

# Renaldo's Harvest Moon

*By Bob Papp*

Frank squirmed and winced in his hidey-hole near the railroad tracks. The stones beneath him gnawed on his bare ass and his furry shoulders ached from bedrock wedging him on either side. A boulder the size of a whopping big pumpkin, kept his knobby legs bent close. Having abided the pumpkin rock for too long, he finally dug his toes under and flipped it away. Now he stretched his legs with a contented sigh, *blending* again so the train drivers wouldn't spot him.

Soon, a train would thunder past and Renaldo would leap from a passing car. He would land with a flourish, bellowing, "FRANKIE! Who loves ya baby?" Frank smiled in anticipation.

He missed Renaldo. And all the others too. In a spirited Age long past, they were the fierce and magnificent terrors of the earth, lurking in desolate places where hope and reason faltered. They *owned* Fear.

Then humans, opening their eyes to the world, bent and changed the rules. They applied their unrelenting *reason* to the *unreasonable* and lifted glaring lights to the shadows of mystery. Weakened by the power of new Truths, the improbable beings of the earth faded and fell. Now, as far as he knew, he and Renaldo were the last of their own kind left, struggling against a world intent on devouring them.

Even the sharp rocks now biting his butt taunted him for his weakness. His skin used to be much tougher but now he yearned for pants. Thick blue ones like the people wore, only very much bigger. With pants, maybe he could *belong* to the world again. Pass warily among people and even learn from them instead of eating them in the wild. Or, lately, only scaring them off.

Frowning, he distracted himself by morphing the color of the fur on his arms. He made the right arm glistening white, like crystals of snow on the wind and the left gritty grey-brown like the forest at dusk. Then he made one arm short and useless like the big lizards used to have and the other long and taloned, like vicious death. He grabbed his useless arm with his deadly one and squealed, "No! Don't hurt me! I'm just a big ol' dineysore!"

With a chuckle, he eased his arms back to normal and *blended* with the rocks again then sighed. No one thought the dineysores would ever fade. Yet, once so powerful and inevitable, now they were just bones buried deep and lost.

His long left ear twitched and he leaned forward to peer down the iron rails. There! He heard it again and felt it through the earth. The rumble of Renaldo's train approaching.

Every year forever they gathered on the night of the Harvest Moon, Renaldo and him and all the others too, back when there were others. They sang and drank and danced and

*howled*. They bellowed into the night and guffawed till they ached. They boasted of triumphs and bragged of dreams. They even copulated long ago, for the joy of it, since time had long since devoured their fertility. They grew strong again together and gloried in the life searing their veins. They relived the wonders and the sorrows, remembered the vows and the virtues. Then, in the morning, they scattered like leaves from a dust devil, returning to their remote private haunts, recharged with vigor till the next Harvest Moon.

For decades now just the two of them remained, him and Renaldo, sharing a more subdued celebration. Yet, this harvesting of life still mattered. Their annual ritual left Frank reinvigorated and reassured and...hopeful.

Frank now spotted the approaching engine and heard its rising rage. He pressed himself further into the crevice and *blended* fervently with the rock. Soon the horrific engine would pass then the cars would trail behind, one after another after another until finally Renaldo would leap off, landing at his feet!

Now the engine shot past! Not one, but two! Three! All fury and iron and colors and shaking earth and thundering roar! Frank squeezed his eyes shut against the terror. He so desperately wanted to see Renaldo's entrance but couldn't watch. The monster train passed too close and too strong! He would hear him though. Renaldo would call to him when he jumped and then Frank would open his eyes to see him land! But the cars continued forever, assaulting him with their clatter and blasting him with their dust and coating him with their hot oily scent until finally, the last cleared. And the nightmare receded.

A sliver of ice stitched through his heart and he drew in a sharp breath. Renaldo did not call out.

He opened his eyes. Everything looked the same except for swirling dust settling in the low rays of the setting sun. He pulled himself stiffly from his hiding spot and rose to his full height, twice that of any human. An impressive sight, he imagined, had the train drivers seen him. If he'd had the courage to stand before them, they would have shat their cursed pants.

"Renaldo?" he croaked. "You here?"

Farther up the tracks, a pile of boulders shifted and groaned. He ran to it and found his friend, *blending*, face down on the gravel beside the rails. He turned him over and Renaldo blinked, his skin scraped and bruised. His fur looked sparse and his bones too near the surface.

"Frank?" Renaldo gasped. He reached with a shaking hand and patted Frank's forearm. "I...love ya baby."

Frank carried his friend to the camp he'd set up for their Harvest Moon celebration, about a mile from the tracks and twenty miles from anything else. Nestled in a low ravine between desolate hills they would be safe. Alone and unnoticed.

