



HO, HO, HO  
SH\*IT!!

9/12

## **FREELANCE BLUES:** **SANTA EX MACHINA** by Ian Daffern

“Do those kids look *too* satisfied to you?” said Lance, as he adjusted his beard, “They seem a little *jolly*”

“Don't ask me dude,” said Leon, “It's your holiday. Maybe they caught up in the spirit or whatevs.”

Lance looked down the tinsel, lights and candy canes of the Magic Workshop at a gaggle of rainbow-coloured snowsuits and glistening eyes. Parents staggered among them, giant pack-animals, clutching shiny bags and cellphones, all with the vacant look that only mall-air provides.

“There's something odd.” Lance said, scanning the departing kids, picking up their wrapped parcels from an elf in high-heels, “Like they leave with an extra bounce?”

“Only bounce I'm seein's on Stephanie. She makes wearing tights almost worthwhile.”

“You know, you whine a lot about wardrobe for a guy who brought his own ears.”

“Just saying, we've got--” Leon said, pointing a mitteny hand up to the sparkling clock tower above them, “29 minutes left for then to get their holiday on. How bad can it be? Anyway, look lively, cause we got--”

“Robot Unicorn! Robot Unicorn! Robot Unicorn!”

Lance and Leon stared down at a tiny pink-and-purple foot-stamping imp. Lance turned on the grin, reached down--

“Ho Ho Ho! Merry Christmas--”

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“--My Ass! I *knew* was something up! They still out there?” Lance said, popping buttons on his red felt suit.

Outside, shapes creaked and crashed in the candy-coloured half-light. Leon peeped through the workshop window.

“Yep, we got... Teddies, Snowmen, a Dolly, that I *think* is peeing, and... “

There was another crash, followed by a scream.

“...And *that's* a robot unicorn. Well at *least* it's not zombies.”

“That's a good thing?”

“Everyone expects zombies in a mall. It's their natural habitat.”

Leon ducked down from the window. Lance was staring blankly at the bare plywood.

“What's wrong big guy? Normally you're all pow-pow! With the fists! And the occasional two by four. What gives?”

“All the hours we were here,” Lance sighed, knocking his forehead with a heavy palm, “And I *never* made it to the stores before closing. I didn’t get the girls *anything*. And now-- *This*.”

“Well you got time-- tons of places don’t close before midnight,” Leon leaned in, put a hand on his shoulder, “C’mon. We just gotta find our Scrooge and give him a taste of Christmas Right the Fuck *Now*.”

Lance looked up at the clock. Pulled up his suspenders. Cracked his knuckles.

“All right...”

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“...What’s Controlling the Toys!”

Aloysius spit out a gob of blood.

“Why should I tell you anyth—”

A zing and a fist--

Aloysius spit out a tooth.

“Pff! Fi wone tell you anyfing! You can’t stop thith! Chrithmath ith going the way of the dodo!”

Lance grabbed a handful of collar, hauling the wrinkled manager up from the control desk.

“Won’t be the only thing extinct if you don’t--”

“Yo! Lance!” yelled Leon, “Check the monitors!”

Lance loosened his grip, dropping Aloyisus back in his leather chair, and came over to the bank of screens.

“What are they...”

“The toys-- they’re combining, like... some kinda Katamari or something!”

“Kata-what-i?”

Leon’s face fell. “Don’t you play *any* game I lend you?”

From behind, a bubbling, wheezing laughter emerged.

“Foolth! You don’t thee?!?!” Aloyisus said, “When your Dethroyer ith upon you? And Chrithmath will at *lath* be...”

“What are you talking about?” said Lance, “What do you know?”

“You have no idea what real work ith... pulling off the impothible e-frey year. All for *him*... but now *he’ll* thee...Firth thith mall! Then the wor—urk!”

Aloysius flipped back in the chair, his breathe a softly bubbling purr. Lance rubbed his knuckles.

“Damn, I think I popped something, seriously--”

“Dude! No!” Leon pointed at a screen, as a cutie in tights dived out of the path of a gigantic teddy-bear hand. “Elves in danger! And it’s not just there. Look--”

On another monitor, a mob of angry, marble-eyed children shoved huddled parents ever closer to the edge of a mezzanine.

