

The Final Play

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Title: The Final Play
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Edition: First Edition, 2024

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Self-Published

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ISBN: 9789403768625

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The Wolves of New Europe

Alex ‘Specter’ Thompson stared at his reflection in the mirror of the locker room, feeling a pang of disconnection as he tried to recognize the man staring back. At 26, he was already considered a veteran in Vortex, the virtual reality sport that had redefined competition worldwide. His brown hair, once kept in a neat cut, now hung a little longer, and messier, just like the rest of his life lately. The bags under his eyes were new, a product of sleepless nights and the stress of being one of the most-watched athletes on the planet. The virtual arena where Vortex (the biggest game on earth) was being played was the only home he ever had.

He adjusted the glove on his hand, feeling the familiar weight of the gear that had become like a second skin to him. The cool metal pressed against his flesh, makes you think of how far he’d come since his early days playing Vortex in underground leagues. Back then, nobody knew his name. He was just another kid trying to escape a broken world through a screen. But things had changed. Now, people whispered his name with reverence, or hatred, depending on the team they supported.

To the fans of the New Europe Wolves, Alex was a hero. But to himself, he was just a guy who got lucky.

He could still remember his first game, the adrenaline pumping through his veins. Back then, New Europe had not yet been formed. London was the capital of Great Britain back then... As he took his first steps into the game. But now, years later, the line between the virtual and the real has blurred. Vortex wasn’t just a game anymore, it was life, especially in a world where hope was in short supply. And Alex, well, Alex is one of the very best now.

The Wolves were more than a team. To the fractured continent of New Europe, they were a symbol of resilience, and unity in a time of political chaos and economic collapse. It had been eight years since Alex had been drafted to the Wolves, a team that had once struggled to find its identity. He’d helped them rise to prominence, leading

them to their first international finals last year. But they hadn't won. The memory of that defeat still haunted him, creeping into his thoughts at the worst times. He could hear the howls of the New Europe fans, their chant filling the arena that day, only to be silenced when the final blow was struck by their opponents, the China warriors. There has never been a World Cup final without the China Warriors and only a few they lost.

Alex exhaled sharply, his blue eyes narrowing as he focused on the door that leads to the stage once more. He didn't like thinking about the past, especially not that final. But the pressure was always there, an invisible weight on his shoulders. He wasn't just playing for himself anymore. He was playing for a continent that had lost nearly everything, for people who clung to their new national identity like a lifeline.

New Europe was barely a decade old, a loose federation of former EU nations that had banded together after the collapse of the old political systems. The Union had fallen apart in 2036, torn apart by infighting, economic disparity, and the scramble for what was left of the world's resources. New Europe had risen from the ashes, but it was fragile, held together more by necessity than true unity. And in a world on the brink of a new global conflict, it felt like only a matter of time before everything fell apart again.

Alex had always known that Vortex was more than just a game. The political undertones were impossible to ignore. Vortex had been invented in 2029, just as the world began to fracture. By 2039, it had become the biggest sport on the planet, A global obsession. One that had managed to distract billions from the grim reality outside their windows. For a few hours, people could escape into the game, watching teams like the Wolves fight for glory in a virtual battlefield that felt more real than anything they experienced.

But for Alex, the game had become his reality. He had trained for years, dedicating his life to mastering the role of Striker, a striker who had the fastest reflexes and the sharpest instincts. His job was to flank, to push the team forward, to create the moments that fans

would remember long after the game was over. It was a role he had embraced fully, but the weight of expectation had grown with each passing year. The more he won, the more the world expected him to be perfect. The pressure was great, but Alex wore it with pride.

As the locker room door swung open, Alex's thoughts were interrupted by the familiar sight of Izumi 'Shadow' Sato, the Wolves' other Striker, bouncing into the room with his usual manic energy. Shadow joined the team four years back and has always felt like a little sister to Alex.

“You ready for this, Captain?” Shadow grinned, her green eyes flashing with excitement. She was younger than Alex by three years, but her enthusiasm was infectious.

Alex forced a smile, trying to match his teammate's mood. “Always.” Shadow gave him a friendly poke on the back, not noticing the flicker of doubt in Alex's eyes. “Good, 'cause today's just the warm-up. Save the real nerves for the qualifiers.” The qualifiers. Alex couldn't even think that far ahead. Not with everything else going on in the world.

As Shadow turned to adjust his own gear, Alex's mind wandered again, back to the political landscape that framed their every match. New Europe wasn't just battling for sporting dominance, it was fighting for survival. Tensions between the superpowers were at an all-time high. The old alliances were breaking down, with countries scrambling to secure the last of the world's resources. The United States, China, Russia and Unified Korea. All of them were on the verge of falling, and New Europe was caught in the middle, a fractured region struggling to stay afloat.