Renaldo started grumbling toward the end of the journey, insisting he be put down and allowed to walk, but Frank refused, telling him to shut up and get healing so they could party later. They didn't say much after that.

At the camp, Frank settled Renaldo into a comfortable spot and dug into the provisions he'd gathered until he found a box with a plastic spigot. He could smell the wine inside but couldn't figure how to work the spout, so he just tore the cardboard off.

"Drink all this," he said, passing over the little bag he freed from the box. With a grudging nod, Renaldo ripped off the spigot and started sucking on the strange little wine skin. Looking away, Frank picked up a rock and scratched sparks with his thumbnail into the dry tinder and kindling he'd gathered earlier, until timid flames flickered to life.

"H—hey, Frankie. Where'd you get this wine? It's good. Makes me feel stronger."

Frank smiled, watching the fire grow. "Oh, ha. Got it from some guy sleeping in the wild in a little bitty orange tent."

"You eat him?" Renaldo asked. Something caught in his voice, a scratch of hopeful longing.

"Oh I was gonna!" Frank turned to his friend, grinning. "I ripped open his itty bitty orange tent and guy starts screamin' like a little piggy. Ha ha! So I grab my hand round his head. You know! Pokey sharp finger nails in his soft skin?"

"Oh ho! Yeah, yeah! Squeeze! Squeeeeeeze! Right?"

"Squeeeeeeze!" Frank agreed, nodding vigorously.

"So then you pop him and...eat him?"

"Nah." Frank picked up a branch he'd stripped clean earlier and poked at the fire a bit. "Dumb guy peed his pants. Don't want to eat no pee soaked fella, you know? Icky. So I toss him away and he runs. I took his stuff instead."

"Oh." Renaldo sucked on the bag some more. "You want some?"

"Sure do."

"What else you get? Anything good?"

Frank drained some wine from the shiny bag and passed it back before answering. "Got me one of them talky phone machines."

"You got a talky phone machine?"

"Yup."

"Lemme see!"

"Nah. Tossed it away. Too tiny. Also it made a noise and I poked at it like you see 'em

do, you know?"

Renaldo nodded eagerly.

"Welllll. Then some lady girl says to me, 'You stay at our re-sort so we got prize for you.' I say, 'Not me! Never been to no re-sort! You lookin' for guy who peed his pants!' But she keeps talkin' and don't stop. So I threw talky phone machine far as I could."

"Ah." Renaldo nodded once more then bowed his head. "Talky phone not meant for you and me, huh?"

"Yeah. Like lots of stuff now-a-days."

Frank dug a finger into his right ear and scraped around the inside, gathering a clump of dark wax. He flicked this into the fire and it burst into a bright ball of minty green flame. It sparked and sputtered for a time, until the campfire relaxed and returned to its diligent chore of eating wood and defecating charcoal.

"What happened to you Renaldo?" Frank asked, watching the fire to avoid his friend's eyes. He gave him plenty of time to answer, not eager to hear the words. Eventually a grunt emerged from Renaldo's boney bulk. Then a snort. Then a snore, the first of many.

Frank poked the fire again and began humming gently. After a time, the song rose from his heart, nudging the words forward until he sang quietly, his voice incongruously delicate and melodious.

*"Nikt wan cepth'o ma shoen vi daa,*

*"Paal ette distoen ci voen ni qaa.*

*"Taiyaa bae lodan haijang'o mi ree,*

*"Sempo di fank'o wei...tri...trae...trr"*

Stumbling on the final words of the verse, he growled, then sighed. The song was in the old tongue they hadn't spoken for ages. He didn't even know the meaning of the individual words any more. Only the emotion and sense of the story. Something about the beginning and the end and the things that mattered in between.

Renaldo grunted and cleared his throat. Voice crackling, he completed the verse:

*"Sempo di fank'o wei treng'a prae di."*

"Yeah," Frank said. "That's it." He looked over and saw Renaldo's eyes glistening, the fire reflected in their depths. His friend seemed less agitated than after his fall from the train, but no stronger. Still grey and thin. Weak.

"Hey Renaldo, you remember that one time?"

His friend snorted. "Which one time Frankie? There been a few, you know?"

"Years ago at Harvest Moon like tonight. It was maybe ten or twenty years after Matilda was gone and just you and me was left. 'Member, those three bigfoots came stompin' up to the fire like *they was gonna scare us?*"

"HO! Oh yeah! I 'member that one." He coughed twice then added, "Those idiots!"

"Yeah!" Frank said, his head bobbing. "And you put on a scary face, like this!" Frank's massive head shifted. His mouth spread wider and his teeth extended, transforming from splintered blocks to rows of sharp daggers. His eyes glowed red and ragged horns sprouted from his skull. "You almost scare *me!*" he exclaimed, struggling to speak through his toothful grin.

