

LOADING



Chapter 1 (The Game: No-Life)

The artificial intelligence known as Sibyl spawned a virtual environment from its colossal database. Billions of bits of data swarmed across the blank stage, their brilliant green glow giving light to the darkness. In the wake of their glow, old-fashioned stone buildings, buttressed by thick columns, began to take shape and form. Cheering spectators filled the stands even as they were created. The ancient landscape was marred by the central network's base of operations, represented by a gleaming skyscraper of epic proportions.

Sibyl always followed proper protocols for handling new users. A connection by a non-digitized player meant that an additional set of subroutines had to be engaged alongside the normal loading sequence. A scan of the immersion capsule captured a perfect rendering of the occupant and applied it to the user's avatar. Player Twelve was injected with stimulants and his brain activity spiked. Somewhere far removed from his virtual existence, a machine whirred to life. The player gained feeling in his limbs and his vision flickered as his mind connected to the virtual environment. As final preparations were made and response times and delay accounted for, the contestant's nervous system was linked to his avatar.

"Ready... start!"

The only thing Player Twelve could remember about himself was his name, Ekko Everlasting. Ekko was surrounded by a pixelated tornado

that obscured his vision, and he bent his knees instinctively. The motion was hardly necessary; in the low gravity environment he floated to the ground leisurely, like a falling feather. He reached behind his back and closed his hands around two foreign objects strapped to his waist. With a flourish, he freed two ray guns from their holsters, holding them up casually for his inspection.

A bolt of fear shot through him, and he leapt to the side without thinking. A black beam tore through the space where he'd been standing a moment before. When the dark energy came into contact with a column, a huge chunk was torn out of the stone. A shower of rocks rained down on Ekko's crouching form as his eyes followed the beam to its origination point. A man of small stature, half-hidden by a building, squinted at the empty space where his target had been.

"One and counting," Ekko said tonelessly.

Ekko raised his guns, their carbon fiber exoskeletons too light in his unflinching grip. He aimed for the player's exposed face and squeezed down on the hyper-responsive triggers. Without waiting to see whether he'd hit his mark, he pushed off the ground and leapt twenty feet into the air. When he touched down, he landed lightly on his toes atop a stone column. He froze in a bizarre pose with his arms outstretched like the wings of a stone gargoyle.

Eyes closed, he flipped through the air like an acrobat, arms tucked against his chest until he reached the zenith of his arcing jump. His arms shot out and beams of green light spiraled through the air, carving a swathe of destruction across the battleground. The maneuver caught two players in matching outfits out in the open. They perished instantly, their bodies exploding in a shower of pixels.

"Three," Ekko said.

Immediately after making contact with an ancient-looking stone building, he charged up the wall like it was a flat surface and not perpendicular to the ground. The unorthodox move revealed a sniper's nest, and a female sharpshooter was wiped out before she could reorient her weapon on the new threat Ekko represented. He holstered his guns, their superheated barrels leaving twin trails of smoke in his wake as he sprinted the rest of the way up the side of the building.

“Four,” Ekko said.

He put everything he had into the last step, sending himself soaring across the magenta sky. An invisible barrier stopped his vertical ascent, and after a fraction of a second’s indecision, Ekko redirected his momentum into a diagonal path that intersected with the ground below. Two distinct beams converged on him as he plummeted towards the earth, and a particularly skilled marksman lit up the position where his trajectory would logically land him at.

Wind tossed his unkempt hair as his body jerked like he’d touched a live wire. Ekko patted his overheated guns experimentally and waited impatiently while the infuriatingly slow recharge function took effect. Three seconds before he touched down, he drew and fired both weapons lightning fast. He put away one ray gun just in time to catch the edge of a stone pillar with his left hand. Shielded from hostiles for the moment, he hung there tiredly, his sides heaving with exhaustion.

“Five,” Ekko said, his voice raspy.

“Three players remaining. Sudden death mode activated,” Sibyl announced over the universal comm line.

The virtual landscape underwent a dramatic alteration. Stone buildings and columns disintegrated, and Ekko fell the rest of the way to the surface when his pillar simply ceased to exist. Without any cover to hide behind, the three remaining players were all in full view of each other. The two more experienced players reacted first, but quick reflexes saved Ekko from being hewn in half by a blue beam.

He threw himself into a sliding crouch across the ground, hoping to make himself more difficult to hit by becoming a moving target and exposing only a fraction of his body. A near miss by a yellow ray turned out to have a dual purpose when fired; it struck another player and knocked him out of the game. Ekko gritted his teeth and twisted to fire at the remaining contestant, but the nimble fighter avoided the attack with ease.

