



THE
WARDEN
WATCH

A R H O R V A T H

THE WARDEN WATCH

From the Annals of Myrtle
and the Blood-King

By AR Horvath

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AR Horvath is also the author of the Birth Pangs series. Learn more at www.birthpangs.com.

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I hope you enjoy *The Warden-Watch*, the first in *The Annals of Myrtle and the Blood-King*.

Sincerely,
AR Horvath

Chapter 1

It was about mid-afternoon, and the sun had already dropped quite a bit from its noon-day position at the top of the sky. A telephone pole cast its long shadow over the tool shed. The first thing that caught my attention was the sound of something ceramic getting tossed to the ground, presumably on account of the wind. Something wasn't right. The trees were waving in the wind and the swing on the swing set was creaking, but there wasn't breeze enough to push pottery around. I turned around to see what was broken and, out of the corner of my eyes, I saw a shadow leap, as though startled.

The strangeness of this observation did not register in my mind.

I continued to gaze blankly in that direction until it dawned on me that there were now two long, narrow shadows lying across the tool shed: one explained by the telephone pole and the other explained by... Well, that was the thing. There wasn't an explanation for this second, new shadow. There was no corresponding object like there was with the telephone pole.

Still, as odd as that might be, I wasn't feeling particularly inquisitive. I probably would have never thought any more about it except that as I sat there on the back deck, the new shadow began rotating in a circle, like the hands of a clock. I could remain no longer in my summer daze; I scratched my head. The shadows of the trees were sweeping back and forth on the lawn as would normally be expected. *That* is proper behavior for a shadow.

No sooner did it occur to me that here was something worth fighting the heat and humidity to investigate did the insolent shadow cease moving. It was as though it had spied me spying it, and froze. It was all to the worse, however, since now the shadow was perpendicular to the shadow of the telephone pole! Not only was there a shadow with no corresponding object, but it was lying in the completely wrong direction.

With a sigh and a groan, I stood up. Some instinct kicked up in me, and I felt like if I was going to make a move to learn more, I had better be sly: this shadow was clever. I nonchalantly made my way in the direction of the shed. The shadow didn't move. The wind was still blowing, the trees were swaying and the swing set was creaking, but the shadow held fast.

I knew that when I got closer I wouldn't be able to see on top of the shed, so I decided to make off for the tree-line, which was about halfway up a modest hill. Then, when I circled back, I'd be on the slope of the hill and would be able to see the roof of the shed for a little longer. I feigned that I saw a butterfly and wandered towards the trees. I had never tried to outwit a wayward shadow before, but I hoped it didn't take much more cunning than this. After all, I am just twelve years old. I have only begun to fill up my bag of tricks.

Though my legs took me on a long, out of the way ramble, I never took my eye off of the top of the shed. It was probably for this reason that the shadow refused to budge. Even as I changed my perspective as I circled the shed, I couldn't deduce what was making the shadow. The more I thought about it, the more I was certain that I had seen that shadow leap into existence out of nothing. I steeled myself; one doesn't let one's guard down around such renegade shadows!

As I finally drew near to the shed, it seemed to me that the shadow was now moving, but just a bit. It was very hard to tell. Could it be that the shadow knew I was approaching, and it thought that by slow, incremental movements, it could fool me? Do shadows have brains? I concluded that my best bet was a surprise burst of speed to take the shadow off its guard. That is what I did.

When I got closer to the shed, I leapt towards an old milk crate, alighted upon it, and pulled myself up so that I could just get my eyes over the edge of the roof and could see on top of the shed. Who was surprised more?

Take a piece of paper and hold it so you are looking at its edge. If you knew nothing else about

paper, you would think it was just a thin, white line. Now take the paper and slowly tilt it. The surface of the paper gets bigger and bigger until at last you can read clearly what is on it. My first glimpse of the shadow was a bit like that. As I made my leap, the shadow 'tilted' to reveal a larger form. Only, what I saw was not a drawing or a scribble. It was a full bodied ape-man, poised to jump, and hiding in plain sight on top of my shed!

