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Some skill info you'll need :

Chen Ran

Ego Extreme Realm / Extreme Realm: Chen Ran's power is described as an extreme raw-stat system rather than a complicated mechanism. His mental strength overwhelms ordinary Five-Star players; his Extreme Realm reacts extremely quickly, can reason from the knowledge/common sense available to him, and can manifest weapons (such as a sniper rifle) and enormous attacks within No-Distance. Its reasoning cannot solve a problem when his prior knowledge supplies no usable clue.

Common Sense: Chen Ran's emotions and feelings have become normalized/common sense. This makes some Superego-style mental manipulation ineffective against him.

Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm: Chen Ran's True Self system. It is associated with normalizing emotions/feelings and a recultivation method after the usual mental-state process has been disrupted. The other True Self Players can infer its broad logic from his behaviour but cannot reconstruct the actual recultivation method merely by observing him.

Eternal Kingdom : Chen Ran's True Self skill, associated with "One" and eternity. Its demonstrated effects include dispelling skills and prohibiting skill use within its effective range. At the point shown in this arc, it can neutralize a trap/skill attack before impact and seal a Secret Chamber so that other skills cannot be used there. Future/fully sublimated use can impose a more focused Eternal Prohibition on a target or item. At Seven-Star it can break through an instance boundary; at the lower level in the current chamber it cannot simply affect a separate instance or wild space beyond those boundaries.

Eternal Kingdom sub-commands : Spacetime Prohibition isolates/prohibits spacetime effects; Shrinking Earth to an Inch applies a localized prohibition to the Secret Chamber; Wheel of Time is used in the River-of-Time struggle to manipulate the temporal/weapon state. The text shows these as different applications, not three unrelated core skills.

Chen Yang

Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique : A True Self-level mind-cultivation system. One observed function is rapid recovery/stabilization of mental energy by drawing on an external resource; the investigation links Points to quantified spirit.

Chen Yang's Soldier: An externalized mental entity/personality under Chen Yang's control. It can act or speak separately, serve as a mouthpiece, conceal what the main personality is doing, and

complicate rules that count speakers/participants. Do not confuse this Soldier with Ling Chi's Ghost Path Soldier system.

Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal: Chen Yang's seal-based ability. If he is judged for a lie, the consequence falls on his *next life*, not the current body; a later judgment falls on the life after that, and so on. The skill can edit/borrow effects associated with a future incarnation and is used with Limit Imprint to copy skill effects.

Six Paths Reincarnation Ghost Seal: A distinct command in the same family. When applied to Zhang Fan, it gives a special status described as nine lives, with death affecting the next life instead of immediately killing the current self. Chen Yang fires it at Chen Ran too, but that attempt is deflected by Chen Ran's Eternal Kingdom.

Celestial Sage Emperor Seal of the Great Emperor of Mount Tai: Presented as the perfected/ultimate form related to Jiang Zhe's Samsara Emperor Seal. Its name suggests authority over life/death, the Netherworld, and fortune/misfortune, but the initial activation produces no visible result.

Samsara Emperor Seal: Jiang Zhe's seal skill, described as a simplified/branch version of Chen Yang's higher-level seal system.

Limit/Exreme Imprint: Lets Chen Yang imprint/copy skill effects, including skills Zhang Fan has devoured. Combined with the Emperor Seal and copying, it lets many Chen Yang copies carry imprinted skills. It can itself be countered/disabled by another application of Return to Simplicity; it is not an unconditionally superior True Self effect.

Reverse Future: A temporal/causal skill used to act upon or crack effects through the future. Its exact mechanics vary by combination and are not exhaustively explained here; it can be used as a countermeasure against a Secret Chamber, but fails against some effects protected by causality-severing status.

Return to Simplicity: A skill-disabling/counter effect. It can crack or suppress active skill effects, and one composite use turns Zhang Fan's skill panel grey for thirty minutes. It can also be applied back to its user, so a user may lose access to it until the skill state is reset.

Radiant Three-Kills: Chen Yang's three-move sword sequence used against Chen Ran's different mental-state manifestations. Its named moves here are Heaven and Earth One Sword, Heavenly Emperor One Sword, and Heaven's Will One Sword. The swords penetrate into No-Distance and destroy the mental constructs there; the sequence leaves Chen Ran's consciousness vulnerable to the Black Lotus possession.

Zhang Fan

Dust Ruins Spirit Transformation: Zhang Fan's dangerous True Self-level system, associated with devouring other players' skills. Skill acquisition allows him to expand an enormous library of techniques and is the basis of his potential to keep growing.

Dao Heart Demonic Seed: A parasitic mind-cultivation system. It sends strands/hairs into a target's mental energy, drains it, and grows a Black Lotus in the target's consciousness. If allowed to grow, it can consume emotional components and progressively take over the target's consciousness/system, enabling possession rather than merely controlling the body. Its spread across timelines would make it particularly dangerous.

Black Lotus: The manifestation planted by the Dao Heart Demonic Seed. It drains mental energy and can possess a host, gradually transforming the host's consciousness into the possessor's. It can be destroyed or crushed by sufficiently powerful external intervention.

Mind Follows Will: A command-type skill Zhang Fan devoured. Its key stated benefit is that he can activate/use other skill effects by thought alone without speaking the full commands. It is later described as having a passive aspect. In combination with a Straw Man, it helps him fake or survive an apparent death.

Straw Man: A decoy/substitute that can take the apparent lethal result (shown with a bullet-pierced head) while Zhang Fan survives. Its demonstrated use depends on Zhang Fan's Mind Follows Will; it is not evidence that he is literally immortal without conditions.

All Rivers Run into the Sea: Zhang Fan's skill framework for a large library of acquired effects. It appears in composite commands with Karma/Causality, Time Stop, Empathy, Holographic Perspective, Night Rain Slows Down, Return to Simplicity, and other effects.

Ling Chi

Ghost Path Soldier: A True Self system/mind-cultivation method that allows the user to externalize a controlled Soldier. A Soldier can act or speak separately and may be treated as a separate participant by a Secret Chamber's rules depending on when it came into existence. This lets Ling Chi manipulate turn order and judgments as well as fight. Maintaining an external Soldier costs spirit.

Supreme Goodness is Like Water: Ling Chi's state-of-mind/mental-attack system used with Ghost Path Soldier. The ten realms of the mind-cultivation system can yield different mental-rule attacks. Named manifestations shown in this span include:

Joy : assimilates mental attacks directed at Ling Chi.

Anger : can transform/redirect assimilated attacks into attacks against another target; in the initial test, attacks aimed at Ling Chi are redirected toward Chen Ran and strengthened.

Pleasure : a rule-based mental attack; the text says a target can break it by understanding/cracking its rule.

Sorrow: a mental-state manifestation inside No-Distance that can be targeted by a Black Lotus.

Music : a mental-rule attack manifested as soldiers singing the Songs of Chu and surrounding the target; Chen Ran reasons his way through its direction/imagery and shoots his way out.

Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction (also associated with Ling Chi's Jie Mie system): Skill destruction. The demonstrated condition matters: Zhang Fan first establishes a causal bridge between Death Rewind and Ling Chi's skill. Ling Chi can then destroy Death Rewind, remove it from hundreds of An Sheng's avatars, and even break Spring and Autumn Brushwork's ability to create new teammates carrying that skill. This is not shown as a free, unconditional “erase anything at any time” ability.

Andersen Fairy Tale Squad and the Secret Chamber

Death Rewind : It is a rollback/rescue mechanism tied to a death condition; An Sheng can have teammates carry/retract it, making permanent kills difficult. In the four-way mental test it does not trigger, leading the characters to infer that ordinary mental attacks do not satisfy its trigger. Ling Chi eventually destroys it after the causal link is established.

Spring and Autumn Brushwork : An Sheng's skill for creating teammates/avatars from written “Article” content. It can create many avatars with skill loadouts, and an avatar can be removed by crossing out its article. After Ling Chi destroys the Death Rewind effect, Spring and Autumn Brushwork can still create teammates but can no longer give them Death Rewind.

Mutual Aid / Mutual Support : It is discussed alongside Spring and Autumn Brushwork as part of what sustains/constructs the Andersen Squad's Secret Chamber. Its standalone mechanics are not fully explained here.

Possession / emotion, common-sense and feeling manipulation: The Andersen Squad's broader plan includes attempts to exploit players' emotions/common sense/feelings. The arc shows these methods becoming ineffective or unreliable against Chen Ran's normalized state and the four True Self Players' counters.

Copying, causality, cards, and information-gathering skills

Causality / Karma : These are used to connect a skill's effect to a target, track causes across spaces/timelines, and make an effect reach corresponding avatars. Zhang Fan's causal link is what allows Ling Chi's skill destruction to reach Death Rewind and its copies.

Empathy : After identities are swapped, the user can receive the other person's memories. Chen Yang uses/imprints it as part of attempts to obtain Zhang Fan's cultivation information and later to steal the Ghost Path Soldier system from its moment of enlightenment.

Night Rain Slows Down : Slows the flow of time in the Secret Chamber by about ten times, as shown by the characters' watches.

Holographic Vision : Shows a remote scene (for example, the basement cell) to the user.

Holographic Perspective : Lets the user observe the Eighteenth Floor remotely. Error of Karma can corrupt/redirect what the user sees, so the apparent scene may be a decoy rather than the real target.

Supreme Card : A status/card skill associated with Du Hongnian. Different cards have different effects; the text suggests a 54-card set. Examples shown:

Two of Hearts : increases spirit tenfold.

Eight of Spades : reverses cause and effect.

Heart 8 : used to graft a cause-and-effect relationship onto Chen Yang so effects from the other Floor Masters can reach him.
The card suite also interacts with severing cause and effect, so a generic “Reverse Future” attempt does not necessarily bypass it.

Error of Karma : A causality-command skill with a passive protection: other people's skills do not directly affect its user; the effects are redirected to other people instead. It brands affected people with a lollipop mark and can redirect the consequences through slaves/other targets, disrupting Zhang Fan's remote observation/attack plan.

Guest Returns to Hometown : It has a bounce/relative-return effect that can redirect causal-linked skills to their origin. It cannot bounce a Dispel after the skill has already been dispelled.

Flowers in the Mirror, Moon in the Water : A duplication-type skill; in the demonstrated combo, mirrors appear and copies emerge from them.

Life is a Long Regret, Like Water Flowing East : Combined with Flowers in the Mirror, Moon in the Water, it yields Infinite Replication, producing countless copies rather than a limited set of duplicates.

Infinite Replication: The combination skill that allows numerous copies to exist at once. Chen Yang uses the copies with imprinted Six Paths Emperor Seal effects; in the time-travel contest, copies also go to earlier points in time to intercept Zhang Fan.