“And then there were two,” Ekko said.

Ekko sprang back up to a standing position and faced off with the yellow player, since there wasn’t a risk of being blindsided anymore. His keen eyes examined the visored player intently, sensing feminine features

despite the attempt at anonymity. She saluted him briefly before shooting her two ray guns with statistical precision. Ekko's evasive potential was drastically reduced, it took everything he had to dodge the beams—there was no room for a counterattack.

“Sorry, noob, but this win is *mine*,” a feminine voice said, too-sweetly.

He was certain his opponent would be more than capable of shooting him out of the air if he relied on aerobatics to evade. Ekko kept to the balls of his feet and relied on his instincts to keep from being boxed in by the deadly pattern while he thought furiously for a way to end the game before he was caught.



Dead End 1

Option 1: Expend the last of your energy to launch an all-out assault to end the match. Go to page 13.

Option 2: Retreat behind cover that could shelter you long enough to get a jump on the other player. Go to page 11.

Option 3: If you're an indecisive player, turn to the next page and you'll be led down the primary route. Go to page 13.

GAME OVER

Ekko couldn't see an opening that he could take advantage of, but that wouldn't stop him from trying. He leapt backwards, twisting his body like a pretzel to avoid the deadly beams closing in on him from all sides. By the time he realized he wasn't going to fit through the too-small gap, it was too late. Running away was the wrong move.

"I guess this is Game Over," Ekko said.

There'd been a split-second where he could've turned things around, but he'd played it all wrong. He'd been outmaneuvered by a skilled opponent—pure and simple. The concentrated beams cut him to the quick, sinking through flesh and bone like a hot knife through butter. He was cut into quarters by the first pass. Each attack came faster than the last, slicing him into bite-sized chunks of flesh in mere moments.

A shadow blocked out the light. "This is how No-Life works, so I won't apologize to a noob that doesn't know the first thing about the game."

Ekko laughed uproariously—it hurt. "I don't know the first thing about myself, let alone some game I've never heard of before, let alone played."

He didn't know much of anything, but it didn't take a genius to learn that in No-Life, the tiniest misstep meant death. He covered his mouth and coughed. When he removed his hand, it was stained red with blood. Already his fingertips had begun to disintegrate.

A yellow beam lanced through his ribcage and revealed his steaming intestines. “You have no one to blame but yourself. Had you committed yourself to martial studies as I did, at least you would have died with dignity.”

Ekko’s wrist disintegrated into bits of data that decayed rapidly after being separated from his avatar. Both his legs had been cut out from under him; all that was left of his lower body were two uneven lumps of flesh. He stopped worrying about whether he’d walk again when the greenish-black sinkhole appeared to swallow his virtual existence whole. He trembled in the face of the total erasure of everything he was or would be.

CONTINUE



One idea rose above the rest and he put it into play before he could think twice about it. With the flick of his wrists, he tossed his right hand ray gun right at the player's smugly smiling face. The unorthodox move threw his opponent off, and he took advantage of the opening it gave him without hesitating. He launched himself directly at his opponent, sailing through the air in slow motion. The yellow player dodged the improvised throwing weapon, recovered, and visibly accounted for his speed and trajectory. Ekko knew he would lose as things were, and so he tossed away his remaining weapon.

The yellow beam that would have surely lost him the game went wide of its intended target. He collided bodily with the girl, sending them both tumbling in a tangle of limbs. While he flipped ass over teakettle, Ekko strained mightily and wrested the other player's weapon from her grip. By the time their momentum was consumed by the low gravity environment, he fired the stolen weapon center mass. A thin trickle of yellow energy spewed out of the barrel before it sputtered and fused itself shut from the strain of continuous, uninterrupted operation.

"Six," Ekko said, panting, as the final contestant disintegrated into little pixels.

"Player Twelve, Ekko, wins!" an announcer-type voice cheered.

Background noise that he'd been blocking out to heighten his senses filtered into his consciousness. Ekko scrunched up his face into a grimace and covered his ears. In a flash, he was forcibly teleported to the top of a podium, onto a black obelisk that rose to the height of the crowd. Vibrantly colored streamers blew up in his face and a gold cup floated triumphantly above his head. That was how Ekko Everlasting went viral after his performance on No-Life, the most popular game in the virtual universe of Elisium.