew to meetings. They still owned laptop computers. Terrol grinned at his reflection. Laptops were for wimps. He stepped out of the changing room.

Into the middle of a chase scene. Two security guards in Western Conglomerate colors were shouting back and forth, trying to corner a short, fast, and very fat man in a green jumpsuit. The guards had the advantage. The fax booths faced into a broad corridor with a wall at one end and a security gate at the other. The fat man had nowhere to go except around. But he was doing that well. As Terrol stepped into the corridor, the fat man dodged around one guard, bounced off the wall, hip-checked the other guard, and sprinted toward the gate.

"Stand back, Sir!" one guard yelled to Terrol.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" the other yelled at the fat man.

Terrol stepped back into the changing room out of the line of fire. The second guard pulled out a dart gun, dropped to one knee, and fired at the fat man. At the same instant, the fat man dove over the gate. Terrol realized that the man wasn't wearing a green jumpsuit after all. He had green skin. He was a fax, marked with off-color skin so he'd be an obvious copy. Terrol himself always chose red.

"Hell of a color," Terrol thought, as the fat man flew through the gate like a badly planned genetic experiment. Then the dart hit, and the round green body splatted against the wall.

"Sorry, Sir," a guard said. "Another damn fax ad."

They rushed passed him and through the gate. The fat man was flopping on the floor like a half-pithed frog. The first guard to reach him shot another dart into his shoulder, and he subsided.

“He’s out,” the guard said.

“I’ll do him,” the second one replied. He pulled a large knife out of his belt and slit the fat man’s throat. The fat man began to soften and then dissolve. Terrol looked away. It was legal to kill a fax, as long as it was done humanely. Still, it wasn’t easy to watch.

Just then, Terrol heard a door open behind him. He turned back and found himself staring into a pair of beautiful jade green eyes. In a beautiful jade green face. Over a very beautiful — and very nude — jade green body. The woman froze in the doorway to the fax booth, obviously as startled as he was. And Terrol found himself unable to stop staring. She was fine-boned, well-toned, slender, and stacked. And she looked great in green.

They stared at each other for a long time. Finally, she blushed (an amazing sight in green) and looked demurely away. She dropped one long-fingered hand to cover her middle.

“Sorry,” Terrol said, feeling overwhelmingly unsorry. “Wrong room.”

He went out and closed the door. And stood for a moment, regaining his breath. He was glad he’d gotten dressed before she arrived. In his business, it paid to hide your true feelings.

Which brought him back to the present. He checked his watch quickly — fifteen minutes wasted by that damn fax ad. And one hell of a beautiful woman. He wasted another second on her memory, then put it aside and went briskly through the gate. The guards were back in position, and they nodded him by with just a glance at the readout. He ignored

them. A robovac was sucking up the remains of the fat man, and Terrol allowed himself a glance at the disappearing mound of green grit.

“Hell of a color,” he thought again. Of course, on the right body . . .

He shook off the memory and strode down the hall to the meeting room. He had no time to waste on a stranger he’d never see again.

He’d been here three times before, in other copies, hammering out the details of the deal he planned to close today. He didn’t have those memories, of course, but he had the reports. Besides, they were him, and they did exactly what he would have done to set up this deal.

A deal to buy up a quarter of Western Conglomerates’ interest in Solar Systems, Inc.; while three thousand miles away, *the* Jared Terrol inked the deal on Lunar Resources; and over in Hong Kong still *another* Jared Terrol bought up enough of Sons of Nippon & Sons to give World Products Unlimited so much weight in the low-gravity crystals consortium they could slow the production of di-petroleum carbonate to a standstill. Which would drive the market price for neotridium, the only substitute, sky high. And World Products Unlimited, through the clever work of one Jared Terrol and his talented copies, had just bought every neotridium plant on the planet. The world could buy from World Products, or it could go back to oil and coal. It was the sort of deal Terrol loved.

He walked into the meeting room, nodded to the two men already there, took a place at the head of the table, opened the desktop console, keyed up the latest draft of the contract, ordered a drink, made two quick phone calls, bought porkbelly futures, and told an obscene joke. All in flawless rhythm. The Terrol style — set the pace, leave them breathless, shake them up. Whatever you do, don’t let them form a complete thought.