It didn't help that Vortex Extended Enterprises (VEE), the company behind the game, had become more powerful than most governments. Founded in 2030, VEE started as a tech company but quickly, grew into a global powerhouse, thanks to the success of Vortex. The game had made them billions, but there were whispers that VEE had bigger ambitions. Some said they were manipulating world politics behind the scenes, using their influence to shape the

future of entire nations. Others believed they were preparing for something far worse, that VEE had its own agenda, one that went beyond the virtual world. They already had schools and owned most of the industry, provided free internet and power to most of the world and Alex does not like talking about it but he went to a VEE boarding school for a while.

Alex didn't know what to believe. All he knew was that VEE was everywhere, their logo stamped on every arena, their presence felt in every match. And now, with the world on the brink of downfall, it was hard not to wonder what role they would play in the chaos to come.

Alex could hear the muffled sound of the fans chanting outside the locker room. Tens of thousands of voices echoed through the massive sphere-shaped arena, all waiting for the New Europe Wolves to take the stage. The roar of the crowd always brought a chill to his spine, even after all these years. The fans were incredible, and the Wolves, had one battle cry, howling like wolves to spur the team on. It was a tradition, one that had started just before Alex joined the team. And now, it was truly the past of the team's identity.

He shook off the nerves as Elena 'Pulse' Garcia, the team's Tactician, strode into the room. With sharp, calculating eyes and a mind like a supercomputer, Elena was the strategic heart of the Wolves. She wore her hair in a tight braid, her olive skin glowing under the fluorescent lights of the locker room.

“You seem out of it, Alex,” Pulse noted, her voice calm but probing. “Focus. We can't afford distractions today.”

Alex nodded, knowing she was right. Pulse had a way of cutting through the noise, getting straight to the core of what mattered. She had been with the Wolves from the very start, it was her that recruited Alex when he was in a tough spot. And if anyone understood the pressures of being at the top, it was her. As the Tactician, her job was to control the game, reading the battlefield, and

giving orders to the rest of the team. In Vortex, that role was critical, without a good Tactician, the team was blind.

Then there was Marcus 'Titan' Williams, the team's Tank. Built like a mountain, in-game and off. Titan was as intimidating off the platform as he was on it. His role was to absorb damage, using his incredible resilience and heavy defense tactics to shield the rest of the team. A tank also gets one heavy strike a game. If hit by these projectiles it's game over for almost every player. With broad shoulders and a scar across his right cheek, Titan looked like someone you didn't want to mess with, but Alex knew better. Beneath the tough exterior was one of the most dependable teammates and friends anyone could ask for. "You'd better not screw up today, Specter," Titan said with a half-smile, playfully punching Alex on the shoulder. "I hate losing!"

"Yeah, yeah, save it for the match," Alex replied, but he felt the weight of Titan's words. He hadn't forgotten the glitch from last week during training. His hand passed straight through the Vortex Core. At the time, he'd chalked it up to a timing error, but something about it had felt wrong, like a glitch in the system. And if Titan was still teasing him about it, then his teammates hadn't forgotten either.

The final member of the team, Leo 'Patch' Anders, was tinkering with his gear as usual. As the team's Engineer, it was Leo's job to keep the team's systems running smoothly, both in and out of the game. He was small and wiry, with blonde hair that stuck out in all directions, giving him a perpetually disheveled look. But when it came to tech, no one was better. If something broke, Patch could fix it, often while still in the middle of a match. His nickname, Patch, came from his ability to patch together solutions on the fly, keeping the team in the game no matter what went wrong.

As Alex and the team finished gearing up, he glanced at the clock. It was almost time. He tightened the straps on his VR gloves, feeling the familiar buzz of the equipment coming to life. The gloves were a marvel of technology, recording every movement of his hands and arms, while the tiny joysticks built into the thumb and forefinger allowed for rapid in-game maneuvering. The headset slid into place

next, immersing him in the digital world of Vortex. His vision adjusted to the stark contrast between the locker room and the vibrant, futuristic battlefield that awaited them.

Finally, the body gear snapped into place, a sleek exosuit that housed the computer system that powered the entire experience. It wasn't just for show, the suit monitored the players' movements, sending real-time feedback to the game's servers. When a player took damage in the game, the suit would pulse, sending a light but noticeable shock through their body, a reminder of how close they were to losing.