Yīn Chā Yáng Cuò: Chen Yang imprints this to mark Han Fei, then combines the mark with Du Hongnian's Two of Hearts effect so that No-Distance can act upon Han Fei. The skill's complete standalone mechanics are not expanded in this passage.

Against All Odds : Mentioned as having a causal command effect that can be cracked by Return to Simplicity. Its complete effect is not established in this range.

Temporal manipulation and River-of-Time battle skills

Wheel of Time: Du Hongnian uses it to freeze Chen Yang temporarily and also to see a foresight-like effect showing multiple Du Hongnians/future outcomes in parallel Secret Chambers.

Sui Han · Gui Yuan : In the River-of-Time battle, this causes the scene to rewind to the state before Eternal Kingdom was used and restores the Pure White Liar Killer to the Cold-Faced Youth's waist, effectively enforcing an order of events/rules.

Dao Extreme · Space-Time Reincarnation · Wheel of Time · Wheel of Space : This composite is used around time paradoxes and attempts to steal Ghost Path Soldier. It pulls participants into other spaces/temporal positions and is part of the correction/reset mechanism that prevents paradoxical events from remaining on the timeline.
Radiant Three-Kills · Heavenly Emperor's Sword : In the River-of-Time fight, the mental attack manifests a crowd of players as a single enormous treasure sword whose particles/force are composed of their mental attacks. The attack is intercepted by Chains of Rules and then neutralized by Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Chains of Rules : Wraps/locks the manifested sword light so the attack can be contained.

Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss : Alters the No-Distance space and makes the sword light and Chains of Rules disappear/return to tranquillity.

Moonlight · Bo Luan · Return to the End : Named as one of the strongest strikes in the eleven-way River-of-Time clash.
Dao Heart Demonic Seed · Azure Dog Devouring Heaven : Also named among the eleven strongest strikes; its separate mechanics are not explained here beyond its association with the Dao Heart Demonic Seed.

General abilities and mechanics that affect how the skills work

Second Realm : A perception/analysis method that can reveal spirit bodies invisible to ordinary sight and track their movement/identity. It is repeatedly activated to identify externalized Soldiers.

Spirit Vision / Unity of Heaven and Man Mind Cultivation : A higher-order perspective. At high cultivation it frees thought from the limits of one time, space, instance, life/death state, or reincarnation, allowing the user to reason across the full River of Time. This is a cultivation/perception advantage, not simply remote eyesight.

No-Distance : A mental battlefield/space. At the True Self level it can appear as layered “worlds of the heart”; attacks can strike the opponent's internal mental-state manifestations rather than only their physical body.

Future-lie / timeline rules : These are not standalone attacks but constraints created by statements/actions and the River of Time. They determine whether a player can retract a skill, lend a Liar Killer across time, or change a future without creating a contradiction.

Soldier versus Black Lotus : Do not conflate the two. A Soldier is a controllable externalized mental persona associated with Ghost Path Soldier or Chen Yang's Three Corpses technique; a Black Lotus is a parasitic possession structure created by Dao Heart Demonic Seed.

TRUE SELF INFIGHTING

Chen Ran was the first to leave the basement. The moment he stepped through the exit, the passage behind him disappeared, confirming that the basement had only been an entrance into another secret chamber. The chamber itself was extremely simple. A chandelier hung in the center of the ceiling, illuminating only a square table and four chairs beneath it while the surrounding walls remained in darkness. Chen Ran stood against the eastern wall, while three other figures stood against the remaining walls. None of them could see the others' faces clearly, but all four could immediately sense that the situation was abnormal.

The mental fluctuations coming from the other three were stronger than anything Chen Ran had encountered from ordinary Five-Star Players. They were not merely comparable to Yue Guanshan. They were on another level entirely. The other three also sensed the same thing from Chen Ran, which was why none of them immediately moved. There was no reason to rush into an unknown confrontation when every person present possessed enough mental strength to make the first exchange dangerous.

The four then simultaneously took out cigarettes and lit them. Even this seemingly ordinary action carried a purpose. None of them used their Second Realm abilities to force a clearer perception of the others' faces. Instead, they remained in the darkness and observed only the four small points of fire moving in front of the walls. When the cigarettes burned down, the four men flicked their cigarette butts at almost exactly the same moment. All four butts collided above the table and landed in the center.

The moment they landed, their mental energies collided.

The collision immediately confirmed that the four systems were fundamentally different. One person's mental strength was immovable and heavy, like a mountain that could not be shaken. Another felt like countless blades pressing against the body. Another spread outward like silk, aggressive and parasitic. The last was like an enormous flood, continuously surging forward without any sign of exhaustion. Yet although all four had enough mental power to produce such pressure, none of them actually pulled the others into No Distance. They were probing one another without committing to a real attack.

Chen Ran then discovered another problem. His Ego Extreme Realm could normally provide him with information from the knowledge and common sense he already possessed, but in this case it gave him nothing useful. The other three seemed to have encountered the same limitation. Their mental fluctuations clearly differed from one another, so at least they could rule out the possibility that they were simply clones of the same person, but that did not answer the

more important question of why four people with such similar levels of power had appeared in the same Five-Star dungeon.

After another cigarette, the person in the eastern position, Chen Ran, asked the first question: what Star level were they? All four answered that they were in a Five-Star dungeon and therefore were currently Five-Star Players. That answer immediately made the situation even stranger. A normal Five-Star Player should have possessed an overwhelming advantage against other players of the same level, especially in terms of mental strength. Yet all four people here had encountered others whose mental strength was powerful enough to rival their own.

The implication was that the dungeon had deliberately gathered people who normally should not have existed together.

The next question concerned whether they could confirm that they themselves were real people. Again, all four answered that they could. This created another contradiction. From Chen Ran's perspective, he was almost certain that he was the only genuine player among the four and that the remaining three were products of the dungeon. But there was no reason the other three would not have reached the same conclusion from their own perspectives. Each person had come from a different dungeon and therefore had their own reason for believing that they were the real one.

The Liar Killers at their waists could have been used to test this, but none of them actually used them. There was too much inconsistency in the situation. The three people facing Chen Ran possessed mental strength comparable to his own, and if they had deliberately lied, there would have to be another explanation for why the lie was possible. The safest assumption was therefore that all four answers were truthful from the perspective of the person giving them.

After another period of smoking, another question was asked. All four came from Five-Star dungeons, and in each of those dungeons, their opponents had apparently reached the point where ordinary methods could no longer kill them. Their enemies had therefore attempted to eliminate them through internal conflict, which was why each had entered this secret chamber. The others confirmed that their own circumstances were essentially identical.

That allowed them to establish the first real piece of the structure. They probably came from different points along the River of Time, but Omniscient and Omnipotent were launching precision attacks against them simultaneously from different times. Their individual perspectives made each of them appear to be the real person, because each existed normally within his own timeline. Yet from a God's-eye perspective, only one of the four could belong to the true timeline, but that still did not prove that Chen Ran was the one.

The secret chamber itself could have been constructed to kill Chen Ran, but there was another possibility: the chamber could have been constructed to kill Future Chen Ran, thereby causing Chen Ran to die indirectly. In either case, Chen Ran could be connected to the intended death

without necessarily being the true-timeline player. This meant none of the four could simply identify himself as the target and work from there. They needed another method.

Chen Ran had already begun reconstructing An Sheng's strategy in his mind. An Sheng had previously tested Chen Ran's emotions and feelings and discovered that they had effectively become common sense. If ordinary deception could no longer kill Chen Ran, then the next method would have to rely on internal conflict and strategic manipulation. To construct a secret chamber capable of defeating Chen Ran in that way, An Sheng would need opponents whose abilities and reasoning could actually challenge him.

There were not many people in Hell who fit that description.

The final cigarette was flicked into the center of the table. The player in the northern position then identified himself as Chen Yang, the Fifth True Self Player, and asked the others to state their identities.

Chen Ran immediately recognized that this was the Five-Star Chen Yang, not an earlier or weakened version. He identified himself as the Tenth True Self Player. The other two followed as Zhang Fan, the Sixth True Self Player, and Ling Chi, the Seventh True Self Player.

This revelation changed the significance of everything that had happened before it. The four strongest mental fluctuations in the chamber belonged to four True Self Players whose systems had been developed independently. Their appearances were different, but their systems could be partially reconstructed simply from the qualities of their mental energy.

The first target of this reconstruction was Chen Ran. His mental strength was so powerful that the others immediately recognized a fundamental difference between his system and theirs. Chen Ran was essentially a pure stat monster. He did not appear to depend on some complicated offensive mechanism that transformed into his current strength. His underlying system itself produced an overwhelming numerical advantage.

The others therefore understood why Chen Ran was so difficult to deal with. Their own systems were more like complicated techniques: they relied on mechanisms, transformations, or special rules to produce particular effects. Chen Ran's system instead raised the fundamental parameters on which those techniques depended. Even if another player possessed a more sophisticated technique, there was little meaning to that sophistication if the difference in basic attributes became large enough.

That immediately made the others consider a more serious possibility. If Chen Ran, with his current system, were allowed to cultivate another complete system on top of those stats, the resulting combination could become even more dangerous. The three therefore instinctively regarded Chen Ran as someone who needed to be suppressed before he had the opportunity to accumulate too much additional power.

Zhang Fan was the next person they examined. His spirit did not have the heavy quality of Chen Ran's. Instead, it felt like strands of silk, aggressive and parasitic. The three could not

completely identify the system, but they could already associate it with the Dao Heart Demonic Seed.

This created a temporal contradiction. Everyone had enough information to know that Zhang Fan would eventually be sealed. If his future karma had been sealed together with him, then why was Zhang Fan standing here now? The simplest explanation was that the Zhang Fan in this secret chamber came from a point in time before the sealing occurred.

That possibility was enough to make Zhang Fan suspicious that the others already understood something about his future.

Chen Yang's mental fluctuations created a different impression. His spirit was like an endless ocean, continuously surging and seemingly incapable of being exhausted. The other three initially interpreted this as another type of stat-based system, but they quickly noticed a difference between Chen Yang and Chen Ran. Chen Yang's strength seemed to depend on conversion rather than simply possessing enormous raw reserves. The question was therefore not only how much mental energy he possessed, but how that energy was obtained, how efficiently it was converted, and what process allowed him to sustain himself.

That made Chen Yang particularly dangerous in a prolonged mental battle. If the four continued fighting without interruption, he appeared to be the one most likely to survive because he could continue recovering while the others gradually exhausted themselves.

The three naturally developed the same thought: Chen Yang should be killed first.

Chen Yang, noticing the killing intent directed toward him, was already calculating the same problem from the opposite side.