“Good morning, Terro—” the older man started.

“It’s 4 p.m., my time, Junior,” Terrol stated, “but thanks for the thought.” He let a tight smile flash across his face.

Junior — J.R. Robbins, Junior, now senior partner and Chairman of Western Conglomerates — smiled back and opened his mouth to say something else. Terrol turned to the younger man.

“We’re off late,” he said. “I got held up by a fax ad on the way in.” The tone of his voice made statements about the security at Western Conglomerates.

The younger man was J.R. Robbins, III — R-3 to his friends and enemies, Mr. Robbie to the staff. He was Vice-Chairman and Director of Operations, and he had no sense of humor. His mouth was still pursed from Terrol’s opening joke.

“I’ll talk to the Cap—” he started to say.

“No problem,” Terrol said. “They trashed him finally. Are we ready to go over this?” He gestured toward his console.

Junior and R-3 glanced at each other. Then R-3 opened his own console and started keying. Junior turned back to Terrol, smiling. He had big ears, big teeth, and thinning hair. A balding monkey, Terrol classed him, and R-3 was a spitting image minus a funny bone.

“We’re waiting for someone from corporate legal,” Junior said. “To iron out the final word—”

“How long?” Terrol asked. He looked pointedly at his watch.

Just then, the door to the meeting room opened. Terrol looked up, and found himself looking into a pair of beautiful jade green eyes. In a familiar and still beautiful jade green face. The body was just as beautiful, too, only now it was clothed. The dress, on the other

hand, was green and sheer, and it billowed around her as she stopped in the doorway. It was hard to tell where cloth ended and skin began. Terrol's memory filled in the details.

"I will always remember you in doorways," he said, and then realized he had said it aloud.

The woman lowered her eyes and blushed (still an amazing sight), but she smiled also and came into the room. Junior and R-3 looked at her, looked at him, and then at each other.

"Have you two m—" Junior began.

"We passed in the hallway on the way in," Terrol said quickly. He forced his breathing down and put on a poker face. He was again glad to be clothed.

"This is Melony Lane," Junior said. "Melony, Jared Terrol."

She came toward him, hand out.

"Mr. Terrol," she said.

Her voice was sweet and husky, and Terrol found himself standing to take her hand. Then he stopped and sat back down. He never stood to greet people. It gave them an edge. But he looked into her green eyes, and found himself standing back up to take her outstretched hand. He stopped himself again.

And got stuck in a half crouch with one hand out and one hand groping for the table to steady himself. He took her hand, and felt her long, cool fingers slide against his palm for an instant. Then his other hand landed on the desktop keyboard. The console folded down into the table, taking his thumb with it.

Terrol smothered a cry and jerked upright. The console snapped back open, his thumb came free, and he found himself pressed tightly against Melony Lane, their clasped

hands squeezed between her breasts, his sore thumb hooked in the folds of her sleeve. Her lips parted slightly in surprise, only a breath away from his own. They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment.

Then she made a little "oh" and drew away.

Terrol remembered himself and stepped back quickly. The back of his knees hit the edge of his chair, and he sat down hard. His thumb came loose with a little tearing sound. Melony looked down at her suddenly bare arm. Terrol stared at the sleeve in his hand.

"Are you all ri—" Junior began.

"Of course," Terrol snapped.

"—ght Melony?" Junior finished.

"Why, yes, Mr. Robbins," she said. Her voice set Terrol's blood humming.

"Sorry about your dress," he said, trying to decide what to do with the sleeve in his hand. "I'll replace it."

She looked at him and smiled. His blood surged and he rubbed the cloth between his fingers. He didn't care if he was dressed or not.

"It's all right, Mr. Terrol," she said. "It's just a fax."

Just a fax. His blood slowed at the chilling thought. She was just a fax. The real Melony Lane was somewhere else, probably in a meeting with some other guy (the bastard). He'd have to find out where, find out how to meet her after the meeting, when this beautiful and breathtaking copy unhappily went soft and dissolved. (God, what a shame.)