When my eyes locked with its eyes, it fell over backwards, startled. I was pretty startled myself, and I fell off of the milk crate. The ape-man had fallen off the shed on the side opposite of me and I, like a fool, gathered up my five-foot, three-inch self and darted around to catch it in the act of retreat.

It was Big Foot. Sasquatch. The North American Yeti. It was a huge beast and I was a little man, but I just had to get one more look!

It was tall and hairy but its face was wise and startled, rubbing its head in apparent pain. When I came around the corner of the shed and looked upon it, it regained its composure and made like it was going to run away.

I don't really know what I was thinking. Maybe I felt that if such a large thing was scurrying away in fear from me, then I had nothing to fear from it. Maybe I knew what all the adults would think if I told them what had happened but had nothing to show for it. More truly, I considered the fame I'd enjoy if I came away from the incident with a fistful of hair that couldn't be identified. At any rate, before it could make its run to the woods, I was already leaping towards it. I grabbed hold of its arm... its eyes grew large and white... and my eyes grew large and white... as what I was doing started to settle in.

It jumped!—I was still attached!

To my astonishment, the world grew larger and larger. Big Foot and I were getting smaller and smaller as we hurtled through the air. I just barely had time to notice that we were falling into a cleaned out mason jar that had been resting against the edge of the shed for who knows how long, before even the jar was so large it seemed like it contained the sky... and then it was dark, dark, dark.

"And that," I said, "is how I came to be in the Great Cavern Council of the Wardens."

I was explaining myself to an assembly of large, hairy creatures. I was standing in the middle of a circle of their elders. The one whom I had clutched was sitting in the circle, too, but he was as far away from me as he could get. He had his head buried in his hands and was rocking back and forth in apparent shame. I had learned that these tall and stringy beings described themselves, strictly speaking, as 'Mammalites,' but preferred to be called Gate Wardens, or just Wardens. In any case, though, I think they were giving me rough translations for my benefit. One thing I learned was pretty unnerving: the Great Cavern which I was currently standing in apparently existed *below* the mason jar that was laying outside our shed, and if these... people? were to be believed, the Great Cavern was actually below a speck of dirt that was below a pebble that was below the mason jar.

And that is hard to get one's mind around, whether you are twelve, twenty, or sixty-three.

Chapter 2

Having given an account of how I came to be among them, the council of elder Wardens now regarded me with an impassive silence that went on and on, such that I finally couldn't keep my attention on my predicament. My mind wandered, and then my eyes. I tried to catch a glimpse of my captors, but the layout prevented it. A bright light from an unknown source flooded the center of the cavern, illuminating myself and the weeping one. However, outside the light, it was a tarry black. Numerous columns rose up around me in a circle. They were equally spaced, with just their faces catching the light, and the bulk of their substance concealed in the dark. I only knew that the Mammalite elders were present because they too would sometimes lean forward, and their features would transition from nothing, to shadow, to form, before they melted back into the formless void. No doubt they were each sitting in a throne and occasionally adjusted themselves. It was only because of this that I had confidence that they resembled the one who still avoided all contact at the other end of the chamber.

"You put us in an impossible situation, Son of Adam," a voice emanated from the far end of the Grand Cavern. I didn't know what to say to that, so I said nothing.

Another voice spoke: "For thousands of years the Wardens have been hidden from the sight of your race, and only because of this do we Wardens continue to survive. If you were to depart from us, untold harm could come to us."

"Yet, he cannot stay!" declared another.

"An impossible situation," repeated the first voice.

I ventured to speak, "I promise to say nothing of what I have seen! No one would believe me anyway!"

This was met with silence.

"He must be put to death," said the one who insisted I couldn't stay.

"He has done nothing to warrant that sentence," the first voice rejoined. I thought that there was a hard edge to it.