This all gets partly covered by a futuristic jersey. The jersey displayed some sponsors but also had a tough-looking wolf on it (the logo of the New Europe Wolves) and his nickname and number on the back. Alex his jersey showed "Specter" with a 35 below it. 35 has always been his lucky number since his first tournament when he was assigned this number and won flawlessly.

The arena itself was a sight to behold. A massive, sphere-shaped structure, it was filled with tens of thousands of spectators, all packed in to watch the battle unfold. In the center of the sphere-shaped stadium were two raised platforms, one for each team. These platforms were where the players would stand, their real-world bodies safely secured, and their eyes were transported into the virtual arena. The platforms floated above the ground, suspended by powerful magnetic fields that kept them hovering in place, adding to the futuristic feel of the entire event.

The inside of the sphere-shaped stadium was filled with giant screens, displaying live feeds of the game from every possible angle. The fans could see every move, every tactic, every shot in crystal-clear detail on screen. As the players moved through the virtual world, their avatars would be projected onto the screens, larger than life. The energy in the arena was electric, a palpable force that surged through the air as the crowd chanted and cheered.

The stadium they are playing in is called the London Sphere. It stood at the site where tens of years ago the Wembley Stadium stood.

Wembley was abandoned after the costs ran too high to maintain and VEE bought the land to build this incredible stadium.

“Alright, Wolves,” Pulse’s voice cut through Alex’s thoughts. “We’ve got our game plan. Everyone knows their role. Let’s give them a show.”

Alex nodded, feeling a surge of determination. Despite the weight of the world on his shoulders, despite the politics, the pressure, and the looming threat of global conflict, this was what he lived for. For the next few hours, nothing else mattered but the game.

As the teams take their platforms the announcer hypes up the crowd. “And here are your Wolves! Shadow, Patch, Pulse, Titan and Spectre!” The crowd goes wild howling in an ear-deafening noise. “Today in an exhibition against the Balkan Alliance Predators!” the announcer added.

As the match began, the familiar landscape of the Vortex battlefield unfolded before Alex. The ever-shifting environment was a hallmark of the game. One game, a dense jungle, the next, a sprawling cityscape. The game’s AI adapted the terrain based on the players’ histories, ensuring no two matches were ever the same. The team got to see a layout of the map two weeks before the game and often it adapted to what the AI thought would make a spectacular show. At the heart of it all, hovering near the center of the map, was the Vortex Core, the game's ultimate game-changer. It was a glowing, spherical entity that pulsed with energy, always floating in the open. To reach it you are fully vulnerable for at least 10 seconds.

The memory of his early training sessions flooded back. The Vortex Core was designed to represent both opportunity and risk. To win the game you need to control the core and defeat all enemies. Once you grab the core your teammates get instantly revived and healed changing the course of the game. It can win you the game at the right moment but lose you if you go for it too early or late.

Alex, as a Striker, had one job above all, secure the Vortex Core at the crucial moment and surprise the enemies with an attack

eliminating them. Grabbing the core was the pivotal point of every game, and getting to it first required both speed and precision. His role relied on timing, getting there before the enemy while avoiding traps, enemy attacks, and the shifting environment.

But as he reached out for the Core during this match, something went wrong.

His hand passed straight through it again.

Alex blinked in confusion, his mind struggling to process what had happened. It wasn't a matter of timing, he hadn't just missed the Core; his hand had physically gone through it like it wasn't even there. The glowing sphere flickered for about two seconds before stabilizing, but the damage was done. He could feel the delay, the crucial few seconds lost as the game paused, allowing the other team to reposition.

"Specter, what the hell?" Shadow's voice was sharp through the comms, breaking the tense silence. "You missed the Core! How do you miss the Core? It was right there! Do you also burn your chest when you try to drink tea or what?!"

"I..." Alex hesitated, trying to understand what had happened. "I didn't miss it. It glitched. My hand went right through!"

"Yeah, sure, VEE just had a glitch, get your shit together!" Titan chimed in; his usual humor laced with frustration. "You know how much time we just lost? Don't screw this up again, man. I'm counting on you!"

Pulse her voice remained calm, though there was a note of concern. "Stay focused, Specter. We'll review it after the match. Let's recover from this delay."

The pressure mounted. Everyone had seen it, but no one believed it was anything other than an error on his part. In their eyes, he had missed the Core, a fundamental part of his job. The Vortex Core was everything, and missing it was unacceptable, especially for a player of his caliber. Alex clenched his fists, pushing the doubt aside. He had

to move on. The game wouldn't wait for him to figure it out, and the Wolves couldn't afford another delay.