Terrol checked his watch again. Another fifteen minutes gone. Fifteen fewer minutes before this lovely lady expired in a cloud of jade green dust. Then he remembered — he was a fax, too. He had even less time left than she did. And he had a job to do. He dropped

the sleeve on the table.

Melony was seating herself between Junior and R-3, directly across the table from him. And Junior was saying something, his monkey face quizzical.

“Your opinions are yours to have, Junior,” Terrol said, his usual cover line when he had missed a point, “but World Products has its own agenda.”

“You don’t like Toledo, then, Mr. Terrol?” Melony asked.

That was it. Junior had said she was from their Toledo office.

“I’ve never been there. As I said, World Products has its own agenda. I go where they fax me. And please call me Jared.” He smiled pleasantly. He tried to smile pleasantly. He made a great effort to smile pleasantly. He had no idea how it actually looked. He had worked hard to perfect his dry, tight power smile, and the habit was hard to break. His face almost cramped from the effort.

Meanwhile, he was thinking about Toledo. He’d have to let Terrol — *the* Terrol — know. Maybe he could find some way to meet this woman in the real flesh. They could go out for dinner, sip some wine, see a show, go to —

Terrol’s heart clenched at the thought. Some other man with Melony Lane? It made him burn with jealousy. (“But *he’s* you,” a little voice said in his head. “Bullshit,” he replied. “I am me, and she is she, and we’re both here and now.”)

Jared Terrol wasn’t given to poetry, but that thought seemed like a sonnet. He loved this beautiful woman, and he wanted her. He, not some frigging double three-thousand miles away. And her, not a distant twin in Toledo. The real Melony Lane was probably a dull shade of pink anyway. He wanted the sleek, green beauty sitting across the table.

Who, right at this moment, was pressing keys on the desktop, while Junior babbled

something beside her.

“Say what?” Terrol said.

“We just need your okay to the changes in section 3, paragraph 42, about the—”

“Fine, Junior, fine,” Terrol said. He quickly keyed up the section and gave it a quick scan.

“Melony felt the present wording would give you—”

Terrol smiled up at Melony. It was getting easier. “Excellent wording,” he said.

“Caught my original intent beautifully. You’re a talented piece — uh, person.”

She glanced demurely down at her console.

“Now, in paragraph 57 of that section,” R-3 said, “Melony thought—”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Terrol said. He keyed up the paragraph for a quick scan, but found himself scanning the lines of Melony’s face instead as she bent to her work.

“Perhaps you’d like to hear Melony’s reasoning behind the new wording,” R-3 said.

“It has to do with the new regulations on windfall prof—”

“I’d love to hear your reasoning,” Terrol said to Melony. “In your own words.”

She looked quickly at Junior, who waggled his monkey head.

“By all means, Melony,” he said.

“Well,” she began, and her voice brought Terrol’s pulse up to the red line. He’d love to hear her whisper those words in his ear. Cartel, injunctive procedure, forced divestiture — beautiful words in the right mouth.

She stopped and looked at him, and he realized she was waiting for him to comment.

“Beautiful,” he said. “Beautiful logic, that is. You won’t get any argument from me.”

R-3 brought up the next change, and Terrol asked her to explain it for him. And the

next one and the next and on down the contract, paragraph by paragraph. Her voice sounded lovelier by the minute. For a brief moment, he wondered if this had all been planned, a trick by Western Conglomerates to distract him from the wording in the contract. Melony could be dosed with pheromones keyed precisely to his glands.

He looked at Junior, grinning like a chimp, and R-3, scowling like a gorilla. And the lovely Melony in the middle, like Sheena of the Jungle. ("Who cares," he thought. "Life is too short. Love is all that matters.")

And that made him think about the time. He glanced at his watch. Only an hour left. Only an hour more in her presence. He couldn't let it slip by. He had to have her.

He let her finish the current section and then said, "I think that's enough. You've done a top-notch job for us, Melony. We can just skim the rest."

She looked puzzled, a delightful tilt of the head, a slight quirk to the green eyes. (God, she was beautiful.)

"There isn't any more," she said.

"What?" Terrol looked at his console. They were at the bottom of the last page. "Of course," he said "We can just skim our signatures onto the old page and be done."