"And what about *him*?" the vindictive one asked, apparently referring to the one who still cowered far away from me.

The second one now spoke again, "He also has done nothing to warrant punishment."

"Agreed," said the first voice.

"An impossible situation!" declared the third voice. Upon the final syllable, the voices of the assembly began making a noise, like a hum with rhythm: "Uh-Hummah-Hum-Hum-Hummah." It was low, and gravely, and seemed to represent agreement by the assembly with what had just been spoken. I found the sound frightening, however. It echoed throughout the chamber and beat me from all sides and permeated deep within me, so that I could even feel my heart vibrate with it. My own heart agreed with the assembly, quite against its will.

"They shall redeem themselves for the harm that they shall inflict in the future," the first voice announced. He continued, "We are caught between competing moral principles and woe to us if we compromise either of them. There will, most assuredly, be untold harm to follow from this turn of events. We must endure them, suffer them, and cry out for mercy. Only let us endure these unknown calamities through no fault of our own and not because we justly deserve them."

The third voice protested, "Have we not already endured so much through no fault of our own? For thousands of years we have been caught between 'competing moral principles.' For thousands of years we have endured calamities on account of the Fall of Adam. Will there not come a day when we act only in the interests of the Wardens?"

There was a round of humming, but not as many as before.

The first voice spoke: "It has been decided, and not another word shall be spoken."

"Uh-Hummah-Hum-Hum-Hummah," they all said.

To my surprise, the owner of the first voice now stepped into the light, and I was able to inspect his features in detail. My first impression was that he looked much like Chewbacca the Wookiee from the Star Wars movies, but the second impression obliterated the first. The speaker's facial features were much more human than I expected. The fur was indistinguishable from clothing. It was clearly part of his being, and yet at the same time it was fashioned like an accessory: there were clearly delineated lines between arms and chest, and waist and torso. The last thing I noticed was that much of the hair I saw came from his head and not from his body, as I had initially supposed. It stretched back from the cheeks and middle of the forehead and flowed in waves along his body, right down to his feet. I was struck with the realization that I was here standing before a king, and so instinctively I fell to my knees, with my head down.

The second speaker spoke: "It is well decided."

I looked up, and I saw now that all of the elders had stepped into the light, and, to my deep astonishment, were all kneeling before me!

I stood up in horror, "I am only a boy!"

The assembly laughed, its laughing a variant of the same low, rumbling hums, as before. I noted that there was one Warden that was on its knees, but was not happy to be so. The other heads were bowed, but this one cast a steely gaze at my direction. The Wardens now stood. There wasn't any one of them that wasn't less than twice my height.

"You do not yet know why we kneel," said the King.

The King turned his attention to the young Warden that had remained cowering throughout the entire ordeal. The King strode over to him and placed his hand on his shoulder, and said, "Arise, Marmor, son of Gleckor, son of Haledash, son of Shim, son of Brecken, son of Kandish, son of Soledad, son of Mitmah, son of Felang, son of Halter, son of Mammal."

Marmor arose.

"Your duty and task from now until relieved is to instruct the Son of Adam in the ways of the Wardens to the extent that is permitted. Carry out the duties appointed to us in general and to you in particular, with him as your companion. At the time that seems right, we shall send him back to his own, and at that time endure what follows."

Marmor cast a glance at me. I now saw that he too had the regal air that the King possessed. Here in the cavern he seemed much less like the wild beast he had appeared to be outside my shed.

Marmor spoke, "Father, I shall do as you instruct."

Marmor's father, the one I regarded as the King, turned his eyes upon me and inquired, "And what is your name, Son of Man."

"My name is Casey," I stammered.

"That is not your name," the King replied, "but it will do for now."

"I should know my own name," I unwisely protested.

"I walked with your father in the cool of the day at the dawn of time and again in the shadowlands. Your name without his name is not your name. Someday you will know your name in full, but it is not for me to tell it. For now, we shall indeed call you 'Casey,' and that will be enough."

End of Excerpt