Ling Chi was the fourth. His mental attack was the purest of the four and produced a sharp sensation even without an actual attack being launched. The others could not immediately determine how his system worked. What they could determine was that nearly everything about Ling Chi's system was oriented toward combat. His killing intent was also the heaviest among them, which meant that if a fight broke out, he was unlikely to hesitate simply because the other three were True Self Players.

At that point, all four had independently reached the same basic conclusion: none of the others could be allowed to grow unchecked, and the safest choice in a real infighting situation would be to remove the others before they could reveal their full systems.

They simultaneously reached for their Liar Killers.

The other three immediately stopped when Chen Ran moved. They all possessed information about the Tenth True Self Player being the "One" and therefore the embodiment of eternity. His skill should naturally be capable of suppressing or becoming the nemesis of other skills. But before anyone actually fired, the three suddenly threw their lighters toward Chen Ran.

Chen Ran caught all three without difficulty and placed them into his pocket.

This small action caused the other three to reassess him. He had not reacted with the emotional hesitation one would expect from a normal person. His response was purely conditioned by his Self State of Mind. From this, they quickly realized that Chen Ran's current state did not simply represent an ordinary Ego. His emotions and feelings had been normalized to the point that he remained permanently within the Self State of Mind.

That deduction led directly to the underlying logic of the Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm.

The other three realized that if emotions and feelings had been normalized, then Chen Ran could no longer simply return to the normal process through which ordinary players cultivated the Self, Superego, and other states. The existence of the Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm therefore implied a method of recultivation. The three could identify the general logic of the system, but they could not reproduce the actual method because the recultivation process itself was something they had never experienced.

Chen Ran noticed that they had deduced this much after only a brief encounter. He also understood why they had reached the conclusion so quickly. The evidence was already visible in the way he behaved; they simply needed to connect the behavior to the structure of his state of mind.

The four then resumed their mutual probing, this time turning toward Chen Yang. They attacked his mental energy simultaneously, observing exactly what happened when his spirit was damaged.

Chen Yang's spirit initially declined rapidly. After approximately a minute, however, the rate of decrease stopped. His mental strength stabilized even though the three continued attacking him.

This established that Chen Yang was indeed absorbing some form of energy. But the energy being absorbed was not the spirit of the three people attacking him. They could feel that their own spirit was continuing to be expended while Chen Yang's reserve recovered through another source.

The three began considering Points.

If a living player could be regarded as a spiritual existence, and if death followed by the creation of a dungeon eventually turned the player's remaining existence into Points, then Points could essentially represent a quantified form of spirit. That would explain why Chen Yang could use Points as a resource for his system. Yet when the three examined their own Liar Killers, they found no method of directly extracting the Points stored inside them.

Chen Yang, meanwhile, recognized what they were trying to do. The others were approaching the underlying logic of his Three Corpses Transformation Technique after observing it only once.

The next experiment focused on Ling Chi.

The four recovered their spirits and then launched another round of mental probing. This time, Ling Chi's system immediately produced a contradiction. Chen Ran found himself being attacked by Skeleton Soldiers whose strength was far greater than the mental attacks Ling Chi was directing toward Zhang Fan and Chen Yang. The discrepancy was too large to be accidental.

When Chen Yang and Zhang Fan withdrew their mental energy, the number of Skeleton Soldiers attacking Chen Ran immediately decreased. This allowed them to reconstruct the interaction. Ling Chi's [Joy] was capable of assimilating the mental attacks directed toward him. Those assimilated attacks could then be affected by [Anger], transforming the original attack into a stronger attack against someone else.

This was no longer a matter of strengthening an ordinary mental attack, as Ling Chi's system could use different states of mind as different forms of mental-rule attacks. The three types of Heart Cultivation contained multiple realms, and each realm could therefore correspond to a different effect. [Pleasure], for example, had already demonstrated a rule-based quality when Yue Guanshan previously encountered it. Ling Chi's system could similarly include techniques that strengthened attacks, redirected an opponent's power, or imposed direct rules on the mental battlefield.

That explained why Ling Chi's system was difficult to predict. It was not centered around one fixed offensive mechanism. Its output changed depending on the state of mind being used.

The others attempted to reproduce the same process by enchanting their own mental attacks, but they could not immediately do so. Ling Chi, however, had also learned something from the experiment: Chen Ran's mental energy was not being assimilated in the same way as the others. Chen Ran's pure stat-based system created a fundamental difference in the underlying logic of his mental energy, making it difficult for Ling Chi's [Joy] to treat it as an ordinary mental attack.

The probing then turned toward Zhang Fan.

Zhang Fan released several strands of mental energy that attached themselves to the other three like hairs. At first, the effect was so weak that it was almost impossible to notice. The strands slowly burrowed into their mental energy and began draining it.

The three watched carefully and discovered that the hairs eventually converged into tiny Black Lotuses within their minds. The lotuses did not attack immediately. They simply remained planted there, quietly absorbing mental energy.

Zhang Fan then withdrew his mental attack and observed the result. When he released his spirit again, the Black Lotuses responded to the renewed connection and began absorbing energy at a much faster rate.

Inside Chen Ran's No Distance, the Black Lotus then changed targets. It attached itself to the version of Chen Ran representing [Sorrow]. The moment this happened, the version of Chen Ran began to fade, while his appearance gradually transformed into Zhang Fan's.

Chen Ran immediately understood that allowing the process to continue would be dangerous. Within the Self Extreme State he created a sniper rifle and destroyed the Black Lotus, turning it into mental energy. He then forced the remaining energy out of No Distance and repeatedly checked himself before confirming that Zhang Fan's influence had been completely expelled.

Chen Yang and Ling Chi went through the same process.

The experiment was enough to reveal the basic danger of the Dao Heart Demonic Seed. Zhang Fan's ability was not simply draining mental energy. It could gradually replace the target's own consciousness.

If the Black Lotus were allowed to continue developing, it could progressively consume the target's Joy, Anger, Sorrow, Pleasure, and other emotional components, then continue moving through the Unity of Heaven and Man, the Self, Ego, Superego, and ultimately the True Self. The target's No Distance could also be consumed as part of the same process.

At that point, there would no longer be a question of simply controlling someone's body, because Zhang Fan could effectively control the entire system of another player and turn that person into his puppet.

The implications were far beyond the three people standing in the chamber. Zhang Fan also possessed the ability to devour skills. If he eventually obtained a space-time type ability and could spread the Dao Heart Demonic Seed across different timelines, then nobody could be certain which allies were still acting under their own will. The possibility extended to people like Qiu Yinong, Lin Xuan, Jiang Zhe, Loss of Self triggers, opponents, and even the Floor Masters of the two major alliances.

This was why his future sealing could no longer be interpreted as an ordinary defeat. If Zhang Fan were allowed to reach the Half-Step True Self Heart Realm while fully mastering the Dao Heart Demonic Seed, players below that realm would have almost no means of resisting the possession. At the same time, his ability to devour skills would allow him to expand the problem from individual consciousnesses to entire systems.

Once the four understood this, there was little reason to continue hiding their systems from one another. They had already reached the limit of what could be deduced from observation alone. Without actual information exchange, they could not reconstruct the remaining mechanisms.

Chen Yang then looked directly at Chen Ran.

The interaction between the two revealed another problem. Chen Yang explained that before his death, he had already deduced that a place such as Hell should exist. He had therefore created nine personalities and arranged for them to kill one another. The surviving personality had

ultimately been influenced by Chen Yang and chosen to end itself, meaning that his consciousness could theoretically be recovered in Hell.

Chen Ran immediately noticed a discrepancy in the number. Chen Yang had created nine personalities, but the information currently available to him suggested that someone might have tampered with that structure. Chen Yang did not seem particularly concerned. His priority was elsewhere: he believed that the personalities he had left behind should be able to recover Chen Ran from Hell.

When Chen Ran asked whether Chen Yang had really been sent back several hundred years, Chen Yang confirmed it. From his personal perspective, however, he had only been in Hell for five days. That made his Five-Star cultivation speed abnormal, especially because he claimed that if there had not been complications involving his Superego Loss of Self triggers, he might already have reached the Superego State of Mind.

The condition he described for that advancement was particularly revealing. Chen Yang needed to kill a law-abiding good citizen in order to satisfy the requirements of his Loss of Self. He immediately clarified that he was not planning to kill Zhang Fan or Ling Chi. His intention was to rank up first and ideally return to the world of the living afterward.

Then Chen Ran asked what he intended to do if he returned.

Chen Yang answered that he wanted to kill Chen Ran.

His reasoning was based on what he called established fate. According to his deductions, Chen Ran was destined to die through an accident involving a truck. Chen Yang considered it preferable to kill Chen Ran himself because he would then be killing someone who was already destined to die rather than deliberately changing the fate of an innocent person.

He even took out a Party notebook and asked Chen Ran to explain exactly how he had been killed so that he could reconstruct the situation when he returned to the living world.

Chen Ran tried to point out the obvious problem. If Chen Yang chose not to kill him, then perhaps the original accident would not happen and Chen Ran would survive. Chen Yang responded by reframing the issue around karma. If he did not kill Chen Ran, then another cause would eventually take Chen Ran's place.

Chen Yang had investigated the original truck driver and discovered that the man had not even left his home on the day the accident supposedly occurred. Someone had interfered with the karmic line and replaced him.

That someone was Chen Yang himself.

The situation became more complicated when Chen Yang explained the truck driver's family circumstances. His wife had previously suffered an accident and lost both legs, their daughter had congenital heart disease, and the family also had elderly relatives to support. Chen Ran

immediately suspected that another True Self Player might have manufactured those circumstances, but Chen Yang's response was that it did not matter. He had not yet reached the point where he could alter that situation. Given the constraints on his own cultivation, killing Chen Ran was still the most practical way to complete the required Loss of Self while leaving the overall karmic structure intact.

Chen Ran therefore reconstructed Chen Yang's reasoning from another angle. Chen Yang did not want to kill innocent people, but he still needed to kill someone in order to complete his Loss of Self. If the person was already destined to die, then killing that person would satisfy the requirement without violating Chen Yang's own moral principle. The truck driver could not simply be substituted again, because his entire circumstance might already have been manipulated by forces beyond Chen Yang's current ability to control. Chen Ran, whose death was already embedded in the established fate, became the most convenient target.

This was essentially Chen Yang treating Chen Ran as a piece of karmic waste that could be recycled without changing the larger structure.

The conversation then shifted toward the historical nature of Hell itself. Chen Ran noticed that Chen Yang, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi were all wearing modern clothing despite having supposedly entered Hell hundreds of years before him. They had even possessed modern objects such as lighters.

That was too consistent to be ignored.

Ling Chi recognized the principle immediately. A secret chamber must contain clues, and Hell itself should therefore contain clues about its own structure. If the people who entered Hell in ancient historical periods nevertheless appeared in a modern environment, then Hell had likely always operated according to the same modern template.