"Great," Junior said, rubbing his fat hands together, "just great. It's a pleasure doing business with a man wh—"

"Let's just print and be done with it," Terrol said. He pressed his thumb against the screen next to his name, keyed in the World Products Unlimited, Ltd., authorization code, and closed the console.

"Now—" he began.

"I think this calls for a drink," Junior said. He leaned back in his chair and pressed a

key beside his console, letting R-3 sign and seal for Western Conglomerates. "What'll you have, Terrol? Bourbon and branch? Palm wine?" A fully equipped bar rose from the table beside him. "How about you, Melony? This is your party, too, you know."

"Well," she said. She looked into Terrol's eyes, than looked quickly away. "Will you be joining us . . . Jared?"

Terrol had been about to refuse. Now he could only nod. He let Junior serve him palm wine and choked down a sip. Melony took her glass in a slender well-formed hand and drank delicately. Terrol watched her lips caress the rim of the glass.

He downed his own drink in a quick, sickening gulp and stood.

"I should report back to World Products," he said to Junior. He caught Melony's eye. "Time's getting short."

"Certainly, Terrol, certainly," Junior said, bobbing his head happily. He picked up his drink and stood. "You can use this room." He looked at his watch. "We'll make sure everyone stays out until you're . . . uh . . . finished. Come on, Robbie."

R-3 got up with a sour look, leaving his drink untouched on the table. "We have a lounge next door you can use, Ms. Lane," he said.

Terrol smiled at her and nodded. Then he opened the console and pretended to work. He was up and moving as soon as the door shut. He crossed the room in three strides and put his ear to the door, listening.

Then it banged open against his head. Junior peered in, his big eyes beetling in surprise.

"Sorry about that, Terrol," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Terrol hissed, rubbing at the growing bump over his eye. "I just dropped

my . . . thing.” He pretended to pick something off the floor and put it into his pocket.

“Never travel without it,” he said, blinking madly to clear his vision.

“I just wanted to say you should help yourself to the bar,” Junior said.

“Fine,” Terrol said, pushing the door shut on the Junior’s hands. “Thanks.”

Junior yelped and withdrew.

Terrol waited, rubbing his forehead and hoping it wouldn’t bruise. God knew what that would look like on his red skin. He needed to look good for the next — he looked at his watch — half hour!

He pulled open the door and sneaked a look down the corridor. To the left, he could see the guards sitting by the gate to the fax booths. They both appeared to be half asleep. Neither was looking his way, at least. To the right, the corridor ended in a lift shaft. As he watched, Junior and R-3 stepped in and rose out of sight. There was no sign of Melony. But there was a door between him and the shaft.

Terrol scooted into the corridor and slid down the wall to the door. He listened carefully, but heard nothing. A quick glance behind showed the guards hadn’t noticed him. He opened the door and stepped quickly inside.

The room was empty. Terrol cursed and started to turn. Just then, he heard a door open behind him. He turned back, smiling.

And found himself staring at a doddering old man in a ridiculous three-piece suit and a stetson, who stumbled into the room fighting with his zipper. Terrol heard water flushing. Then the man conquered the zipper and looked up with a smile of exultation. He saw Terrol and the smile stretched into a monkey grin. He came shuffling forward, hand outstretched.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said, “pleased to meet you.”

“Sorry,” Terrol said quickly, backing out of the door, “wrong room.”

“J.R. Robbins,” the old man said, still coming, “pleased to mee—”

Terrol slammed the door. He heard a thud and a yelp from the other side. But he was already hurrying back the other way, past the meeting room, to the door on the other side. He didn’t bother to tip-toe — time was running out — but the guards didn’t shift an inch.

He went through the other door without listening. It, too, was empty. But there was another door on the opposite wall. Terrol didn’t wait for the inevitable. He ran across the room and yanked the door open.

“Melon—” he said.

A robovac buzzed out. Terrol hopped away, kicking at it and cursing. It followed doggedly, sucking at his shoes with its piggy little nozzle.

“Get away from me,” Terrol raged. He brought his foot down on its back with a satisfying crunch. The plastic top cracked and a cloud of green grit blew out into the room. Terrol’s shoe lodged in the plastic and sparks flew. He leaped away, one foot bare, batting at tiny fires in the hair on his toes. Then he noticed the green grit.

