Toward the end of his usual 12-hour shift at Science Now Advanced Research Labs, Chief-of-Staff Dr. Calvin Chubb entered the men’s room and screamed. He backed out of the lavatory and hurried to his office. There, he picked up the phone and dialed the Security Division extension.

After two rings, a male voice said, “Security Division. Night Supervisor Everett Mann speaking.”

“What’s happened to Mallory?” Chubb asked.

“Dustin quit yesterday. I was next in line, so I replaced him.”

“I wasn’t made aware of this personnel exchange within the Security Division. I must approve all such matters.”

“Look, Doc, did you call to discuss proper promotion procedures? ‘Cause I’ve got a lot going on here.”

“Don’t take that tone with me,” Chubb said. “I contacted you in order to report my discovery of a

mutilated corpse in the men’s room on Level Three.”

“Should I contact the South Brookfield PD?”

“Absolutely not,” Chubb said. “I expect you, as Security Division Night Supervisor, to dispose of this mess with stealth and caution.”

“What if someone from the outside finds out about this?”

“Dispose of the mess yourself in order to avoid such an occurrence. And make no mention of my involvement. It has been a long night, and I am going home now. I do, however, expect a full report when I return to the facility tomorrow morning.”

“Whatever you say, Doc. You’re the boss.”

Moments later, Chubb began his journey home from Science Now. Along the way, his thoughts turned to his current research project dubbed Full Spectrum. The guidelines had been established by an unnamed and extremely wealthy benefactor, who required that Chubb obtain six cryptids, one from every New England state.

Depending on its obscurity, Chubb had been paid anywhere from $1 to $5 million for each of the first three specimens—code-named Red, Orange, and Yellow—after studying and observing those creatures for one calendar year.

For the past eight months, Chubb and his staff had researched Subjects Green and Blue. Thus far, however, he had yet to locate a cryptid worthy of fulfilling the role of Subject Purple.

Sudden movement in the road before him jarred Chubb from his mental meanderings. His

Chevy Tahoe then struck a large animal. Just after impact, the organism flew about ten feet away from the SUV. When it landed, it slid an additional couple of yards across the cracked asphalt. Then the felled beast stood. Chubb gasped.

“My goodness,” he said. “What *is* that? Who cares? It will most certainly qualify as the elusive Subject Purple.”

The monster angled its massive, misshapen head to the left. Its plethora of eyes absorbed the light thrown by the Tahoe’s headlamps. Five stout legs supported its bulbous body. Sprouting from its rear end, two tails both culminated in a seven-fingered hand.

Soon, Purple lumbered off into a field adjacent to the road on which Chubb had braked to a stop. With haste, he exited the vehicle in order to track Purple’s progress, for he didn’t want to provide it with a chance to run off and disappear.

Peering into the field, he noticed that Purple had paused in mid-stride. With one of its hands, it beckoned Chubb to join it on its quest. He had every intention of doing so.

Chubb ambled over to Subject Purple. However, he maintained a distance of several feet between him and it. Just in case.

Apparently satisfied with Chubb’s actions, Purple hurried over to a small, dilapidated shed that stood in the exact center of the field. Purple then opened the narrow door that hung from the front of the shed. The creature stepped inside and closed itself in. The entire structure trembled for a brief moment before becoming still once again.

Chubb rushed over to the shed and yanked the door open. Jogging backward away from the aperture, he peered into the murky interior. He saw nothing. So he walked into the tight quarters and inspected the ceiling, floor, and walls. Again, he saw nothing. Shrugging, Chubb reached for the door and pulled it shut.

Shrouded in shadows, Chubb soon felt subtle tremors emanate from all directions. He grew faint. Shaking his head, he reached for the door again, but his hand encountered humid air. He took a single step and fell a few feet down onto a rocky path.

Disoriented, Chubb remained on his hands and knees for a moment. He studied his surroundings from that vantage point.

A thick, violet fog hovered about three yards above the ground; the sky could not be seen through this soupy murk. Gnarled, leafless trees squatted silent and unmoving on either side of the path. Gloom dwelled deep into the dead forest. Instead of grass, maroon thorns paved the uneven land.

A sudden, discordant clamor caused Chubb to jump and turn around. A dense wall of shadows blocked the path some distance behind him. Then a large section separated itself from the remainder of the mass. Facing forward once again, Chubb hurried away from the huge being that moved toward him.

The path soon began to incline at an almost 45-degree angle. Chubb’s thighs burned with the effort of climbing this increasingly steep hill, so he slowed his momentum.

Once at the top of the miniature mountain, he allowed himself a brief break so as to catch sight of his pursuer. It appeared to be just as far away as when he had first noticed it. Ignoring the thing following him, Chubb moved on.

Moments later, he saw a tall, slender shed in the middle of the path. It looked similar to the one he’d entered not too long ago.