“Dude-- we better get back there before--”

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“--It's too late!” Aloyisus screamed from the top of the Clock Tower, “For you! For Chrithmath! For everyone!”

Far below, a conglomerate foot stomped down, shaking the atrium.

“Make yourself a target he says...” said Leon, diving for cover.

The foot clomped again, scattering jack-in-the-boxes and plastic doll parts.

Leon looked over, where under the shadow of a sparkling Christmas tree, a tiny pair of eyes gleamed.

“Robot Unicorn...” they whimpered.

“Yeah, I know...” said Leon, “I didn't get what I wanted for Hanukkah either...just grab my hand before that thing comes BAAAAHHH!!!”

Plush fingers enfolded Leon, lifting him high, high up in the air, almost to the glass ceiling. Far below, he saw it all: the parents hugged the railing, the chanting children pushing, the cackling madmen, still hanging onto the clock face.

“DUUUUUUDE!” Leon yelled, “Any second--”

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“--Now!” Lance yelped, jumping over the edge of the mezzanine.

He hit hard on the escalator, sliding, stumbling to the floor, then up again, gliding now past artificial snow, plastic trees, shiny gift boxes... high above the abomination towered, showering toys, women and children screaming, squeezing Leon tighter in its grasp... until Lance slipped on the slick chemical foam of cheap snow. He flew like a hockey puck, his head cracking the frame of his oddly-cushioned throne.

Red white and green sparklers in his vision, scintillating like Northern Lights.

A vision appeared, a beautiful, elven, ethereal face amidst the glow.

“Hey,” said an oddly husky voice, “Hey Santa. Hey. Is your real name Lance?”

“Uh, yeah?”

Stephanie crinkled her nose, cocked an eyebrow.

“There was a package for you-- last one left in the bag. For the kids. Came just after you disappeared.”

Lance looked down at the foil-wrapped parcel, tagged with his name. He opened the card.

“For a Very Good Boy?’ What in the--”

He tore at the packaging, and soon held a red lacquer box. Popped a clasp. The case flipped open, and a red and white gleam filled his eyes.

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“...And then Lance comes out with these two Candy-Canes firing glitter and tinsel everywhere! And when they hit, the toys went 'POP!' and the kids went 'A-Duh!' and Aloysius was just stuck up on his clock tower looking *soooooo*.... pissed. Hey pass the stuffing?”

Nicki lifted the dish and sent it up-table. Vicki frowned.

“Which is why you guys had to spend the night out?” she said.

“We had to get everybody home!” Leon said, spooning a healthy portion, “Lance insisted we drive.”

“Mmph, well it was still snowing,” said Lance, through a mouthful of turkey.

“Why would a mall-owner have a grudge against Christmas?” said Nicki, “Then go to all the trouble of making a big deal of it too?”

“Probably some kind of union thing,” said Leon, “Kept going *on* and *on* about 'the workshop'.”

“Well I'm glad we made it,” Lance leaned back in his chair, and popped the tab on a beer can, “And thanks for making dinner.”

“Don't mention it. Thanks for, well, we always need antifreeze,” said Vicki “And that mitten scraper was very thoughtful.”

“Just wanna keep you safe on the road...” Lance mumbled, staring down at the table. Nicki reached over, patted his shoulder, “C'mon dummy. It's not like it's the *first* year for gas-station gifts. We're just glad you're okay.”

Before things got awkward, Leon cut in.

“So...Lance.” he said, before taking another chomp from a turkey leg, “Since we're now *free*, think you might be able to help out with something next week?”

“Yeah I guess so. Especially since I'm back on the grind. What's up?”

“Nothin'-- just a catering gig down at the Museum.”

Vicki groaned. Nicki stood up, grabbed hold of the turkey dish, “I better get started on dishes...”

“I don't get it,” Lance blinked, “So, what's the occasion?”

“Just a New Year's Party” Leon said, “Why not right? Not every day you get to hang out with the Mayan Historical Society.”

**WISHING YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS, A HAPPY HOLIDAYS  
AND A VERY SPECTACULAR NON-APOCALYPTIC NEW YEAR TO YOU AND YOURS**

**From  
IAN DAFFERN  
MIKE LEONE  
VICKI TIERNEY  
DIEGO MORENO  
ROB PETEK  
& THE FLB TEAM**