Chen Ran therefore realized that the modern environment was itself one of the largest clues in Hell. His earlier inability to prove the existence of the greatest Gui Yu in Hell could be explained by the fact that he had not remained in Hell long enough to observe the full temporal structure.

This also explained why people he had killed in dungeons did not reveal information about Eternal Kingdom after becoming dungeons themselves. The dungeons they inhabited might not exist at the same point on the River of Time as Chen Ran's own dungeon. Unity of Heaven and Man's interference further complicated this by deliberately preventing Chen Ran's abilities from being exposed across incompatible points in time.

There was, however, one possible exception: Chu Yun.

Chu Yun currently existed in a superposition of life and death. If Unity of Heaven and Man interfered with that state, a True Self Player would effectively be entering the conflict directly. That meant Chu Yun's unique condition might allow Chen Ran to kill him in a way that ordinary dungeon rules could not reproduce.

At that point, Ling Chi finally asked Chen Ran what his own future would look like.

The question was reasonable. Chen Ran was the Tenth True Self Player, separated from the other three by hundreds of years. He possessed information about their future that they could not possibly possess themselves.

Chen Yang's future was already relatively clear. Zhang Fan had a fate that was also difficult to change because Omniscient had already identified him as a threat. Zhang Fan himself acknowledged that he could theoretically hide, retreat behind the scenes, and grow slowly, but the existence of Omniscient made that unrealistic. His eventual sealing was therefore not something that could simply be avoided through caution.

Ling Chi's answer was more complicated, and Chen Ran described him as having become a Death Row Inmate. Ling Chi did not treat that as a final death sentence because, in Hell, there could still be many possibilities as long as ultimate death had not occurred.

That led Chen Ran into a much larger reconstruction of the True Self Players' chronology.

The First True Self Player was in the Eternal Land. The Second was Unity of Heaven and Man. The Third and Fourth were Omniscient and Omnipotent. Chen Yang was the Fifth in the River of Time. Zhang Fan should logically have been the Sixth, but Chen Yang's return to the past altered the sequence. Supreme Perfect Enlightenment therefore occupied the Sixth position, while Zhang Fan became the Seventh. Ling Chi became the Eighth and had entered the Death Row Inmate state. The Ninth True Self Player was the person surnamed Li, also associated with the River of Time. Chen Ran was the Tenth.

That created a contradiction with the information Chen Ran had previously received about a True Self Player being labeled as an NPC and trapped in a dungeon. By this numbering, that person should have been Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. Yet the information associated with the Buddha and Doomsday Zombie Escape dungeons suggested that Ling Chi was the person who had been trapped.

Chen Ran therefore considered another possibility. The four True Self Players trapped in those dungeons might not have originally been NPCs at all. On the true timeline, the True Self Players could have eventually launched a counterattack against Omniscient and Omnipotent. After losing, they were labeled as NPCs and trapped inside those dungeons, forcing them to seek help from Future Chen Ran.

The Future Chen Ran involved in this possibility had to be the Future Chen Ran of the true timeline. A Future Chen Ran belonging to another timeline could not necessarily exist by that point, because those other timelines would already have diverged or disappeared. The true-timeline Chen Ran, however, would have naturally survived past the relevant point and therefore remained available to receive their request for help.

That changed the meaning of True Self Player infighting entirely. Ordinary low-Star players relied on deceptive lies, while mid-Star players could use virtual replication and similar

mechanisms. Higher-Star players could create large-scale Truman Show-type dungeons. True Self Players operated on another level because the battlefield itself could extend into the present, past, or future. The identity of the opponent could therefore depend on when the battle was being observed.

The four then continued sharing information and considered the two major dungeons, Buddha and Doomsday Zombie Escape. Their conclusion was that both had to be extremely important because even the Ninth True Self Player had participated in them. Chen Ran himself could not yet enter the Buddha dungeon as a Seven-Star Player. He would have to reach Nine-Star first and then use downward compatibility to lead a group of Seven-Star Players into a Seven-Star dungeon.

The question of Xia Ning was also connected to this.

Ling Chi had previously eliminated an effect within the power described as "omnipotent" that allowed players to enter dungeons early by subverting the causality connecting them to the dungeon. Because that ability had been removed, the reason for Xia Ning's importance became easier to understand. She was already an extremely high-Star Player and could potentially have become a Super-Self Player by the time the Buddha dungeon opened.

Chen Ran therefore concluded that Xia Ning had to be dealt with before he himself reached Nine-Star. Once the Buddha dungeon opened, if Omniscient and Omnipotent protected her, killing her would become substantially more difficult.

After the collective discussion, Chen Yang pulled Chen Ran into No Distance. Since both had systems that could not be predicted normally by Omniscient and Omnipotent, this provided them with a private space to exchange information.

Chen Yang warned Chen Ran about one point first: none of the True Self Players could simply be trusted. He considered the Ninth True Self Player especially dangerous because her obsession was unusually deep. Her attempts to change Hell's structure had produced countless time-space distortions, but Chen Yang understood why she had done so. She had failed to save the world she once lived in and therefore wanted to achieve another form of self-redemption through Hell.

He then explained the roots of Zhang Fan's and Ling Chi's obsessions. Zhang Fan had lived as a beggar, had experienced powerlessness and humiliation, and therefore developed an obsession with controlling others. Ling Chi, whom Chen Yang believed had likely been a general during the late Ming period, had experienced large-scale warfare and destruction. His response was to pursue peace by ending chaos through violence.

The common feature was that a True Self Player's obsession was far deeper and broader than an ordinary person's desire. That was why Chen Yang considered Chen Ran's obsession especially dangerous. Chen Ran hated criminals and believed in an absolute form of justice. Chen Yang did not attempt to argue him out of that belief. Instead, he warned Chen Ran that if

his obsession ever reached its extreme form, he needed to reconsider his actions repeatedly before acting.

When Chen Ran asked what Chen Yang's own obsession was, Chen Yang pointed to the structure of Hell itself. In a world where skills could create food, medicine, and basic necessities directly, humanity's fundamental survival needs no longer had to depend on ordinary material resources. Chen Ran understood what Chen Yang meant without needing the explanation to continue.

Chen Yang then gave him the more personal warning. Regardless of which time-space they occupied, Chen Ran was his brother, and Chen Yang would not allow him to be bullied. The statement was not dependent on their timeline relationship.

After Chen Yang left No Distance, Chen Ran considered whether his brother was deliberately placing something in advance for the coming infighting.

The four eventually returned to the table.

Chen Yang took out cigarettes and distributed one to each of the others. Chen Ran accepted his cigarette, crushed it, then produced cigarettes from his own pocket and handed them out. Ling Chi did the same. By the time the exchange finished, all four were crushing one another's cigarettes and lighting their own.

Zhang Fan then asked whether they needed to establish a Future Lie.

The question exposed a structural problem that would become unavoidable once the actual infighting began. The secret chamber had been constructed by the Andersen Fairy Tale Squad's combined skills. Chen Ran's Eternal Kingdom could theoretically restart the chamber. That meant anyone who fell into a disadvantage could potentially force Chen Ran to activate Eternal Kingdom and use the restart to reset the battlefield.

Chen Ran was not necessarily the only person who benefited from that possibility. The same reset could also benefit his opponents. If the three other True Self Players were losing and managed to force Chen Ran into using Eternal Kingdom, they could make use of the refreshed chamber. Chen Ran could likewise exploit the same mechanism if they were the ones who gained the advantage.

A Future Lie therefore became a question of commitment. If no Future Lie were established, the player in the worst position could attempt to force Chen Ran into restarting the chamber. If a Future Lie were established instead, Chen Ran would have to obey whatever condition they agreed upon when the time came.

The most dangerous situation was therefore obvious: if all three other players became disadvantaged and used their abilities against Chen Ran, should he activate Eternal Kingdom and reset everything, or would doing so violate whatever Future Lie they had established? The answer would determine how much control Eternal Kingdom actually provided once the four

stopped probing and began fighting seriously.

Ling Chi was not particularly surprised when Chen Ran said that he should have become a Death Row Inmate. For True Self Players, as long as a person had not experienced ultimate death, there were still too many possible ways for the future to change. Chen Ran, however, had begun thinking about a contradiction in the information he had accumulated. Someone was supposed to have been labeled as an NPC and trapped inside a dungeon, but the numbering of the True Self Players did not fit the information he had previously received.

The First True Self Player was in the Eternal Land. The Second was Unity of Heaven and Man. The Third and Fourth were Omniscient and Omnipotent. The Fifth was Chen Yang, who existed in the River of Time. Originally Zhang Fan should have been the Sixth, but because Chen Yang had traveled back into the past, Zhang Fan had been pushed back and should now be the Seventh. That meant the Sixth position belonged to Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, whose current location was uncertain. The Seventh was Zhang Fan, who was eventually sealed in the Eternal Land. The Eighth was Ling Chi, who became a Death Row Inmate. The Ninth was the person surnamed Li, also associated with the River of Time. Chen Ran himself was the Tenth.

Following that sequence, the person who should have been labeled an NPC was Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. But the information Chen Ran had received about the Buddha and Doomsday Zombie Escape dungeons suggested that Ling Chi should have been one of the people trapped there. The contradiction could not simply be ignored because the two pieces of information had come from different parts of the same larger structure.

Chen Ran therefore considered that the Buddha and Doomsday Zombie Escape dungeons might themselves be enormous traps. The statement that four True Self Players had been trapped inside dungeons could be describing a later event rather than their original fate. Another possibility was that, on the true timeline, the True Self Players had eventually launched a counterattack against Omniscient and Omnipotent and had subsequently been classified as NPCs by the two of them. Once trapped, they would have needed outside help, which explained why they would later seek out Future Chen Ran.

The important distinction was that this Future Chen Ran had to belong to the true timeline. He could not simply be a version from any other branch. Once the true timeline reached the point where the True Self Players launched their counterattack, the Chen Ran on that timeline would already have passed the corresponding point in his own history and therefore could still exist in the future. By contrast, the Future Chen Ran of another timeline would eventually disappear together with that timeline's future. The trapped True Self Players therefore had no alternative if they wanted to seek assistance from a Future Chen Ran who was guaranteed to exist beyond the point where their own defeat occurred.

Chen Ran then tried to determine which four True Self Players those dungeons contained. Zhang Fan could be excluded because if Omniscient and Omnipotent were eventually defeated, Zhang Fan's growth potential and his ability to absorb other systems would make him one of the greatest remaining threats. It would therefore make sense for him to be sealed before such a

final conflict rather than being allowed to continue developing. The Ninth True Self Player was naturally another candidate because of her involvement with the River of Time. Ling Chi was also a candidate because of his future status as a Death Row Inmate. The fourth would therefore likely be either Chen Yang or Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, depending on how Unity of Heaven and Man's situation was interpreted. If Unity of Heaven and Man had already been subjected to Magpie Occupies the Nest by Omniscient and Omnipotent, then the exact identity of the fourth trapped player became more complicated.