As the match resumed, the team refocused on their objective: securing the Vortex Core. The game hinged on controlling it. Alex could almost feel the weight of the situation on his shoulders. The Wolves had to hold the Core and eliminate the opposing team. Once a team claimed the Core, all their teammates would respawn once, offering a crucial advantage in the final push. But having the core has its risks. It gives the opponent an opening to reclaim it and revive its team members. Vortex is a balanced game of risks and opportunities. This is why people love it.

With this structure, the match often turned into a tense, strategic struggle. Holding the Core wasn't just about survival; it was about outlasting the other team, beating them back, and denying them their respawn advantage.

"20 minutes left!" Pulse reminded the team, her voice cutting through the chaos of the game. The pressure was mounting. "We need to secure the Core now, or this match will go to whoever held it longest, and that isn't us!"

They couldn't let that happen. If they didn't take the Core soon, the other team would win by default when time ran out. The Wolves had to make their move.

A game rarely went out of time. Winning by time is not considered an impressive win against any team, especially not the Balkan Alliance Predators, a lower-ranked team from Zagreb.

Alex sprinted toward the Core, feeling his focus tighten. This was his moment, his chance to redeem himself after the earlier miss. His role as a Striker meant he had to be fast, aggressive, and unrelenting, especially now when they needed the Core more than ever.

"Titan, keep those barriers up!" Pulse's command brought Alex back into the moment. "On it!" Titan quickly activated another set of walls, fortifying their position while the rest of the team pushed forward.

Pulse flanked from the left with Shadow, engaging the enemy Strikers in a fierce duel. Alex knew the opposing team's Tank, Igor "Gauntlet" Kavanic, was lurking near the Core, waiting to crush anyone who tried to claim it.

This was their chance. The Wolves had the momentum. Alex darted forward, timing his approach perfectly, determined not to miss again. The Core pulsed with energy as he reached for it, and this time, there was no glitch. His hand wrapped around it, and the Core responded instantly, signaling he had control.

"We've got it!" Alex shouted, his heart racing. The moment the Wolves claimed the Core, his teammates who had been eliminated earlier respawned instantly, rejoining the battlefield with renewed energy. The crowd went nuts howling for a solid minute.

But their work was far from done. The other team would dig in, fortifying their defenses around the Core. The Wolves had to defeat every single one of them to secure victory. Alex's pulse quickened as Gauntlet came into view, his massive form guarding the Core with a menacing presence.

"We need to break through!" Pulse urged. "They'll hold us off if we don't push hard now!" Alex nodded, focusing on Gauntlet. The Tank's job was to block their path, and he was doing it well, but Alex and Shadow worked in tandem, their Striker abilities designed for fast, precise attacks. Shadow kept Kavinsky occupied with heavy fire, while Titan deployed his heavy strike, creating openings for Alex and Shadow to strike.

The minutes ticked by as the battle raged, the Wolves fighting to maintain control of the Core and eliminate the remaining enemy players. Alex's earlier miss was forgotten, replaced by the intense drive to win.

As the crowd roared inside the colossal sphere-shaped arena, Alex stood still on the platform, eyes locked on the shimmering Vortex Core. His heart raced, but not from the intensity of the match alone. No, it was the weight of everything resting on his shoulders. Every

time he entered the arena, it wasn't just another game for him it was survival.

His mind drifted, even as he felt the pulsing of his body gear, signaling the damage he'd taken earlier. Memories flashed before his eyes: the cold, damp streets of the slums in London, the nights he went hungry, the orphanage, the hopelessness. It was Vortex that had saved him, pulled him from the abyss. But this wasn't just about him anymore, no, it was about New Europe, about the millions who saw this sport as their only beacon of hope. Vortex was the only thing that kept people from falling apart as their once-great nations teetered on the edge of collapse. Alex blinked the memories away, refocusing on the match. The score was tight, and the tension was palpable. The exhibition match was no ordinary game, it was a preview, a chance to send a message before the World Cup qualifiers kicked off next week. The top 8 teams would advance to the World Cup tournament. But New Europe's Wolves needed more than just qualification. If they could finish in first place, they'd get to host the final eight of the World Cup, bringing an influx of tourism, business, and wealth into the poverty-stricken federation. Hosting would double their yearly income from hotel bookings and food stands alone. It would be a lifeline for millions who relied on Vortex for hope.

