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Opening extract from

Blart III The Boy Who Set Sail On The Questionable Quest

Written by

Dominic Barker

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Chapter 1

There were pigs for as far as the eye could see. Piglets playing in muck. Sows standing in muck. Boars lying in muck. All in all there was a lot of muck.

And there was Blart.

Asleep and dreaming in his bed in the palace of the King and Queen of Illyria, Prince Blart, husband of Princess Lois and an Official Saver of the World (twice), gave a little snore of pleasure.

Perhaps he would not have done so had he known that at that very moment two black-clad agents of Anatoly the Handsome, Prince of Styxia, eldest son of Gregor the Grizzled and one-time suitor of Princess Lois, were sneaking towards his bedchamber, armed with daggers. Their orders – to make sure Blart never awoke from his dream.

Back in that dream it began to rain. But not any ordinary kind of rain. It rained apples. Juicy green apples fell from the sky, landing harmlessly in the muck surrounding the fat, contented swine.

Meanwhile, the two agents of Anatoly the Handsome slipped stealthily into the room.

But Blart was too soundly asleep to be disturbed. He watched the pigs munch happily on the bounty from the sky as, adding to the gaiety of the scene, the sun suddenly burst brightly from behind a cloud.

If only Blart had known that what seemed to be the sun shining was in fact a light creeping across the pillow as the two agents raised a lantern over his bed to check whether the slumbering body belonged to the youth they had been detailed to kill.

But Blart was one of the few people who slept on his front with his face squashed deep into the pillow and, despite their proximity, the agents of Anatoly the Handsome were unable to tell whether the sleeping boy was their quarry.

'Oh,' whispered the first agent, who was called Uri, when the lantern revealed the anonymous back of a head.

'Is that him?' hissed the second agent, whose name was Mika.

'Don't know,' replied Uri.

'This is his chamber, isn't it?' said Mika. 'It must be him.'

'The palace is big and there are many corridors. We could have taken a wrong turn.'

'Shall we kill him anyway?' suggested Mika, raising his dagger.

Uri shook his head. Mika was younger than Uri and

lacked his extensive experience when it came to killing people. Uri knew that in cases like this you only got one chance.

'We must be absolutely sure. If we kill the wrong boy then Anatoly's wrath will be terrible. He will tell his father.'

Both men shivered at the thought of what happened to people who displeased Gregor the Grizzled.

'What should we do, then?' muttered Mika.

'We must wait,' answered Uri in hushed tones. 'We have time. It is still dark. People turn over in their sleep all the time. When one is on a mission to kill, one must be patient.'

Uri and Mika waited, but Blart, still happily in the land of pigs and muck, didn't move at all, much to the annoyance of the two killers who stood over him.

'This is not working,' said Uri after they had watched for some time. 'We must amend our plan. He is too sound a sleeper. You pull him back and, if it is the right boy, then I will strike.'

Silently, Mika slunk round to the other side of the bed, leant over Blart and gently, ever so gently, began to turn him away from the pillow. Little by little, he moved Blart until he was lying on his side.

'Stop!' ordered Uri.

He raised the lantern to reveal Blart's face and compared it with the description he had been given by Anatoly the Handsome.

'*Head too big.* Yes. *Eyes too close together.* Yes. *Squashed nose.*

Yes. *General look of stupidity and idleness.* Yes. It is Blart,' confirmed Uri.

'Now can we kill him?' asked Mika.

Uri nodded and unsheathed his dagger.

Blissfully unaware of his impending death, in his dream Blart watched as a large boar trotted towards him.

In the real world, Uri raised his dagger.

'Can't I do it?' asked Mika. 'You always seem to have all the fun.'

The boar approached ever closer to Blart.

Uri shook his head, took careful aim at Blart's heart and prepared to use his ultra-sharp blade.

Nothing in the real world could save Blart now.

Uri's dagger plunged downwards.

But fortunately for Blart, he was not in the real world. Suddenly the boar reared up.

Blart had been handling pigs all his life and he knew that a boar could be a very dangerous beast indeed. He threw himself back from the deadly trotters.

Which meant in the real world, just as Uri attacked, Blart's limp, defenceless body suddenly came to life and flung itself across the bed, taking Mika, who was still holding on to him, completely by surprise. To Mika it felt as though Blart was possessed by some unnatural force, which twisted and turned and pulled Mika on to the bed.

Uri's dagger connected.

'Aaarrrggghh!'