This also changed how the four-person infighting itself had to be understood. Ordinary low-Star Players fought through deceptive lies. Mid-Star Players could use systems such as virtual replication to create additional layers of uncertainty. High-Star Players could construct large-scale environments equivalent to Truman Show-type deceptions. True Self Players were operating on an entirely different scale. Their conflicts were not limited to the present battlefield. The battlefield could involve the past, present, and future simultaneously. A person could therefore be alive at one point in time, dead at another, sealed somewhere else, and still interfere with an earlier or later version of the same conflict through karma or causality. To understand such an infighting, it was necessary to step outside the immediate perspective of the four people sitting in the secret chamber and consider the entire time-space structure.

Chen Ran also recognized that his own existence changed the significance of this structure. The previous conflicts had occurred without his participation, so the other True Self Players could still predict the general direction of events based on the established timeline. Now that Chen Ran himself had become part of the structure, many of those deductions would become uncertain. He looked again at the Liar Killer in his hand and seemed to realize that the weapon was more useful than he had originally thought, because the four-way game would ultimately depend on forcing the others to expose themselves through their own statements.

The four continued exchanging information and reached another common conclusion concerning the Buddha and Doomsday Zombie Escape dungeons. All three believed that the two dungeons were important precisely because the Ninth True Self Player had participated in them. The fact that she had personally become involved meant that those dungeons could not be treated as ordinary high-Star content.

Chen Ran's own participation in the Buddha dungeon had an additional restriction. He could not enter it immediately because his current Star level was still insufficient. He would have to reach Nine-Star first and then use downward compatibility to bring Seven-Star Players into a Seven-Star dungeon. This meant that the timing of his advancement mattered. If the Buddha dungeon opened before he reached the necessary point, he would not be able to enter it in the form he wanted.

That immediately connected to another question: why did Xia Ning need to be killed?

The four reconstructed the reason from Ling Chi's earlier action. Ling Chi had eliminated the skill effect within the power described as omnipotent that allowed players to enter dungeons prematurely. That ability had gone beyond simple teleportation because it could erase the

causal restrictions associated with dungeon entry and forcibly make a player eligible before the normal conditions were satisfied. Once Ling Chi destroyed that function, Omnipotent could no longer use the same mechanism to send someone into a dungeon ahead of schedule.

Xia Ning was already an Eight-Star Player and was likely close to or already at Nine-Star by this point. If she completed her Loss of Self and became a Super-Self Player before Chen Ran could act, then the situation would become substantially more difficult. In particular, if Chen Ran reached Nine-Star at roughly the same time that the Buddha dungeon opened and Omniscient and Omnipotent were protecting Xia Ning, he might lose the opportunity to kill her before she completed the next stage of her development. The conclusion was therefore that Xia Ning had to be eliminated before Chen Ran reached Nine-Star, rather than waiting until the dungeon itself opened.

Chen Ran pointed out that skills were not necessarily the most important part of this battle. Zhang Fan, Ling Chi, and Chen Yang had all demonstrated that they could gain an advantage without immediately relying on their strongest skills. Their actual strength depended on the ability to understand the structure of the battlefield and use the correct skill only after the right moment had appeared. The skill itself was only the tool. The decisive factor was how the person used it and whether the surrounding rules allowed it to produce the intended result.

Chen Ran therefore proposed that the four temporarily put away their skills. The secret chamber already had one person from the true timeline and three others from different points in the River of Time. If the chamber was indeed situated within the Eighteenth Layer, then allowing Chen Ran to activate Eternal Kingdom without restriction could destroy the entire structure. He therefore demanded that everyone stop using their buffs and hidden enhancements until they had clarified the rules.

Zhang Fan accepted the proposal without resistance. He snapped his fingers and produced a tea set. A light screen appeared above the table showing that the chamber still had thirty minutes of preparation time remaining. Zhang Fan poured tea for the four people, then began explaining the role of his [Mind Follows Will].

He had obtained that skill through devouring another player. It was a command-type ability, but its greatest value for Zhang Fan was not the command itself. It allowed him to use the effects of other skills through thought alone without needing to shout the corresponding commands. Combined with his enormous collection of devoured abilities, this meant that Zhang Fan could operate a complicated system without revealing every skill simply through verbal commands.

He then proposed another way of examining the true-timeline question. The others had previously suspected that he might be the baseline timeline because his future sealing appeared incompatible with his presence in the current chamber. If Zhang Fan were the true-timeline version, then the other three would have to be versions from branches created by the Ninth True Self Player.

That raised a deeper contradiction.

The Ninth True Self Player had created countless timelines in order to find a growth route for Future Chen Ran that would eventually lead to the proper Absolute Defense. Qiu Yinong's existence was one of the criteria involved in distinguishing the timelines. If this timeline contained a Future Chen Ran because Qiu Yinong existed here, then the timeline should also produce Future Zhang Fan, Future Ling Chi, and Future Chen Yang unless something happened to them.

Zhang Fan therefore asked where those future versions had gone.

His answer was that they had been killed.

The Ninth True Self Player controlled the other timelines and had no reason to allow Future Zhang Fan or Future Ling Chi to continue existing indefinitely. If they had remained alive, they would eventually appear in the River of Time just as Future Chen Ran did. Their absence therefore suggested that the Ninth had eliminated them in advance.

That created another apparent contradiction. If the other True Self Players died on the alternate timelines, then the events of those timelines would obviously differ from the true timeline. If the events differed, Future Chen Ran should also disappear because the process through which he developed depended on those surrounding circumstances.

Zhang Fan's answer was that the Ninth did not need the alternate timelines to be completely identical in reality. She only needed to create the appearance that the other True Self Players were still alive during Future Chen Ran's development. Since the Chen Ran on the true timeline had never actually encountered the other True Self Players during those periods, he would have no method of distinguishing a genuine person from an illusion produced by the Ninth.

Therefore, Future Chen Ran could continue developing according to a history that appeared identical even though the underlying reality of the other True Self Players had already been changed.

Zhang Fan then returned to Chen Ran's own position.

Chen Ran had already confirmed that the timeline he occupied was the true timeline. He also possessed information indicating that Zhang Fan would eventually be sealed and Ling Chi would eventually become a Death Row Inmate. If the alternate timelines were controlled by the Ninth and the other True Self Players were killed there, while the corresponding players remained alive in Chen Ran's timeline, then the timeline containing all of these living True Self Players should indeed be the true one.

Zhang Fan was deliberately presenting the reasoning in a way that pressured Chen Ran to accept it.

The real dispute, however, was not simply about which timeline was genuine. It was about momentum.

If Chen Ran accepted Zhang Fan's reasoning completely, then Zhang Fan and Ling Chi could take the initiative without fear of Eternal Kingdom. They would know that Chen Ran believed his own death was not guaranteed and therefore would hesitate to activate his strongest trump card. A player who appeared unwilling to attack because he was uncertain about the rules could then become the easiest person to suppress.

Chen Ran therefore refused to concede.

He pointed out that even if Zhang Fan's reasoning appeared internally consistent, the Ninth True Self Player could have planted exactly the same information into the false timeline. If Chen Ran believed that Zhang Fan had been sealed and Ling Chi had become a Death Row Inmate only because he had been shown an artificial history designed to imitate the true timeline, then the evidence ceased to distinguish the two possibilities.

Zhang Fan responded by creating two strange players.

He proposed using them to test the theory directly. If Chen Ran really belonged to the true timeline, then Chen Yang should have been able to help him without hesitation. Chen Ran therefore reminded Chen Yang of what he had said earlier in No Distance: that Chen Ran was his brother and that this would not change regardless of whether they existed in the same time-space.

Chen Yang immediately fell silent.

He could not simply nod, because if he publicly repeated the statement as a promise, it could become a Future Lie. But his reaction itself was enough to confirm that he had said something extremely similar in private.

That created a new tactical possibility. If Zhang Fan and Ling Chi could prove that Chen Ran came from the true timeline, then the four-person struggle would effectively become Chen Ran and Chen Yang against Zhang Fan and Ling Chi. The other two therefore had to be careful not to make the test that would trigger this outcome.

Zhang Fan and Ling Chi exchanged a glance and chose not to proceed immediately. Even though Zhang Fan possessed the more convincing logical argument, Chen Ran had successfully used the surrounding rules to make them hesitate.

Chen Ran then shifted the discussion toward [Death Rewind].

He revealed that all four had previously been hit by the skill, yet none of them had triggered the rollback during their mental confrontation. This implied that mental attacks probably did not satisfy the condition required for Death Rewind. The obvious question was therefore what actually triggered it.

The rules of the chamber were already displayed on the central light screen: only one of the four could leave alive.

Death Rewind created a serious contradiction because whoever reached the point of death could potentially return through the skill. If nobody dealt with the rollback mechanism, the actual process of killing another player could become impossible.

The Andersen Fairy Tale Squad controlled the skill. If Chen Ran were the true-timeline player, then An Sheng could simply allow the other three to activate Death Rewind repeatedly whenever they reached the point of death. Chen Ran could defeat them but would be unable to permanently kill them. On the other hand, if one of those players defeated Chen Ran and An Sheng ordered his teammate to retract Death Rewind at exactly the right moment, Chen Ran could be killed permanently.

Therefore, while the true-timeline identity remained uncertain, Death Rewind created an unavoidable disadvantage for the person who was actually supposed to survive. The four could not continue the internal struggle properly without first dealing with the skill.

Chen Ran and Zhang Fan therefore turned their attention toward Ling Chi and Chen Yang.

The implication was obvious. If one of them removed Death Rewind, then whoever actually belonged to the true timeline would no longer possess the same predetermined disadvantage. But destroying the skill would also alter the providence of the other three.

The Andersen Fairy Tale Squad effectively functioned as the Heavenly Dao within the chamber. Its arrangement had already established a destiny in which three people could live and one person would die. As long as Death Rewind remained intact, the identity of the true-timeline player was linked to that predetermined death.

Zhang Fan and Chen Ran therefore needed to change the situation from certain death into uncertain life or death.

The simplest method was to destroy Death Rewind.

Ling Chi immediately understood the danger.

His Jie Mie system could extinguish skills completely. If he destroyed the Andersen Squad's Death Rewind, or erased the rollback effects attached to the other three players, then he would effectively become the new Heavenly Dao controlling the fate of the chamber. The other three could not possibly allow Ling Chi to obtain that level of authority unchecked.

Ling Chi nevertheless explained another possible solution.

He reasoned that Chen Yang's True Self Skill, as the Fifth True Self Player's system, should possess a supreme form of resurrection. Every resurrection-type skill in Hell was likely connected to his system in some way. Ordinary resurrection used a portion of that power, while Chen Yang's own skill represented the underlying principle itself.