"Specter, you with us?" Pulse's voice cut through his earpiece, sharp and commanding. "I'm here. What's the call?" Alex responded, pulling his mind back to the task at hand. Pulse, the tactician of the Wolves, was a genius when it came to strategy. The tactician is the only class who gets to oversee the entire map by pressing a button live during the match. And her eyes seemed to see the whole game at once, anticipating moves and counter-moves before they even happened. It was Pulse who had designed the play they were running now, a risky move, but one that could win them the game if executed perfectly. "They're pushing hard on Titan. Patch is covering him, but we need to bait them. Shadow and I are setting up a flank. You hold here, wait for my signal," Pulse instructed, her voice calm under pressure. Alex scanned the battlefield. Titan was taking heavy fire from the opposing team. The tank has 10 times the hitpoint of a

striker so he can handle it for now. But not endlessly, Alex and Shadow had to hurry, but a Striker got double the speed and jump height of other classes so they are the perfect players to do so. Patch, their engineer, tried repairing Titan's shield but it was taken apart immediately. After he tried to build a wall for Titan to hide behind. But their enemies weren't fools. They knew taking out Titan would cripple the Wolves' defense. The wall was destroyed before it was erected.

Alex clenched his fists inside his VR gloves, feeling the tension of the joystick as he shifted his position slightly, waiting for Pulse's cue. His role as a striker was to hit hard and fast, to exploit any weakness in the enemy's formation. But right now, the opposing team was playing it safe, holding back, waiting for the clock to run out. An all-caps message appeared in Alex's field of view.

“TITAN HAS FALLEN!”

As the message "TITAN HAS FALLEN!" appeared on his HUD, a familiar wave of anxiety surged through Alex. They were running out of time. The clock was ticking down, and Gauntlet, the enemy's tank, was still standing.

“Now!” Pulse's voice rang out suddenly, sharp and decisive.

Alex moved instinctively, his body responding before his mind caught up. The world blurred as he darted forward, narrowly avoiding a barrage of incoming fire. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pulse and Shadow break from their flanking positions, catching the opposing team off guard.

He knew what had to be done. His fingers squeezed the triggers, sending precise shots at their distracted strikers. Two headshots each, and they were down. The enemy tactician fell after, and the engineer barely had time to react before Alex dropped him with a single shot.

Only Gauntlet remained. Half-health or not, Gauntlet's sheer presence was enough to intimidate even the most seasoned players. “Don't hold back. Everything we've got!” Pulse commanded. The

Wolves unleashed their arsenal, battering Gauntlet with everything they had. His health bar plummeted, but then, with a roar, Gauntlet activated berserk mode. The rate of his fire increased, it was going to be close.

Patch fell first, then Pulse.

Alex's heart hammered in his chest. He couldn't let them lose. Not now. Not when he screwed up earlier. It wasn't just about this match. It was about New Europe's future. The thought of hosting the World Cup, revitalizing cities, and giving millions of people hope, surged through him like electricity. He could almost see the future, bustling markets and children watching the matches, their eyes wide with hope.

But then, the message he dreaded flashed across his screen.

“SHADOW HAS FALLEN.”

Now it was just him. Alone.

Gauntlet charged, fury in every step, and Alex could feel his body gear pulsing, warning him of his critical health. His vision flickered as his HUD glowed red. There was no time to think, only react. His movements became instinctual, a dive to the left, a quick turn, his hands gripping the VR controls tightly.

Time slowed as they barraged each other with shots both going towards the 0 hitpoints.

His screen went black.

Two agonizing seconds passed. Had he lost?

Then, the words flashed across his visor.

“NEW EUROPE WOLVES WIN.”

The arena erupted in chaos, the crowd's deafening roar shaking the walls of the sphere-shaped stadium. Before Alex could react, he felt Shadow's arms wrap around him in a triumphant hug, their visors still on.

He had done it. They had done it.

But as the adrenaline began to wear off, a different weight settled in his chest. The qualifiers were next. And this, this was just the beginning. As Alex pulled off his visor, the howling of the crowd hit him like a physical wave. Thousands of voices merged into one incredible howl that echoed throughout the enormous sphere-shaped arena. The signature chant of New Europe's Wolves filled the air: a long, drawn-out wolf howl followed by the rhythmic clapping of hands. Alex smiled, feeling the vibration of the sound deep in his chest.

The howl was more than just a chant. It was a promise, a connection between the team and the people of New Europe. It was a call to stand together, to fight for survival in a world where everything seemed to be crumbling. For Alex, that sound always stirred something deep inside him, a reason to fight so hard in the arena.

Izumi "Shadow" Sato gave Alex a quick nudge, her usual playful smirk lighting up her face. "We did it, Captain. Never doubted you."