“My God,” he moaned. “Melony.” He sank to his knees and reverently touched the little pile. “Oh dear, beautiful Melony.”

He heard a door open behind him.

“Oh, shit,” he muttered.

“Jared,” Melony said, “what are you doing here?”

He stood up and turned, trying to smile. His face was sore from too many smiles already. He gave it up and let his face do what it damn well pleased.

She was standing in the doorway, the delightful, quizzical look on her face. He undressed her with his eyes. She flushed and looked away. Her hand went up to her throat.

"Melony," he said, his voice hoarse, "I had to see you."

"Whatever for?" she asked. Her eyes were wide. She was breathing quickly.

He went to her. "Why do you think?" he asked.

"Paragraph 57?" she asked.

"To Hell with Paragraph 57," he said, taking her hand and drawing her into the room.

"To Hell with everything." He shut the door and pulled her to him. "I love you, Melony," he said. "I have since I first saw you in the fax booth."

"Oh, Jared," she said, pulling away to stand irresolute in the center of the room. The smoking robovac lurched over and blew green dust up her dress.

"You can feel it, too, can't you," Terrol said. He stepped toward her, his hands shaking.

There were spots of forest green on her cheeks. Her nostrils flared. But she turned half away from him.

"Yes," she said, her voice a whisper, "but it's impossible."

"For God's sake, why?" He went to her and took her cheek in his hand. The contrast in skin tones lent a holiday air to their passion. He turned her face toward him. "Why?" he said again. His lips were inches from her own.

"My career," she said weakly.

"You're brilliant," he said. "They wouldn't dare let you go."

"My husband," she said, leaning a hair's breadth closer.

"He doesn't deserve you," he said. Their lips touched. An electric surge passed

through his body. The robovac rolled over his bare foot.

He kicked it aside and lifted her into his arms, their lips still pressed.

"I could get pregnant," she said, her voice echoing in his mouth.

Terrol dropped her onto the couch. "For God's sake," he cried holding out his watch. "We're going to dissolve in another ten minutes." He started unfastening her dress.

"It's too sudden," she said, passion writ on her face. "I feel so . . . strange. Like a . . . a stranger trapped in a . . . strange body."

"I'm me and you're you and we're both here and now," he panted, the poet in him bursting forth as he loosened the last seam and tore the fabric from her body. He kissed her savagely and began peeling off his own jump suit. He wasted ten seconds on the knot in the tie and then gave it up. He bent to kiss her again.

When a door opened behind him.

"Hey, hey, hey," a breathless voice chanted, "have I got a deal for you."

Terrol jerked up and found himself staring into a pair of bloodshot green eyes, in a jowly chartreuse face, over a fat lime-jello body. A naked body. A naked *ugly* body.

"Greenburg's the name, fax is the game," the fat man said, hopping into the room. "I got booths, I got accessories. I got paper and body toner. I got a service contract you wouldn't believe. Just call 413-672-786-333-8900, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, any language you like, our operators are —"

Terrol rose with a cry of frustrated rage. He grabbed the fat man by his fat chartreuse neck and began shaking him back and forth. The fat man croaked and jiggled. Then Terrol tripped over the robovac and went down. The fat man tumbled over him and sprawled across Melony. She cried out, suffocating under one jello thigh.

The robovac crawled into Terrol's hands. He scrambled up, brandishing it like a medicine ball, and brought it down on the fat man's head. Then he threw it, sparking and grinding, into the corner. He grabbed the fat man under the arms and hoisted him up with a mighty heave. It was like wrestling with a jellyfish. A jellyfish that softened and turned to powder in his hands.

Terrol stared stupidly at the grit on his fingers. Melony gave a little cry, and he looked down at her. He was panting hard, flushed, aroused.

"Oh, Jared," she said, almost swooning. "You're so . . . so . . . red." She held out her arms.

He sank into them, seeking her body with his lips. She pulled his head between her breasts and held him fast. He tried to lift up, tried to slide his legs over her, tried to get into a good position. Any position. But she held him tight.

"Hold me," she said. "I want to remember this moment forever."

And he felt himself start to soften.

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