That meant the Five True Self Player's ability could not be treated as an ordinary resurrection technique. If an ordinary resurrection skill were simply destroyed, then the user would return to death. A True Self-level resurrection system should instead operate on a deeper level, potentially allowing Chen Yang to continue existing regardless of repeated attempts to kill him.

If that was correct, Chen Yang could already possess countless possible lives through his own system. In the context of the present battle, he was therefore effectively another Heavenly Dao.

A person with countless lives fighting against three opponents who each possessed only one effective life was difficult to defeat. This was why Chen Yang's existence had to be treated differently from an ordinary combatant even before he revealed the details of his skill.

Chen Yang then turned the reasoning toward Zhang Fan.

He pointed out that Zhang Fan's Dust Ruins Spirit Transformation could devour skills and that he possessed [Mind Follows Will]. If Chen Yang were in Zhang Fan's position, he would already have prioritized absorbing skills related to time, space, resurrection, mental pollution, material creation, and mechanism or rule manipulation.

That meant Zhang Fan should already have a hidden mechanism for predicting the coming battle from another time or space.

Zhang Fan's expression changed.

The accusation was accurate. He had indeed been predicting the future from another space since the beginning of the secret-chamber struggle. But Chen Ran had already entered that prediction as an unknown variable.

In the other space, Chen Ran should have been affected by certain Superego-type mental effects. Instead, Chen Ran had deliberately behaved as though he were unaware of them. That changed Zhang Fan's predicted sequence of events and caused the future he had calculated to diverge from reality.

The reaction allowed Chen Yang, Ling Chi, and Zhang Fan to identify another part of Chen Ran's system. Chen Ran's Common Sense made him immune to some forms of Superego mental manipulation. His apparent ignorance had therefore been deliberate rather than genuine.

At this point, the others recognized what Chen Ran had been doing throughout the conversation. He was constantly pushing them into revealing information about one another while pretending that he was simply asking innocent questions. His objective was to force them to expose their trump cards and then use the resulting uncertainty to make them retract or suppress those skills.

Chen Ran's system, his Extreme Realm, and his Military Form all followed the same basic principle of breaking through whatever restriction had been placed in front of him. The three had

to take that into consideration even though none of them wanted to admit how much information they had already revealed.

The immediate priority remained Death Rewind.

Zhang Fan therefore drew his Liar Killer and used [All Rivers Run into the Sea - Karma - Death Rewind - Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction]. The causal effect immediately crossed toward An Sheng's teammate who possessed Death Rewind. Because Zhang Fan's Karma could lock onto the corresponding causal relationship, hundreds of avatars that An Sheng had created in the Eighteenth Layer were also connected to the same effect.

Ling Chi recognized that Zhang Fan had established a karmic bridge between his own skill and the Death Rewind effect. He then activated [Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction].

The result was immediate : Death Rewind disappeared.

The destruction did not stop with An Sheng's direct teammate. Hundreds of avatars in the Eighteenth Layer lost the skill simultaneously. The effect of [Spring and Autumn Brushwork] that had allowed An Sheng to create new teammates carrying Death Rewind was also damaged. Creating another teammate no longer restored the lost skill.

This exposed an important distinction in Ling Chi's Jie Mie system.

An Sheng had initially feared that Ling Chi could destroy any skill simply by activating Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction. That interpretation would make the skill essentially unbeatable because a player could either use a skill and have it destroyed or refuse to use it and gain no advantage from having it.

The destroyed version of Death Rewind, however, provided the missing condition.

Ling Chi's skill was able to destroy a skill after Ling Chi himself had been affected by that skill. The Death Rewind used against the four True Self Players had therefore supplied the necessary connection. Ling Chi had not randomly chosen Death Rewind as a target; Zhang Fan's Karma had first connected the skill to Ling Chi, allowing Jie Mie to follow that connection and destroy it.

An Sheng understood the weakness but still recognized the enormous strategic danger. If a player used a skill against Ling Chi, Ling Chi could potentially erase that same skill from existence. That meant that many of the Andersen Squad's offensive and defensive techniques could no longer be safely used against him.

The distinction between Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction and Eternal Kingdom then became clearer.

Jie Mie represented complete destruction. Once something was destroyed, the original form no longer existed. Eternal Kingdom was different because it combined destruction with

regeneration. Breaking the current structure did not necessarily mean permanent annihilation. Instead, the structure could restart from zero and generate another system.

This explained why Eternal Kingdom represented the principle of "One." The cycle of destruction and rebirth allowed a new structure to emerge after the old one was erased. Even if the Eighteenth Layer itself were destroyed, as long as its underlying participants and systems remained, another form of the same order could eventually appear.

The destruction of Death Rewind also forced An Sheng to reconsider his own Ultimate.

He remembered why the First True Self Player had chosen Chen Ran rather than himself. An Sheng's original Ultimate had been to search for truth through war. At first he believed this would allow the majority of Hell's players to participate in the process of discovering truth.

Later, during his Superego Ego Loss Tribulation, he realized the structural problem.

If the ten True Self Players remained in place, then their own Ultimates would continue determining the direction of Hell. If An Sheng wanted ordinary players to pursue truth through war, he would first have to eliminate the ten True Self Players who controlled the fundamental structure of the world.

But even after removing them, his system still had a second problem. The ordinary players remaining in Hell would naturally pursue their own interests. The resulting Hell would become a community of interests rather than a structure organized around a single coherent objective.

An Sheng therefore modified his Ultimate. Instead of simply pursuing truth through war, he imagined that whenever such a community of interests emerged, another top-down revolution would have to occur. He would become the dictator who repeatedly corrected the system.

He eventually understood why this was unacceptable. An Ultimate that required continuous patches was not an absolute solution. Every time a new problem appeared, another correction would have to be added. The resulting system could never reach a final state.

While An Sheng was still considering how to replace the destroyed Death Rewind, Zhang Fan and Ling Chi attacked again using Karma combined with [Spring and Autumn Brushwork] and Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction.

An Sheng immediately understood what they intended.

He did not remain.

He fled.

The karmic bridge connecting Ling Chi to Spring and Autumn Brushwork was severed as An Sheng escaped, preventing Ling Chi from immediately destroying the rest of the system.

Ling Chi mocked the Half-Step Author Realm for running so quickly, but Zhang Fan did not relax. He deliberately left An Sheng alive.

His reason was simple. Zhang Fan knew that he might eventually be sealed. If he left An Sheng and other troublesome figures alive, they could potentially continue causing problems for the other True Self Players after Zhang Fan's own fate was sealed. In other words, even An Sheng's survival could become a future resource for Zhang Fan.

After the destruction of Death Rewind, the four returned their attention to the remaining twenty minutes of preparation.

The Andersen Fairy Tale Squad's previous schemes had largely collapsed. Its methods for manipulating the players' emotions, common sense, and feelings could no longer determine the outcome of the chamber. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi had effectively removed the external Heavenly Dao from the equation by destroying the key causal structure that had allowed the Andersen Squad to control the ending.

The chamber's eventual outcome would therefore depend almost entirely on the internal struggle between the four True Self Players.

Chen Ran and Ling Chi each possessed a method that could overturn the entire battlefield if the wrong conditions appeared. Chen Yang and Zhang Fan, by contrast, possessed systems better suited to directly determining which side would win. None of them could afford to reveal everything at once.

The four therefore continued sitting at the table, drinking tea and smoking while gradually stripping away one another's advantages.

Chen Yang finally spoke.

He admitted that his original plan had been to deal with the other three by himself. From his own assessment, he did not believe that defeating them together would be particularly difficult.

Zhang Fan and Ling Chi immediately became alert. From the moment they met Chen Yang, both had possessed the same instinctive impression: among the three opponents they faced, Chen Yang was the one they least wanted to fight directly. Even without seeing the full details of his system, his presence created the sense that an ordinary confrontation would end badly.

Chen Yang then looked toward Chen Ran and stated that he could feel he was not the Chen Yang of the true timeline.

Chen Ran immediately asked why.

Chen Yang slowly drew his Liar Killer. Unlike ordinary weapons, the pistol was blood-red and almost impossible to look at for long. He told Chen Ran not to be in a hurry to draw his own gun.

He then pointed his Liar Killer at the ceiling.

The first command was [Celestial Sage Emperor Seal of the Great Emperor of Mount Tai].

The reaction from the other three was immediate. All three were startled because the title alone implied enormous authority. The Great Emperor of Mount Tai was associated with life and death, the Netherworld, and the fortunes and misfortunes of the mortal world. An Imperial Seal carrying the authority of such an existence should theoretically possess control over an enormous portion of Hell's rules.

Yet none of them attacked.

If Chen Yang truly possessed absolute authority over life and death, then he would never have needed to hide in the River of Time from Omniscient and Omnipotent in the first place. The actual function of the skill therefore had to be more limited than the name suggested.

Chen Yang's first command produced no immediately visible result.

He explained that this was only the opening move.

The blood-red Liar Killer gradually turned emerald green. Chen Yang then issued a second command: [Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal].

Again, the secret chamber went dark for a moment, but nothing visibly changed.

Chen Ran immediately connected the skill with Jiang Zhe's [Reincarnation Emperor Seal]. He had previously wondered why Jiang Zhe possessed such a skill, and Chen Yang's display now provided the missing relationship. Jiang Zhe's Reincarnation Emperor Seal appeared to be a simplified branch of the larger system represented by Chen Yang's Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal.

Chen Yang then explained the actual effect.

The Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal only acted on himself. If he told a lie and another person judged him for it, the person who died would not be Chen Yang's current self. Instead, the death would be transferred to his next life.

If someone judged him a second time, the second judgment would kill the Chen Yang belonging to the life after the next.

A third judgment would kill the following life.

The process could continue indefinitely.

Chen Yang then connected this to his ability to absorb spirit. Even if Chen Ran, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi joined forces, they would still have to determine how many of Chen Yang's future

incarnations they could actually exhaust. Killing one version of Chen Yang would simply consume another future life rather than ending the process.

That changed how his earlier behavior inside the secret chamber had to be understood. The chamber might have been designed to kill one person, but Chen Yang's skill had transformed the meaning of death itself. As long as his future lives remained available, killing the current version did not necessarily eliminate him. He then addressed Zhang Fan.

Zhang Fan possessed many skills involving time, space, secret chambers, and teleportation, and his system was designed to continue absorbing additional abilities. Chen Yang asked whether Zhang Fan could counter the Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal by exploiting his growth-type True Self Skill.

The answer was that Chen Yang could counter him.

He raised the Liar Killer once again and activated [Reincarnation Emperor Seal - Karma - All Rivers Run into the Sea - Reverse Future].