Knowing Pulse calls the shots during the match you almost forget Alex is the captain. However, this title signals the off-screen responsibilities. Alex needs to talk to the press and hype up the crowd. He is also an expert motivator in the locker room.

Alex laughed, still catching his breath. "Close call. I thought Gauntlet had me for sure." "Would've been embarrassing if he had, wouldn't it?" Marcus "Titan" Williams, grumbled as he approached, his massive frame still encased in the heavy, damage-pulsing gear. He looked exhausted but triumphant. Pulse and Patch joined them, their visors removed and sweat dripping from their brows. Pulse, always the calm strategist, wore a satisfied grin. "It went as planned... mostly." "Mostly?" Patch, the team's Engineer, scoffed. "Gauntlet nearly turned us into minced meat out there!"

But there was no real bitterness in his voice. Patch was used to being the team's mechanic, fixing what broke both inside and outside the game. His grumbling was part of the team's post-match routine, a

ritual to shake off the adrenaline. "At least the fans got their money's worth," Pulse said, glancing up at the thousands of cheering spectators. But Alex, next time don't miss the core. No need to make it so exciting. You sure made up for your mistake though. For a moment, Alex let himself bask in the triumph the crowd feels. The flags of New Europe waved proudly in the stands, a blend of old EU symbols reworked into a new identity. The Wolves were more than a team, they were a symbol of hope, a symbol of defiance, and every victory they achieved sent a message to the rest of the world that New Europe was not to be underestimated.

As the fans continued to chant, some began waving homemade banners and signs. Many were painted in the Wolves' iconic black-and-grey colors, with slogans like "Hunt Together, Win Together" and "For the Future of New Europe." Children in the crowd wore replica VR gloves, bouncing excitedly on their feet. They looked at the Wolves like heroes. Alex had been one of those kids once, watching from the slums, dreaming that maybe one day he'd be up there too. He knew how much this sport meant to them. It wasn't just entertainment. For many, it was a lifeline, a distraction from the harsh realities of their world. Every match felt like a battle for survival, and every win was a reminder that they could still fight back.

"You see that kid over there?" Alex pointed to a small boy near the front row, wearing a homemade version of Alex's jersey, complete with a number 35 and "Specter" scrawled across his back in shaky handwriting. The boy's face was painted in grey and black, his eyes wide with awe as he waved furiously at the team. Shadow followed his gaze and chuckled. "Looks like you've got a fan club, Specter." Alex smiled, but inside, a familiar weight tugged at him. It wasn't the adoration that bothered him, it was the pressure. These kids didn't just see him as an athlete. They saw him as a savior, someone who could pull New Europe from the ashes of its former glory. And that kind of responsibility never left him.

As the team made their way off the platform, escorted by security and met with a barrage of camera flashes and reporters, Alex felt the exhaustion beginning to catch up to him. His legs felt heavy, his mind

still buzzing with the match. But there was little time to rest. The World Cup qualifiers were next week, and the exhibition win had only fueled the fire of expectations. "Hey, you did good out there," Pulse said, speeding up to walk beside him. Her tone was matter-of-fact, but there was a warmth in her voice that Alex appreciated. "Thanks," Alex replied, running a hand through his damp hair. "Couldn't have done it without your play calling." "True," Pulse teased, before softening. "But don't forget to give yourself some credit. We follow you because we trust you." Alex nodded, appreciating her words more than he let on. The team was a unit, a pack of wolves, but every member brought something unique. Pulse, with her unparalleled tactical mind; Shadow, with her lightning-fast strikes and relentless spirit; Titan, the unshakable wall between them and defeat; Patch, the creative genius always ready to adapt and rebuild. And then there was Alex, the captain, the face of the team, the one who bore the weight of their victories and their losses. He wasn't just playing for himself anymore. He was playing for all of them, the millions who depended on their success.

As they reached the locker room, the howling of the fans still echoing faintly in the distance, the team began to peel off their gear, groaning in relief. The pulsing vibrations of their body gear, simulating the damage they'd taken during the match, had taken its toll.

"Qualifiers next week," Patch muttered, stretching out his arms. "You think we're ready?" "We have to be," Alex said, his voice steady. "Not just for us. For everyone." For a brief moment, silence fell over the room. The weight of his words sank in, and they all knew he was right. This was more than just a game. It was a lifeline. Shadow broke the silence with a grin. "Well, if we play like we did today, we've got nothing to worry about." "Just don't miss the Vortex again, Specter," Titan rumbled, a smirk tugging at his lips. Alex rolled his eyes, but the memory of his hand passing through the Vortex Core still gnawed at him. It had been so subtle, so fleeting, but something about it felt... wrong. He pushed the thought aside, not wanting to dwell on it now. They had won, and that was what mattered.