There was a howl of pain as it thrust straight through Mika's arm. Surprisingly sensitive to the sight of blood for a murderer, Mika fainted, but the noise of his anguished cry had penetrated into Blart's dream. He woke up and sat up in the same moment, his head crashing into Uri's, who had been bending over Blart to check for signs of life after his strange fit.

Blart did not have many outstanding physical qualitites but he did have a particularly thick skull. The force of the blow was so strong that Uri was knocked unconscious to the floor.

Blart blearily rubbed his eyes.

A moment ago he was leaping back to avoid a dangerous boar, and now he was sitting up in bed with one man lying unconscious on the floor, while another lay beside him with a dagger through his arm.

Blart sighed. He'd only just finished saving the world for a second time yesterday. You would have thought that he could have been allowed one decent night's sleep.

But before he could even begin to work out what had just happened in his bedroom, from the diamond tower the emergency bell began to toll.

Chapter 2

The bell had been tolling for less than a minute and already the palace was alive with activity. Blart stuck his head into the corridor and saw guards with torches rushing up and down passageways. Courtiers caught up in the confusion barged into each other. Blart had never seen such a scene in Illyria. Normally it was a peaceful place, where everybody was relentlessly nice to each other and all they ever did was eat fruit.

A courtier rushed past, muttering to himself.

'What's happening?' asked Blart, but the courtier didn't even bother to turn round. It was almost rude. It was most unIllyrian.

A guard ran past in the opposite direction.

'There are two strange men in my bedchamber and one of them has got a knife in his arm,' shouted Blart after him.

The guard stopped.

Finally, thought Blart.

The guard turned round and glared at him. An angry-

looking guard in Illyria! Normally Illyrian guards were the ones with the biggest smiles.

'Why are you wasting my time with such trivia?' demanded the guard. 'Can you not hear the Gigantic Bell of Disaster tolling?'

Blart was taken aback.

'How was I supposed to know it was the Gigantic Bell of Disaster?' he said. 'It could have been just telling the time.'

'The Gigantic Bell of Disaster has not tolled in Illyria since the dreaded Toxic Satsuma Blight of five centuries ago,' the guard informed him angrily. 'It tolls only in times of national emergency.'

'You were nearly invaded by three other countries last week and it didn't sound then,' Blart reminded him, referring to his previous quest.

'Its clapper was being serviced,' replied the guard haughtily. 'Now detain me no more. I must away to the throne room.'

With no desire to return to a bedroom containing two would-be assassins, and with nothing else to do, Blart rushed down the passageway after the guard.

Chapter 3

The vast golden throne room was already thronged with worried Illyrians by the time Blart reached it. Above them, the Gigantic Bell of Disaster continued to toll out its warning of impending doom. Courtiers whispered, servants speculated and guards muttered. But nobody whispered, muttered or speculated to Blart. Even though last night he had been recognised as the official husband of Princess Lois of Illyria (their wedding having taken place in a cold cave on the side of a mountain in order to fulfil a prophecy) and accepted into the Illyrian royal family as Prince Blart, it seemed that he was not yet regarded as trustworthy.

So, taking matters into his own hands, Blart stamped, barged and elbowed his way through the crowd to the thrones at the far end of the room, where he felt sure there would be someone who could tell him what was going on. Instead, he found in front of these thrones, pacing back and forth, his jaw grimly set, Illyria's newly appointed knight, Sir Beowulf. He had been a knight for just one evening (most of

which he had spent drinking flagons of ale and eating numerous large succulent pies) and so, with bleary red eyes and stale breath, had not yet attained the gravitas that comes with knighthood, still resembling more the simple warrior who cheerfully cleaved people in two. But together with Blart, Sir Beo the Knight had succeeded in twice defeating the evil Lord Zoltab and saving the world from destruction.

Beo caught sight of Blart as he emerged from the throng.

'Where have you been?' he demanded. 'Lying in again?'

But before Blart could think of a suitably indignant reply, the Gigantic Bell of Disaster ceased to toll. The sudden silence had a sobering effect upon the crowd gathered in the throne room and they too fell silent.

At that moment the King and Queen entered, their subdued subjects stepping aside to let them pass. They ascended the royal dais and Beo knelt with a flourish at their feet.

'Sir Beowulf the Knight reporting for duty, sire.'

'It isn't necessary to say Sir Beowulf the Knight,' the Queen told him. 'Sir Beowulf is quite sufficient.'

'Thank you, Your Majesty,' said Sir Beowulf. 'Now do you have any orders for me?'

'You could just stand there and be quiet,' suggested the King. He was already beginning to regret his rash act at the banquet the night before when he had touched each of the warrior's shoulders with his sword and fulfilled Beo's dream by transforming him into a knight. And also an officious nuisance.