He approached the wooden structure. Examining it, he noticed that the door offered a square hole instead of a proper knob. Chubb inserted his thumb into the opening and pulled.

A small, open-fronted metal box leaned against the far wall. Upon seeing the contents of the object, Chubb collapsed to his knees.

A human body had been forced into the toilet-tank-sized container. Excess flesh and gore bulged out but didn’t quite overflow the confines of their prison. The side of the head was visible. Part of the ear was missing. Teeth stuck out of the torn cheek. An eye dangled from its socket; the sightless orb rested on the protruding tongue.

Something about the squashed body looked familiar, however. The shoe that had been shoved up to the chin definitely belonged to the cadaver Chubb had discovered at Science Now. Then he read the name embossed above the person’s breast pocket: Dustin Mallory.

Shuffling forward, Chubb closed the shed door and turned so that he could stand with his back against it. The image of the mutilated corpse remained scorched in his mind.

For the first time in years, Chubb ran. He was eager to put as much space between him and that shed as possible.

At one point, he lost his footing and tumbled to the ground. Sharp stones cut into his palms and knees. He shouted. Something in the distance answered his cry. Perhaps Subject Purple. Or perhaps something worse.

Chubb shivered.

All at once, a strong wind enveloped the portly man. With a glance over his shoulder, he witnessed an immense presence rushing toward him. He couldn’t view this gargantuan monster in its entirety, for its top two-thirds disappeared into the constantly shifting violet fog.

The giant thing suddenly bent toward Chubb thereby revealing its previously hidden features. Chubb rolled into the fetal position and waited for whatever manner of depravity was to come.

“Stand,” a menacing voice said from high above Chubb.

With downcast eyes, the research scientist complied.

“Gaze upon me,” that same voice said.

Chubb took a deep breath as he straightened his back. Then he stared directly into the speaker’s enormous eyes, which shone a peculiar shade of purple.

“You neither frighten nor intimidate me,” Chubb said with a quavering voice.

“That is not my intent,” the titan said just before it chuckled.

Chubb cringed at that moist and vile sound before he asked, “What are you? What do you want from me?”

“I am The Unknown. You have served me well via the Full Spectrum project. The next phase of your labor shall be implemented immediately.”

Swallowing a sudden build-up of saliva, Chubb backed away from the entity. He only made it so far before bumping into an obstruction. As multifingered hands pushed him to his knees, he mouthed a silent oath. Looking over his shoulder, Chubb saw Subject Purple looming behind him.

The Unknown said, “You shall return to the Earthly Realm in order to perform any and all tasks that I demand of you. Once I have reached my goal of bringing myself into existence in your

Realm, you shall become something more meaningful and more powerful than you are now, my dear Calvin.”

“And if I refuse your instructions now or at any point in the future?” Chubb asked.

The Unknown guffawed. Then Chubb’s five senses quit, and his mind went blank.

***

Chubb pulled into his driveway at the usual time after a typical work day. Upon exiting the Tahoe, he noticed something odd about the SUV’s front end; a large dent marred the grille and part of the hood. He had no recollection of hitting anything living or inanimate on his way home. Never one to experience blackouts, Chubb scratched his bald head. Just what the hell had happened during this evening’s commute?

Not wishing to waste any more time on useless speculation, Chubb continued on his way into the house. He saw the message light flashing on the wall-mounted phone in the kitchen. After listening to a distraught woman’s frantic jumble of recorded words, Chubb dialed her direct line at Science Now.

“Organic Research Division. Senior Laboratory Assistant J. Catherine Penney speaking.”

“This is Chubb. Explain the situation to me.”

“It’s just awful, Dr. Chubb,” Penney said. “Full Spectrum Subjects Green and Blue have escaped.”

“How could such a thing have been allowed to occur?” Chubb asked through pursed lips.

As Penney prattled on, Chubb pondered the ramifications of this horrific news.

Then he said, “I’ve heard enough, Penney. I’m on my way. I trust that the facility has been properly secured against any additional breaches?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Fine. See to it that the Executive Leadership Team is convened for a meeting upon my arrival in approximately 20 minutes.”

***

Having returned to Science Now, Chubb first visited his office. Once he unlocked and opened the door, he stopped short. A man sat in his desk chair.

“What is the meaning of this?” Chubb asked.

As the man stood and extended his right hand to Chubb, he said, “I’m Everett Mann, Security Division. Pleased to meet you.”

“What are you doing in my office?” Chubb asked without bothering to shake the other man’s hand.

With a grin, Mann said, “You’re about to become a very industrious person, Doc.”

Chubb furrowed his brow; then his eyes widened as he said, “Ah. You must be referring to the escaped test subjects.”

“Yes,” Mann said still grinning, “Of course.”

Chubb’s eyelid twitched as he said, “What steps have been taken to locate and recapture the escapees?”