As they packed up, Alex felt a surge of determination. The next match wasn't just another game. It was the beginning of the real battle, the qualifiers, the World Cup, the chance to bring hope to millions. But there was something else too, a nagging feeling at the back of his mind. The glitch. It hadn't happened again since that moment in the match, but it was there, present in the shadows of his thoughts. He shook his head. There would be time to figure it out later. For now, they only had to talk to the official of the VEE and then they had a victory to celebrate and a world to prove wrong.

As the team made their way out of the locker room, the energy from the crowd still hummed in the distance. The mood was relaxed but Alex asked for focus because meeting the official was next, this was necessary to officially confirm the victory. Standard procedure, but important. Vortex Extended Enterprises (VEE) was in charge of every part of the game, from the arenas to the rules to the advanced VR gear that powered it all. No win was final until VEE had signed off. Alex led the team down a series of corridors beneath the stadium, his mind still buzzing with thoughts of the match, and that strange glitch. He hadn't mentioned it to the others, not yet. But he knew he couldn't just let it slide. They arrived at a sleek conference room where the VEE official, a woman with sharp eyes and even sharper attire, was ready for them. Her name was Clarissa Dael, one of the top-ranking representatives from VEE and known for being as cold and efficient as the company itself. Alex and his team had dealt with Clarissa before. On the surface, she seemed courteous and efficient. But they knew her to be ruthless when crossed. A few seasons back, she'd banned an opponent for life after he mispronounced her name during a hearing for the use of hacked gear, even though the usual penalty for using hacked gear was just a year. The man had taken his own life a few months later.

"Congratulations, New Europe Wolves," Clarissa said, standing as they entered. She extended her hand, a thin smile on her lips. "An impressive performance, especially given the pressure of the upcoming World Cup qualifiers." Alex shook her hand, though the warmth of celebration was dampened by the questions in his mind.

"Thank you," Alex said, his voice steady but carrying an edge of caution. "It was a tough match, but we pulled through."

Clarissa nodded, her eyes briefly scanning over the rest of the team before gesturing for them to sit. "I've already reviewed the footage, and the victory is confirmed. I'll file the report now, and your points will be added to the standings by the end of the hour. As always also warm congratulations from Kylie Bentara herself"

Kylie Bentara started in 2046 as CEO at VEE. She took VEE to the next step in their evolution calling herself president. I have never met her, but every time you win, they get "personal congratulation". At the finals last year, her words echoed through the arena: "Vortex has changed my life, as it changed yours. It's no longer a game, it's a way of life." Her gaze had swept over the crowd. "The only future worth living. At VEE, we're here to increase your quality of life, not just in the game, but through real means." Not long after VEE started a chain of new universities for poor students (on top of the ones they already had) and several new charity organizations providing food for the poor, mostly in New Europe. We should be happy VEE is doing this, but they are so powerful. Suddenly Alex snaps out of it. We were busy finalizing the match.

The room was filled with the quiet clicks of her fingers tapping across a holo-screen she was sitting behind, finalizing the paperwork that made their victory official.

While the others relaxed slightly, chatting amongst themselves, Alex leaned forward, he couldn't let the moment slip. "There's something I need to bring up." Clarissa paused, her fingers hovering over the screen. "Go ahead." Alex hesitated for a moment, then decided to press on. "During the match... there was a moment when my hand went right through the Vortex Core. No damage, no feedback, nothing. It was like it wasn't even there." Clarissa's sharp eyes flicked to him, her expression unreadable. She waited for a beat before replying. "The Vortex Core? Are you certain?" "Yeah. It wasn't a missed grab, my hand passed right through it," Alex said, keeping his voice steady but firm. "I don't know what it was, but it didn't feel like

a player error. There was no feedback from the system at all." Clarissa frowned, her fingers flying across her screen to pull up the segment of the match. A holographic display projected the footage in mid-air, rewinding to the exact moment Alex had described. They watched as Alex's hand went for the Vortex Core, but passed through it without the usual collision or resistance. Clarissa's frown deepened as she studied the footage. For a moment, she said nothing, but Alex could sense the wheels turning behind her icy demeanor. After a long pause, she spoke. "It's unusual, I'll admit. But I've seen this sort of thing before. It's not the game itself. The issue is likely with the stadium's connection to the VEE servers." Her voice was measured, and Alex could sense she was choosing her words carefully.