'Good people of Illyria,' the King addressed the anxious crowd. 'I have ordered the Gigantic Bell of Disaster to ring out across our land because a calamity has befallen us.'

'Is it the satsumas again?' shouted a voice from the crowd.

'No,' said the King.

'The pears?' cried another.

The King shook his head.

'The bilberries?' cried a third.

'No, no and no,' answered the King. 'My good people, the tolling of the bell is not fruit related.'

The crowd seemed to relax a little, but then another voice cried from amongst the muttering throng.

'If not a fruit blight then what catastrophe could be so dire as to require the tolling of the Gigantic Bell?'

Those close to the thrones noticed the Queen dab away a tear. The King swallowed to find the courage to speak, then raised his hand for silence and addressed the crowd once more.

'All of us here today are aware of the dread curse on Illyria,' said the King.

'I'm not,' said Blart.

'Know, then,' said the King, 'that for countless epochs and numberless ages and lots of other time, Illyrians have lived in fear of a terrible prophecy.'

'Is there any other kind?' groaned Blart.

'The Chilling Prophecy of Endless Torment!' exclaimed the King.

There was a horrified gasp from the courtiers, servants and soldiers. No longer could the Queen maintain a controlled demeanour and tears ran freely down her cheeks. Sir Beowulf the Knight realised too late that the closest thing he had to a tissue was a dagger, which was not appropriate for the task of wiping a regal visage.

'Let me remind you of its words,' said the King.

'Beware this time, a time of joy,
A time of nuptial bliss,
For endless torment will plague the land,
If the newly-wed bride be missed.

If she be fine when one month's passed,
This prophecy's naught but air,
But if she be gone at dead of night,
Illyria BEWARE!'

'I don't understand,' said Blart.

'The Queen was awakened by a noise from Princess Lois's bedchamber not an hour ago,' the King said solemnly. 'She rushed in to find the Princess gone and a torn piece of paper lying on the pillow where her head should have rested. On it were written four terrible words: *I have been taken.*'

Low groans and cries of 'No!' echoed through the throne

room as the significance of the message was understood by all. Well, all but one. One person still stood with the same puzzled expression that he had before.

But soon Blart stopped trying to work out what the prophecy, in conjunction with the disappearance of Princess Lois, might mean. For he noticed something different. Every pair of eyes in the chamber, from the King to the lowliest servant, seemed suddenly to be trained upon him.

'What?' he demanded.

'Perhaps I should read the rest of the prophecy,' said the King.

'I don't know why,' said Blart defensively. 'I didn't understand the first bit – I don't see how I'll get the rest.'

But the King ignored him and read once more:

'If these grim tidings come to pass,
Your land's for ever cursed
With endless suffering and pain
And maybe even worse,

Unless the husband of the bride
Return her ere full moon is high,
Then all Illyria will be saved,
Except her husband – he must die!'

The King stopped. All eyes remained trained on Blart. Most of the prophecy didn't make any sense to him, but the last

line seemed clear enough, so he decided to confine his remarks to that.

'No, no, no.' Blart shook his head violently. 'Not again.'

'It may be your destiny, Prince Blart,' said the King.

'I've always had a rubbish destiny,' said Blart. 'I want another one. And stop calling me Prince Blart. I'm Blart the Pig Boy. I want nothing to do with princesses.'

His words had no effect on the crowd in the great chamber, who continued to stare impassively at him.

'Stop looking at me!' Blart told them.

But one person in the throne room was not looking at him impassively. One person was advancing towards him with murder in his eyes. Sir Beowulf the Knight had a great respect for the institution of marriage and he was not about to let Blart slide away from his responsibilities.

'Listen here, pig boy,' he began. 'I don't care if you're only fifteen. You are going to save your wife and you are going to die in the attempt or you are going to die right here and right now when my sword cleaves you in two.'

The Illyrians, who were not accustomed to violence of any sort, took a collective step backwards.

Blart looked at Beo – he was already reaching for his sword. Blart didn't want to die now, any more than he wanted to die later. He thought desperately of a way out and his mind chanced upon the one person who had always been able to stop Beo from cleaving him in two before: the great wizard who had led them on two previous quests ...

'Capablanca!'

Beowulf paused in his advance just long enough for everyone to hear a shout from the rear of the chamber.

'Harken to my tidings of woe.'

All those in the throne room swung round. Standing in the doorway was Lowenthal the Court Physician.

'I have news,' he announced. 'Capablanca the Great Sorcerer is dying.'