Just then, Mann’s Blackberry emitted two beeps in quick succession.

“Excuse me, please, while I step outside to take this call,” Mann said.

“Make it quick,” Chubb said.

During the next 30 seconds, Chubb glared out into the night through the large window behind his desk. Upon Mann’s return, the Chief of Staff turned to him with an expectant look.

“The two specimens have been located and returned to the facility, my dear Calvin,” Mann said.

The way in which Mann had referred to Chubb rattled the Chief of Staff. Where had he heard that phrase before?

Lost in thought, Chubb walking around his desk. He chose not to sit, however.

“Why are you still in here? Don’t you have a job to do?” Chubb asked.

Mann closed the office door and locked it; then he said, “I’m here to tell you that the Full Spectrum project is to be terminated immediately.”

“You don’t have the authority to do any such thing. I make the decisions pertaining to the operation of Science Now,” Chubb said through clenched teeth,

“I’m in charge, Doc. Always have been. Or don’t you recall our recent exchange in the Realm Between the Shadows? Let me refresh your memory,” Mann said as he reached out and grabbed Chubb’s arm.

Disjointed images overwhelmed Chubb’s mind. His face paled. He opened his mouth but no words flowed out. Mann grinned.

“Yes, I see that you now remember our interaction in its entirety,” Mann said. “Listen well. Science Now will immediately cancel all ongoing research projects, including Full Spectrum. You see, *you* have been one of *my* test subjects. I, your benefactor, planted each of the cryptids that you ‘discovered’ and ‘studied in the interest of science.’

“You performed very well and exceeded all of my expectations. Including your pursuit of Wulkeankozoyl, or Subject Purple if you prefer. Now that you have completed the preliminary stages, your true service to me is about to begin.”

Chubb plopped into his chair. He’d always been a leader, the person in control. *He* set the rules; *he* manipulated people and events. How could he have stumbled onto such a self-destructive path? It was time to rectify this situation.

The Chief of Staff stood and stepped around to the front of his desk. Lunging at Mann, Chubb extended his doughy arms straight out in front of him. He intended to choke Mann into submission. Mann’s eyes widened, but he didn’t back away. Just as Chubb’s hands encircled

Mann’s neck, the Security Division Night Supervisor smirked and then vanished.

Without warning, an invisible force encased Chubb and denied him any movement. He yelped. His entire body quaked. A trickle of urine darkened his crotch.

“You have only succeeded in angering me,” the booming voice of The Unknown said.

It seemed to come both from within and without Chubb’s head. Tears rolled down his flushed cheeks.

The Unknown said, “Have you learned nothing from our time together? Are you so arrogant as to believe that you dictate your own life, your own destiny? That you could so effortlessly dispatch one such as me? Well, my dear Calvin, dispel any such notions. For your new reality is one of enslavement and degradation.”

The Unknown laughed. The noise first grew in volume and then gradually dissipated. Soon, a swirling violet mist filled Chubb’s office. He slumped to the floor, which felt rocky through the thin material of his suit pants.

Glancing around, Chubb found he had been returned to the Realm Between the Shadows. Subject Purple stood not too far away.

It lurched over to Chubb. As Purple shredded the clothes from Chubb’s overweight body, The Unknown strode into view. Chubb covered his genitals with one hand. He also bowed his head.

“You could have become my general. My second-in-command. Powerful and immortal,” The Unknown said. “Instead, you chose to defy me. To make a pitiful attempt to assassinate the human body I utilized to travel from my Realm to yours until which time I become fully realized in this pathetic place. My one time offer has now expired.

“Wulkeankozoyl, harvest this pitiful human’s essence. But leave behind a small portion of his intellect so that he remains aware of his plight. Banish him to one of the Outlying Realms, where my servants stew in their own filth and anguish until called upon to perform a perpetual and meaningless task.”

The Unknown expelled another of those disturbing chortles. Subject Purple forced Chubb to his bare knees. Seconds later, a pointed finger pierced each of his eardrums. Chubb bellowed in agony.

A rushing sensation filled his head. His mind emptied of almost all of his memories, his knowledge, his personality, everything that Chubb had ever been and ever would be. Then the pain ceased.

A miniscule, yet cognizant, fraction of Chubb’s consciousness howled and sobbed at this disgraceful situation. He had imparted so much of his time and energy into Science Now and, especially, Full Spectrum only to have them both crumble in the space of a single evening.

Wulkeankozoyl shoved Chubb toward a swirling vortex. Toward his future as the type of weak and passive person that he had always despised.

Now he would one of *them*.

Forever.

Ben McElroy is an admissions representative for a Massachusetts state university during the traditional work week. Late at night, however, the constant clicking of the computer keyboard disturbs the dreams of his family as Ben transcribes his fevered thoughts to the blank screen. His first three published stories haunt two separate anthologies that have been released during the past six months.

{jcomments on}