"Occasionally, in older venues like this one, there can be latency issues. A minor lag spike in the system could cause a momentary desynchronization, making it seem like the Vortex Core wasn't there when, in fact, it was." Alex wasn't convinced. "Are you sure? It didn't feel like lag. It was... clean. Almost like the Core wasn't even part of the game." Clarissa's lips thinned. "I understand your concerns, Alex. But I assure you, the integrity of the Vortex system is unparalleled. VEE has invested billions into ensuring that glitches like the ones you're describing simply don't happen within the core framework of the game."

Alex could feel the shift in her tone. She wasn't just defending the stadium; she was protecting VEE's reputation. Vortex wasn't just a sport. It was a global phenomenon, an industry worth trillions. If word got out that the system could fail, it would send shockwaves across the earth. Clarissa wasn't going to let that happen. "It's standard protocol to investigate anomalies like this," she continued, her tone diplomatic. "I'll have the technical team review the logs and the server connections here in the stadium. But I can assure you, it's nothing more than a minor network hiccup. The game's integrity stands."

Alex leaned back in his chair, not fully convinced but realizing he couldn't get much more from her. Clarissa's gaze softened slightly as if sensing his lingering doubts. "I understand your position, Alex. As

captain, the responsibility weighs heavily on you. But trust me, VEE has the best engineers and technicians in the world. If there had been a failure in the core system, we would know." The rest of the team stayed silent, listening to the exchange. Most of them trusted the VEE system, it had never let them down before. But Alex couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this. That glitch hadn't been random. Something was off. "Alright," Alex finally said, though the unease in his chest remained. "Just make sure it doesn't happen again. The World Cup is too important for technical issues." "Of course," Clarissa replied, her smile returning. "VEE is committed to ensuring a seamless experience for all players, especially with the World Cup qualifiers coming up. Your concerns have been noted, and we'll take the necessary steps."

With that, the conversation shifted back to the formality of the win confirmation. Clarissa wrapped up the final details, and within moments, their victory was officially logged into the system. As they left the room, Alex couldn't help but glance back at Clarissa. Her cool, corporate demeanor hadn't faltered once, and while she'd given him a plausible explanation, something about her reaction had left a bitter taste in his mouth.

The VEE controlled everything. Every match, every arena, every piece of equipment. They had reshaped the world with Vortex, pulling nations together and creating a sport that transcended borders. But with that kind of power came secrets. And Alex had a sinking feeling that this glitch might be the first crack in a much bigger façade.

As the team moved toward their celebratory event, Shadow nudged him. "You good, Captain?" Alex forced a smile. "Yeah. Just thinking about the qualifiers." But in the back of his mind, the glitch remained, gnawing at him. "Are you going to the draw tomorrow?" Shadow asked. Tomorrow is the draw for the qualifiers. The qualifiers work in two steps. You play two games in a home stadium and two in an away stadium. This is different for some teams, but because of our success last season, we got lucky. "I think I'll show my face digitally from home. No use traveling to Brussels for a ceremony where I'm

not really needed”. Brussels is the VEE headquarters, they have a huge room where all the draws take place, but the traffic is a pain, especially during ceremonies, So Alex avoids going there at all costs. VEE does not mind mostly, as long as you log in to give a facial expression when your opponent is made official.

“I hope we get lucky and take the World Cup tournament to New Europe” Shadow added. “It would mean so much for the fans, not to mention the economy” I responded. Being a New European I know exactly what it means to live on the edge.

The formation of New Europe in 2041, a federation of former EU nations, was a direct response to the instability sweeping across the globe. The countries in Europe had crumbled under the weight of internal conflicts and a crashing economy, and in its place rose several new countries and alliances. New Europe was one of them, a coalition that banded together to survive in a world where resources were dwindling, and war seemed inevitable. In this fragile political landscape, New Europe consists of the provinces of England, The Netherlands, Belgium, and France. New Europe is neighbored by Germany, Italy, The Celtic Federation, the Scandinavian Republic, and Spain. All countries are economically and technologically more advanced. The only thing New Europe got going for them in the last five years is a Vortex team that keeps getting better and better and better!

But New Europe was far from the only power on the Vortex stage. The qualifiers for the upcoming Vortex World Cup were a fierce competition, with only the best teams from each nation making it to the global tournament. Among the most feared opponents were teams like the Texas Cavalry, representing the Republic of Texas, which declared its independence in 2035 after breaking from the United States they’d forged their own path, becoming a powerful state in its own right. The Texas Cavalry were known for their relentless aggression and tactical brilliance, with a penchant for storming the Vortex Core in an all-out attack.