Chapter 4

The King, followed by the Queen, followed by Sir Beowulf the Knight, followed by Lowenthal the Court Physician, followed by Blart, rushed up the steps of the castle to Capablanca's bedchamber.

In the dim light of a solitary candle, the great wizard lay motionless on his bed.

'He's not breathing,' observed the King.

'He's terribly pale,' observed the Queen.

'He keeps his socks on at night,' observed Blart.

Lowenthal the Court Physician hastened to his patient's side. He felt the wizard's wrist for a pulse, he felt his chest for a heartbeat and he leant over his mouth to feel the lightest of breath, but he could sense nothing at all.

Turning to the four onlookers, he told them, 'It is as I feared. The fever was too strong and it has overcome him. Capablanca the Greatest Sorcerer in the World is no more.'

There was silence in the room as the enormous import of the doctor's words sank in.

'He was a great friend to Illyria,' said the King.

'The whole nation feels his loss,' added the Queen.

'I was proud to cleave people in two for him,' attested Beo, and there was a lump in the ex-warrior's throat as he cast his mind back to the numerous body parts he had lopped off.

'He was a very good friend of mine,' said Blart solemnly, somewhat to the surprise of the others, as he was not known for his ability to strike the right tone in times of seriousness and grief.

'We will give him a state –' began the King.

'I hadn't finished,' interrupted Blart. 'I was going to add that in a private talk I had with him last night, Capablanca told me I was never to go on another quest even if I wanted to, especially if it could risk me dying.'

'You're a disgrace,' bellowed Beowulf, forgetting Blart's royal rank and shaking him forcibly.

'It's all right for you,' said Blart, slipping free and bouncing nimbly, if somewhat disrespectfully, over the deathbed of Capablanca the Sorcerer, giving his corpse an accidental kick as he did so. 'Nobody said you had to die.'

'Really, Prince Blart,' said the King. 'There are certain standards that you must live up to.'

He felt he could talk more freely now Blart was family.

'I never asked to be a member of the royal family,' said Blart. 'And I never asked for your standards. I was happy being a pig boy.'

'You shame the Royal House of Illyria,' said the King sadly.

'I agree,' said the Queen.

'So do I,' said Capablanca.

'You will go on that quest or I ...' Beo stopped.

Along with everybody else he turned to look at Capablanca the Wizard.

'You're supposed to be dead,' said Blart.

'Am I?' said Capablanca, looking surprised.

'Yes,' nodded Lowenthal the Court Physician. 'I did all the tests. You've no pulse or breath and your heart has stopped. I'm afraid you are dead.'

'Couldn't you break it to him more gently?' asked the Queen.

'I've never had to diagnose death to the corpse before,' answered Lowenthal defensively.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you,' said Capablanca weakly, 'but I appear to be still alive, though I confess I do not feel well. I felt as though I was slipping away. My strength was ebbing and I felt ready to die. Then a sudden shock to the chest restarted my heart.'

'I kicked you when I was running away from Beo,' Blart told him. 'I must have saved your life.'

'Thank you, Blart,' said the wizard.

'And that means you have to save mine by stopping them sending me on the quest.'

'Quest?' said Capablanca, looking puzzled. 'What quest?'

Quickly the King outlined what had happened.

'I must get up,' said Capablanca. 'Pass me my cowl.'

But the wizard was too weak and he could not even raise himself into a sitting position, never mind get up. He lay back, exhausted.

'I cannot account for this inability to get out of bed,' he confessed.

'It happens to me all the time,' said Blart sympathetically.

'Disgraceful,' said Beo, glowering over the bed at Blart. 'You should be thinking of others and not yourself – your wife being kidnapped or Capablanca nearly dying.'

'I was nearly dying before,' Blart snapped back, 'when two men tried to murder me in my bed.'

'What?' roared Beo. 'Why didn't you say so before, you fool?'

'I forgot,' said Blart.

'Forgot?'

'It's been a busy night,' said Blart. 'But they were still in my room unconscious last time I looked.'

'Forward,' cried Beo, dragging Blart along. 'There's no time to lose.'

And so saying he charged out of the wizard's bedchamber.

Chapter 5

Through the passageways of the palace raced Beo, tugging Blart behind him.

'You'd be quicker without me holding you back,' pointed out Blart, but Beo didn't seem to hear him. Instead he began to climb the dimly lit stairs of the west turret that led to Blart's bedchamber. He was a big burly man, but due to a great fondness for succulent pies and flagons of ale he was not in the prime of physical condition, and halfway up the stairs his breathing became deep and heavy. But Beo would not stop, in spite of his shortness of breath. Up and up they went, faster and faster. They reached the top of the stairs. They charged down the final passageway. They flung open the door to Blart's room and saw ...