Zhang Fan and Ling Chi immediately understood what this meant. Zhang Fan's [All Rivers Run into the Sea] was a True Self-type growth system in nature, but its current level had not yet reached the actual True Self rank. Chen Yang's newly demonstrated ability did not necessarily need to overpower Zhang Fan's entire system. It only needed to identify the level at which Zhang Fan's current skill existed and attack that lower-level component through a sufficiently compatible mechanism.

Chen Ran, meanwhile, could only think of the most obvious reaction to the situation: Jiang Zhe had arrived at exactly the right moment to discover that Chen Yang was effectively taking his skills and incorporating them into an even larger system.

Chen Yang had just revealed a skill that contained traces of several completely different systems. Chen Ran immediately noticed that the technique carried characteristics belonging to Zhang Fan, characteristics belonging to Jiang Zhe, and the [Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal] associated with Chen Yang himself. The important question was how Chen Yang could simultaneously possess these different effects. Chen Ran therefore began reconstructing the meaning of Chen Yang's earlier statement that if he were judged as lying, the person who died would not be his current self, but his next life. If the next life was already connected to him strongly enough, then perhaps Chen Yang was not just transferring damage into the future. He could instead borrow the existence, abilities, or conditions of that future incarnation in advance. In that case, the uncertainty of reincarnation became an advantage rather than a weakness. Every future life was theoretically another version of Chen Yang, and because Chen Yang's current consciousness could determine how that future life developed, he could effectively borrow the results of that future existence. Therefore, the [Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal] could be understood as the ultimate evolution of [Life Editor], except that instead of

directly editing the present, Chen Yang was editing his next life and bringing the consequences back into the current one.

This interpretation immediately explained why Chen Yang's skill could contain abilities that did not originally belong to him. If the next life was treated as a future version of the same person, then modifying that future version could potentially allow Chen Yang to obtain techniques or advantages that the current Chen Yang did not possess. In other words, the skill was not simply resurrection. It was a method of manipulating the relationship between the present self and future selves.

Chen Yang then immediately tested this reasoning by pointing the Liar Killer at Chen Ran and using [Six Paths Reincarnation Ghost Seal]. The bullet entered Chen Ran's mind, but rather than affecting him, it was deflected and shot back into Chen Yang's own Liar Killer. More importantly, the secret chamber did not even turn dark. This meant that the skill had not simply failed to injure Chen Ran; the entire mechanism had been rejected before the ordinary skill process could even begin. Even Chen Yang himself showed that this result was outside the outcome he had expected.

Chen Ran was naturally quite satisfied by this. From his perspective, irritating Chen Yang had always produced the same expression, and this time he had managed to reproduce it despite being in the middle of a battle between four True Self Players. However, the other two were already analyzing the more important reason behind the failure. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi realized that the problem came from the special nature of Chen Ran's [Eternal Kingdom]. The First True Self Player had chosen Chen Ran as the "One", which meant that Chen Ran wasn’t another person moving through the River of Time, he’d become a permanent existence. Once [Eternal Kingdom] had been used, Chen Ran's state as "One" meant that even his future lives remained connected to the same eternal identity.

This created a contradiction with Chen Yang's technique. Chen Yang's technique operated on the next life, and for an ordinary player the next life was uncertain. The person who died in the present could therefore have an entirely different skill set or existence in the future. Chen Ran was different. His future self would still be Chen Ran, and his future self would still possess the possibility of using [Eternal Kingdom]. Therefore, even if Chen Yang successfully moved the effect into Chen Ran's next life, that next life could simply use [Eternal Kingdom] again and break the effect. In other words, every possible future Chen Ran contained the same counter. Chen Yang was effectively trying to attack an uncertain future, but Chen Ran's "One" status had removed the uncertainty. Every branch led back to the same answer. Chen Ran's future lives could therefore continuously invalidate Chen Yang's skill.

If Chen Yang had succeeded in applying his skill to Chen Ran, the situation would have immediately changed. Chen Yang and Chen Ran were both exceptional mental-stat monsters, and putting the two brothers on the same side would have given them enough offensive power to overwhelm Zhang Fan and Ling Chi. But because Chen Yang's skill had been rejected by [Eternal Kingdom], the four-person structure remained unstable rather than becoming a straightforward two-versus-two battle. The central question therefore became: if Chen Yang

could not safely use this method against Chen Ran, how could the remaining three deal with Chen Yang's enormous advantages?

Zhang Fan and Ling Chi immediately drew their Liar Killers. Zhang Fan first tried to establish another route. He pointed out that Chen Ran's system made him largely immune to ordinary Superego mental attacks, but Hell's strongest techniques were not necessarily individual skills. Combo skills could link several systems together, and Zhang Fan had spent a long time collecting these kinds of abilities. He specifically explained that he had devoured more than a hundred different Whisperer secret chambers. His idea was to use [Karma] together with a secret chamber so that if Chen Yang tried to interfere with the secondary skill, the effect of his interference could itself be transferred through the karmic connection. In theory, this would give Zhang Fan a way to construct a chain that was difficult for Chen Yang to simply break.

But Chen Yang had already anticipated the problem, as before Zhang Fan could even finish explaining the mechanism, Chen Yang used [Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal - Extreme Imprint - Karma - All Rivers Run into the Sea - Return to Simplicity]. When the light returned, Zhang Fan discovered that every skill on his panel had turned gray. They had all been disabled for thirty minutes. This was important because Zhang Fan's entire strength came from his ability to combine and modify other people's systems. Chen Yang did not need to overpower each individual skill one by one. He could directly attack the structure that allowed Zhang Fan to use those skills in the first place. Chen Yang then deliberately gave Zhang Fan time, meaning that he wasn’t trying to kill him immediately. He wanted Zhang Fan and Ling Chi to prove something.

That "something" was the identity of the player from the true timeline. Chen Yang was essentially giving them two possible roads. Either they had to prove that Chen Ran was not the player from the true timeline, or they had to prove that one of the other two, Zhang Fan or Ling Chi, was the true-timeline player. If Chen Ran really was the true-timeline player, then Chen Yang could eliminate Zhang Fan and Ling Chi without hesitation. If Chen Ran was not the true-timeline player, then the three of them might be able to kill the actual true-timeline player, after which the secret chamber could potentially be broken through [Eternal Kingdom] or [Reverse Future].

The entire dispute therefore reduced to one question: who was supposed to die? This was where Chen Yang's statement became dangerous. He was not simply threatening Chen Ran. He was forcing Zhang Fan and Ling Chi to make the first move. Once they accepted the premise that Chen Ran might be the true-timeline player, they would naturally have to attack him. Once they accepted the premise that Chen Ran might not be the true-timeline player, they would have to cooperate with Chen Yang to remove the real target. Either way, Chen Yang could manipulate their actions by controlling the interpretation of the timeline.

Zhang Fan and Ling Chi understood this almost immediately. The next moment, they launched their attacks. Zhang Fan chose Chen Yang while Ling Chi targeted Chen Ran. This was not an arbitrary division. Chen Yang's spirit could continually recover because of his absorption system, so Zhang Fan could not expect to kill him quickly. His goal was therefore to stall Chen Yang.

Ling Chi, meanwhile, had to deal with Chen Ran directly and determine whether Chen Ran could maintain himself under pressure.

Ling Chi immediately pulled Chen Ran into his [No Distance]. However, Ling Chi's [No Distance] was deliberately constructed as a mental-rule battlefield rather than a straightforward exchange of attacks. It contained drums, electric guitars, a DJ booth, and a group of strange soldiers performing songs. The seemingly ridiculous setting was actually a carefully designed mental attack. The soldiers began singing about having no clothes and sharing robes, which pointed toward the Songs of Chu and the historical story of Xiang Yu. Chen Ran recognized the underlying concept almost immediately: "Besieged on All Sides." Ling Chi was not simply singing at him. He was constructing the historical logic of Xiang Yu's final defeat and turning it into a mental rule.

Chen Ran responded by identifying the escape direction and used the Self Extreme State to construct a sniper rifle, shooting the soldiers positioned in the south before breaking through the encirclement. This showed the fundamental difference between Chen Ran and most mental fighters. His Self Extreme State gave him extremely efficient reasoning and reaction speed. He could identify the conceptual structure of the attack while simultaneously producing the exact object required to counter it.

But escaping the soldiers did not mean escaping Ling Chi's mental rule, as the moment Chen Ran broke through the first layer, a river appeared before him. The symbolism was obvious: Xiang Yu had reached the River of Wujiang after the defeat, and the correct historical sequence involved crossing the river. Chen Ran immediately searched for a boat. The problem was that history itself was being used against him. Xiang Yu, who had no desire to cross, possessed a boat, while Chen Ran, who actually wanted to cross, had none. Chen Ran therefore constructed his own small boat, but the moment he did so, fire appeared across the river and destroyed it.

Ling Chi continued singing from a distance, reconstructing the final moments of Xiang Yu's life through the battlefield, his defeat, his refusal to return, his shame before his people, and finally his death. The entire sequence was designed to eliminate Chen Ran's possible exits one after another. Instead of simply attacking Chen Ran directly, Ling Chi was forcing him through a predetermined historical narrative in which every apparent escape path ended at the same conclusion. By the time the song ended, Chen Ran had already been torn apart by five horses. The attack was therefore successful in forcing Chen Ran into the logic of the scene, even though it did not actually demonstrate that Ling Chi could overpower Chen Ran in a conventional mental battle.

This point becomes important immediately afterward. While Ling Chi and Chen Ran were fighting inside one [No Distance], Zhang Fan and Chen Yang were fighting inside another. Zhang Fan noticed that Chen Ran's spirit was declining extremely rapidly. His conclusion was that Chen Ran's system, the Extreme Realm, mainly increased his stats rather than providing the kind of mental attack techniques used by Ling Chi and Zhang Fan. Therefore, if Chen Ran remained inside Ling Chi's [No Distance] for too long, his advantage in raw stats would not necessarily save him from gradual mental exhaustion. Chen Yang, however, also understood

this weakness. The situation therefore appeared to give Chen Yang an opportunity to wait until Chen Ran was sufficiently weakened before finishing the confrontation.

Zhang Fan then made a much more dangerous deduction. He told Chen Yang that Chen Ran was probably deliberately pretending to be suppressed by Ling Chi. He estimated that there was an eighty-percent chance that Chen Ran was faking his current state. This immediately brought the discussion back to the timeline question. Zhang Fan asked why the Ninth True Self Player would kill Chen Yang on other timelines. If she wanted to preserve useful True Self Players, then killing Chen Yang would make little sense. It would be much more useful to preserve multiple versions of him. Yet only one Chen Yang ultimately existed on the River of Time. Therefore, there had to be another explanation: the Chen Yangs on those other timelines had not been intentionally eliminated by the Ninth. They had died naturally during their growth process.

