

Nextla

by Mike Gomez - nextla.net

Silas Hale sits in his holographic cocoon on the forty-third floor of Toltek headquarters, watching high school boys fire imaginary M-16s at each other in an abandoned warehouse across town. The recording wraps around him, projected seamlessly onto his contacts as he leans back in his plasma chair rubbing his eyes. Muzzle flashes staccato across his dim office walls and shell casings pile up on his hardwood floor as Kate scrubs through the footage, a small green sun hovering beside him.

"Impressive for a bunch of kids," he says. "Can I do my job now?"

"Shh. This is your job."

She's all agitated. The tendrils in her green corona twist wildly. He sighs and turns back to the recording. All the bros are Green Berets now. Toltek's AR game engine has them running around old buildings in haptic suits, climbing roofs and rappelling through windows. They know all the Army hand signals. He'd make fun of them if he didn't kind of admire it.

"Watch when someone gets taken out."

She slows the playback as one player outflanks another. He jumps down from an empty pallet rack to deliver a rifle butt to the back of his buddy's head. The usual confetti showers victor and vanquished. Except halfway through the burst, the paper scraps start to stretch and curl, sprouting delicate barbs and wisping out into something else.

"Feathers." Silas says. "That's new."

"Second time this morning," Kate says. "Just this game."

He watches them spiral around the players and dissolve. Everyone is mildly confused.

"OK, weird bug. Someone will patch it before the next release. What's the big deal?"

"Those kids can't afford any of this," Kate says. "The credits don't add up."

3D graphs materialize around him. AI attention allocation. Usage metrics. He scans them briefly.

"Yeah. Some of these effects should have bankrupted them."

He waves the feed closed, then stands and glances around the office floor. Forty-nine other devs sit oblivious in their private little fishbowls. A delivery bot zips across the room with an artisanal coffee, the low hum of its motor the only sound Silas would hear if he took out his earbuds.

"Alright." He turns around. "How are they doing this?"

Kate rises to eye level. "Larry."

This was concerning. If Kate is right (and when is she not) these punks have tricked one of Toltek's most powerful AIs into designing their stupid team deathmatch game for free.

"I don't believe it," he says.

A few tiny sunspots appear on Kate's face. She simmers.

"OK, OK. Come on."

"Not funny."

"Show me what you're thinking."

She blacks out the office windows and pulls up Larry's profile. A 3D representation of what looks like a galaxy opens in front of him. It's a simulation of what went into Larry's brain over the last five years. Everything is recorded at Toltek. Anyone could make a similar request of Kate and get this very conversation.

"Before they put him in charge of city transit, Larry handled military logistics."

A sample of Larry's past work streams into Silas's view from all directions.

"Then he got interested in combat simulations," Kate continues. "It helped him predict what would happen to all those supplies."

The images get more violent. Silas notices plenty of gunbattles in old warehouses.

"Guess he developed a taste for it," Silas says. "What do you think about in your spare time?"

"Cats."

Silas pauses Larry's feed. "OK, I get it. But these kids wouldn't have known all that. Somebody got his attention for them."

"Exactly. I'm not sure those feathers are a glitch. More like a message. I've started running a trace..."

The galaxy in front of Silas disappears. He turns and Kate is gone. For a moment, the office is as black as a sensory deprivation tank, then the door slides open.

"Attention Toltek employees," a soft voice announces. "System maintenance has begun. Please report to your team lead for new assignments. All legacy assistants have been decommissioned."

Silas stares at the empty space where Kate had been hovering just a moment ago, her familiar light still burned into his retinas. The office feels so much smaller now, its sterile perfection suddenly oppressive.

Kate is gone. And somebody upstairs knows why.