An empty bedchamber.

Were they too late?

Not quite.

'Look.' Blart pointed to the window at the far side of the chamber. The shutters were open and moonlight was

pouring in, silhouetting two figures.

'Stop by order of the King!' roared Beo.

Uri and Mika whirled round in surprise.

'Surrender or die!'

'Surrender or die?' replied Uri calmly. 'We'll do neither.'

And so saying he turned and leapt from the window.

Beo and Blart were stunned. Uri's action was suicidal, for Blart's bedchamber was high up and all that lay below was hard stone. And then Blart looked at his bed.

'Where are my sheets?' he cried.

'This is no time to worry about bed linen,' said Beo in exasperation.

But there Beo was wrong. Upon awakening, Uri and Mika had swiftly torn Blart's sheets into strips and then tied them together to make a rope which, even now, Uri was descending.

Beo and Blart realised what was happening just as Mika prepared to follow, but the assassin had dropped out of sight by the time they reached the window. Undaunted, Beo leant out of the window as far as he could. His outstretched hands touched the top of Mika's head, but before he could grab hold of his hair and yank him up, the intruder slipped out of reach.

'Curses!' yelled Beo. 'If only I was taller.'

Without pausing for breath, he reached behind him and grabbed Blart.

'Whoa!' cried Blart.

Ignoring his cry, Beo thrust Blart straight out of the window.

'Grab him,' instructed Beo and, switching his grip to hold Blart by his ankles, he leant out as far as he could again.

'Aaargh,' said Blart as he was suddenly turned upside down.

'Grab him,' repeated Beo.

The extra distance was just enough. Blart found himself face to face with Mika.

'Hello,' said Blart.

The assassin's look of surprise was quickly replaced by one of delight.

'An unexpected opportunity to complete our mission and kill you,' he remarked with pleasure. And then he hit Blart as hard as he could in the face.

'Ow!' cried Blart.

'Ow!' cried Mika, remembering too late that his attacking arm had been stabbed during the first attempt to kill Blart.

'What's going on down there?' demanded Beo. 'Just grab him, boy, and I will haul you both up.'

Thwack!

Mika hit Blart in the face once more and again their cries rang out over the courtyard, across which Uri, having slithered down to the ground safely, was already scampering to make good his escape.

Crack!

Another fierce blow connected with Blart's chin.

'Hurry, boy,' instructed Beo, 'for I cannot hold you much longer.'

In the bright moonlight Blart could see the hard stones that would smash him to pieces were Beo to let go. Avoiding another glancing blow, he grabbed Mika's head.

'At last,' cried Beo and immediately he began to haul them up.

'I can't hold him,' Blart shouted.

'You drop him and I'll drop you,' threatened Beo grimly.

Blart gritted his teeth and kept his hands clamped firmly to Mika's head. Above them, Beo, his great muscles growing weaker with every passing moment, kept pulling, but the pace of their ascent was slowing. Beo felt his strength ebbing away. He could pull no further. Blart and Mika stopped and hung a small but significant distance from the safety of the window.

'What's happening?' cried Blart.

For a second he felt himself go down rather than up. At any moment he expected his descent to accelerate a hundredfold as the knight let him go. But though his strength was ebbing, Beo's will was strong. With one gigantic heave he hauled Blart and Mika through the window and on to the floor of Blart's bedchamber, where they all collapsed in a heap.

Mika was first to react. He tried to prise himself free from Blart's grip, but Beo thwarted his desperate escape bid by simple means. He sat on him.

'He hit me,' panted Blart.

'You can wear those scars with pride,' answered Beo in

between deep breaths. 'For they are the marks of bravery and courage.'

'They are the marks of a coward,' spat Mika. 'But I know what you do not. I know that there will come a time when Blart will wish he had died this night rather than face what the future holds.'

'Cease your foolish prattle,' Beo ordered his prisoner. 'We will take you to Capablanca and there we will find out what you know.'

'I'll never talk,' insisted Mika. 'Never, never, never.'

'I wager you will,' said Beo with the cheerful confidence of a man who had changed many a prisoner's mind in the past. Pulling Mika up, he dragged him towards the door.

Blart did not follow immediately. Instead he lingered for a while in his chamber, wondering what Mika could have meant when he said that there would come a time when Blart would wish he had died that night. There was something about the way he had said it that chilled Blart's heart.