"Oh shit, yeah!" Renaldo agreed. "I almost hurt myself doin' that I 'member!"

Frank let his head ease back to normal. "But the best part—you remember the best part? What you said to those assholes?"

Renaldo's brow furrowed and he shook his head. "What I said? No...w—what'd I say?" He raised the wine skin to his lips to drain the last of it.

"You sucked in a deep big breath and yelled, loud as could be, 'WALLA WALLA BING BANG!'"

"PFFFFTT!" The fire sputtered at the force of Renaldo's spit-take. He clutched his sides laughing. "HAW! HA! OH Frankie! I 'member now! I—I—I!" He laughed hoarsely, trying to catch his breath before completing his thought. "I—I never knew bigfoots could run so FAST!"

"HA! BigDOPES more like!"

They both laughed more until Renaldo started coughing. Frank wiped his eyes and got up to rummage in his supplies. Finding a bottle of liquor, he broke off the neck and swallowed about a third its contents before passing it to his friend.

"Thanks Frankie. You get this from pissy camper guy too?"

"Naw. Found a couple who stopped their car on the side of the road to pee. They're always peein'! They ran and I didn't bother followin'. Tore open their car and took a bunch of stuff instead. Even found me a book with maps of all the places you'd want to go."

"What you gonna do with that? You can't *read.*"

Frank looked away from Renaldo and picked up the branch to poke the fire some more. He wouldn't tell his friend he'd learned himself some reading, any more than he'd tell him he sometimes thought about wearing pants.

Instead, he brought up more memories and they shared more stories and spent the early hours of the night laughing some more. Reliving the good times. The times when they were stronger and...somehow more than they were now. All the while, his earlier question

to Renaldo hung in the air between them, like an axe waiting to fall. *What happened to you Renaldo?*

Eventually, during a lull, Renaldo drifted off to sleep again. Frank eyed the moon, judging they didn't have long before it reached its zenith and they would share their annual *howling*. After that, Renaldo could sleep all he wanted. Frank would get him on the train the next morning. He hoped he'd be able to get off safely on his own when he arrived home.

He reached out with the branch and nudged Renaldo awake again. "Hey buddy. *Howling* is soon. You gotta stay awake."

Renaldo eyed him through squinting eyes and shook his head slowly. "I'm glad you're here, Frankie."

"Course I'm here. You and me and the Harvest Moon, forever."

"Nah. I...I won't be 'round next time."

Frank opened his mouth to protest, but Renaldo raised a shaking hand, saying, "Y—you know it, so don't go fightin' me on it."

Frank closed his mouth and stared.

"Frankie, I—I heard Matilda is still here."

Frank frowned. "What? No. You know she's gone. Been gone decades buddy. Just you and me now."

"No. I heard she gone under. Livin' in shadows under their noses. Even made herself—" A coughing fit overtook him until something dark splattered from his mouth. When his breathing settled, he continued. "Even made herself...smaller so she could h—hide better. Lives in the bowels of dead buildings. Place called Gary."

Frank scowled. "In a *city*? That's not the *way*. Who told you that anyway? Everybody's *gone*!"

"Little flibbertygits. I see 'em sometimes and talk to 'em. They...urm...they know more'n we do now. You should find her Frankie. Before next Harvest Moon. You shouldn't...you shouldn't be alone at H—Harvest. Moon."

Frank stood and paced through the dust around the fire. Renaldo handed him the bottle when he passed. He drank from it then sat next to his friend. "I love you Renaldo."

"Yeah," Renaldo said, his voice hoarse and soft. Patting Frank on the knee, he said, "I love you too Frankie."

Frank nodded then looked up and pointed to the moon. Renaldo lifted his thin face to the shimmering white light, drew in a slow quavering breath and *howled*. Frank joined in, harmonizing, bellowing, growling as hot tears flowed freely. It wasn't the best howling. Not like the old days for sure, when there were so many of them. But it lasted a long time

and it felt *good* and *right* and when his friend sputtered out Frank put his arm around him and *howled* all the louder for both of them.

The next morning when he awoke he looked for Renaldo, but where his friend had slept only a rough pile of crumbling boulders and spindly branches remained. He turned away quickly, then looked back and swore once in the old tongue. Another word he didn't really know anymore, except that it disparaged the wisdom of their Maker.

Glancing at the rose-colored sky, he whispered, "Sorry. Just didn't think it was so late. Does it...does it *have* to be?"

The Maker didn't answer, not directly anyway.

Narrowing his eyes, Frank looked at the boulder pile again then stepped to his stash of supplies. Digging out the book of maps, he slumped to the ground to begin the tedious process of studying every word on every map, searching for the one spelled G-A-R-Y.

- End -