From there, Zhang Fan constructed his conclusion. If the other Chen Yangs had all died during their development, then Chen Yang's death inside this secret chamber could itself be part of a predetermined history. If Chen Ran came from the true timeline and knew that Chen Yang was destined to die here, then Chen Ran's rational choice would not be to save him. He could instead allow Chen Yang to eliminate Zhang Fan and Ling Chi and then permit the predetermined death to occur. That would explain why Chen Ran appeared to be weakening himself instead of immediately using [Eternal Kingdom]. He was not necessarily losing. He could be deliberately preventing Chen Yang from becoming cautious.

But Zhang Fan then flipped the perspective and examined Chen Yang's side. Chen Yang himself did not know whether he was the Chen Yang of the true timeline. The appearance of [Eternal Kingdom] inside the secret chamber complicated the deduction. If this really was a chamber created to kill the true-timeline player, then Chen Yang could be the predestined victim. But if he was not the true-timeline player, then his apparent death might not be necessary at all. Therefore, Chen Yang could not simply accept the conclusion that he was destined to die. He had to act according to the safer assumption that his death was not guaranteed. From that perspective, the correct strategy was to eliminate the other three first.

This was the actual function of Zhang Fan's argument. He wanted Chen Yang to become uncertain. Chen Ran then added the corresponding deterrence: if Chen Yang dared to kill Zhang Fan and Ling Chi first, Chen Ran would immediately use [Eternal Kingdom]. That would potentially collapse the situation and force Chen Yang into the outcome he feared. In other words, Chen Ran did not need to defeat Chen Yang directly. He only needed to convince Chen Yang that a certain action would trigger an unacceptable result. This was a gamble over what Chen Yang believed about the identity of the true-timeline player.

From Chen Yang's original perspective, however, the situation had a completely different meaning. His original strategy had been to use his brotherhood with Chen Ran to make Chen Ran cooperate with him. If Chen Ran stayed on his side, Chen Yang could use Chen Ran to remove Zhang Fan and Ling Chi first. Afterward, Chen Yang could use [No Distance] to control Chen Ran indefinitely, preventing him from activating [Eternal Kingdom]. But Chen Yang's first

attempt to strengthen Chen Ran had already failed because of [Eternal Kingdom]. Therefore, he had to change his plan.

His next plan was the "prove the true timeline" proposal. On the surface, it sounded like an objective method of solving the contradiction. In reality, Chen Yang expected Zhang Fan and Ling Chi to divide their forces. One would restrain him while the other fought Chen Ran. More importantly, Chen Yang intended to use that division to kill Zhang Fan first. Once Zhang Fan was dead, Chen Yang could retract his own skill. From Chen Ran's perspective, this would make Chen Yang temporarily appear less threatening, potentially causing Chen Ran to cooperate with him against Ling Chi. Then, after Ling Chi was eliminated, Chen Yang could finally fight Chen Ran in [No Distance]. This was a continuously adapting plan rather than a single fixed scheme. He had shifted from trying to overpower all three simultaneously to eliminating them in a specific order.

The important mistake in Chen Yang's calculation was his assessment of Chen Ran's apparent weakness. From the information available, Chen Ran possessed several types of powerful mental energy and seemed to have the advantage in a prolonged [No Distance] confrontation. Chen Yang, on the other hand, had only been in Hell for five days, even though his number of Points was enormous. On paper, Chen Ran should therefore have been the stronger mental combatant. But this did not prove that Chen Yang would lose. In fact, the very fact that Chen Yang wanted to create a [No Distance] confrontation suggested that he had already calculated something the others had not yet confirmed.

Chen Ran understood this. If Chen Yang intentionally created conditions for a direct [No Distance] duel, then assuming Chen Yang would simply lose because Chen Ran had more types of mental energy would be a mistake. Chen Yang had no reason to arrange a confrontation that he believed he could not win. Therefore, Chen Ran rejected the outcome Chen Yang wanted by refusing to let Ling Chi genuinely finish him. His apparent rapid collapse was not necessarily evidence of defeat. It was a message: do not force me to use [Eternal Kingdom].

This also revealed an important difference between the four True Self Players. Chen Yang possessed terrifying raw ability and could construct extremely deep schemes, but he lacked the accumulated experience of the other three. Zhang Fan, Ling Chi, and Chen Ran had spent much longer surviving the various forms of deception that existed in Hell. They had experienced Emotional Deception, Common Sense Deception, Feeling Deception, and many variations of these tricks. Therefore, when Chen Yang attempted to construct a situation in which the obvious interpretation pointed toward a particular outcome, the other three were more likely to question whether that obvious interpretation was itself bait. Chen Yang was powerful enough to create the trap, but he had not yet accumulated enough experience to understand all the ways the other three could respond to it.

Inside [No Distance], Chen Yang eventually understood where his calculation had failed. He was still calm, even turning the experience into another comment about grassroots experience. But underneath the joke was a significant change in the battle. Chen Yang's position as the

apparent controller of the situation had been broken. The three other True Self Players had collectively resisted the structure he had attempted to impose. The battle had therefore shifted from Chen Yang possessing the initiative to all four players operating on roughly equal strategic footing.

At the same time, Chen Ran refused to leave Ling Chi's [No Distance]. He openly stated that if Ling Chi refused to reveal another part of his system, Chen Ran would simply remain inside. His reasoning was straightforward: Zhang Fan was already being dealt with by Chen Yang, so if Chen Ran came out too early, he might end up helping Chen Yang eliminate Ling Chi afterward. In other words, Chen Ran was deliberately refusing to make the move that Chen Yang wanted. Ling Chi could not simply force him out without exposing more of his own system, while Chen Ran had no reason to cooperate. The four-way battle had therefore become an information war in which revealing even one additional ability could change everyone's calculations.

Chen Yang watched Zhang Fan quietly before explaining a very simple principle: when a player possessed sufficiently high stats, they could sometimes ignore conventional tactical restrictions. Zhang Fan's original assumption had been that Chen Ran and Ling Chi would eventually leave [No Distance]. Once Chen Ran left, Chen Yang would retract the battlefield and the confrontation would reset. But Chen Yang had no intention of allowing that sequence to happen. Because Chen Ran and Ling Chi remained inside [No Distance], Zhang Fan was effectively trapped in Chen Yang's own battlefield as well. Even if Zhang Fan escaped temporarily, Chen Yang could simply pull him back into the clash. The longer this continued, the more mental energy Zhang Fan would lose.

Chen Yang then made his demand directly. He wanted the cultivation method for Zhang Fan's [Dao Heart Demonic Seed]. Zhang Fan rejected him immediately. Chen Yang did not become angry. Instead, he treated the demand as a negotiation. His meaning was obvious: he did not necessarily need complete cooperation, and Zhang Fan did not necessarily need to give him everything. Both sides could trade information according to their own priorities. Zhang Fan then realized that Chen Yang's behavior resembled what Chen Ran had been doing to Ling Chi. Chen Ran had effectively trapped Ling Chi and was extracting information from him, while Chen Yang was doing the same thing to Zhang Fan.

The important factor was that Chen Yang had the resources to force such a negotiation. His system absorbed Points and mental energy, which made prolonged confrontation much easier for him than for Zhang Fan. Chen Ran likewise possessed enormous reserves. Therefore, the usual logic of "fight until someone loses" did not necessarily work. Zhang Fan's better option was to provide enough information to satisfy Chen Yang without completely surrendering his system. He therefore allowed his mental energy to transform into strands of hair and began teaching Chen Yang the underlying cultivation logic. He did not have to give Chen Yang the entire method immediately. Chen Yang only needed enough information to reconstruct it himself later.

After roughly ten minutes, all four finally exited their respective [No Distance] spaces. Two of them looked satisfied while the other two were considerably more serious. This showed the

result of the information exchange. Chen Ran and Chen Yang had not completely reconstructed Ling Chi's and Zhang Fan's systems yet, but they had gathered enough information that future comprehension would be much easier. The exchange had therefore permanently changed the information balance among the four players. Even if no one had been killed, everyone had become more dangerous because everyone now understood more about the others.

Chen Yang immediately retracted his skill. At this point, Zhang Fan's [Mind Follows Will] had already been cracked and banned. If he wanted to use other skills, he would first need to restore that ability. Ling Chi's skills were instantaneous, and Chen Ran's skills worked similarly. Chen Yang's own skill had been withdrawn. From a purely tactical standpoint, the first struggle over momentum and providence had ended. The four could now sit down and begin analyzing the situation properly. However, the secret chamber still had approximately ten minutes of preparation time, so none of them had any reason to rush.

Chen Ran then asked Chen Yang how he had thought of sending Jiang Zhe into Hell through split personalities. Chen Yang's answer revealed another part of his investigative method. He had started from Qiu Yinong's virtual-game company and used Murphy's Law as the basis for his deduction. Once he realized that a mysterious force had found Chen Ran, he investigated Qiu Yinong's background and connected her company's research to Chen Ran's death. From there he formed the hypothesis that death might not truly be the end. He then compared Chen Yang's nine personalities with Jiang Zhe's nine samsara bodies. Since Jiang Zhe had nine bodies and a Main Body, while Chen Yang had nine personalities, the numbers created a structural inconsistency that Chen Yang considered too suspicious to ignore.

Chen Yang therefore wanted to investigate the "problematic" Jiang Zhe personally. He asked Zhang Fan to teleport Jiang Zhe into the secret chamber through a causality skill. Zhang Fan demanded a benefit in exchange. Chen Ran offered access to the Self Extreme State inside his Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm, which was the maximum price he was willing to pay. Zhang Fan accepted and prepared to use [Causality], but then stopped. Rather than directly teleporting Jiang Zhe, he first used [Holographic Vision]. This was important because the situation looked suspicious. Jiang Zhe was lying in a pool of blood, and since Jiang Zhe possessed the [Reincarnation Emperor Seal], Zhang Fan suspected that this could be a deliberate trap designed to make him declare a false conclusion.

Zhang Fan nevertheless stated that Jiang Zhe was dead. Nothing happened immediately, so Zhang Fan briefly suspected that his deduction had been wrong. But Jiang Zhe suddenly appeared directly in front of him with a gun pointed at his forehead and immediately judged Zhang Fan as lying. Zhang Fan's head was pierced by a bullet and his body collapsed. The important point was that Zhang Fan had intentionally allowed this possibility. He already suspected that his own [Mind Follows Will] might possess a passive component, and if Jiang Zhe appeared, Zhang Fan would gain the opportunity to test both Jiang Zhe and his own system at the same time.

Jiang Zhe then turned toward Chen Yang and immediately used [No Distance]. From Jiang Zhe's perspective, this was probably his best possible opportunity to approach Chen Yang's

[Loss of Self] directly. Ling Chi had previously neutralized the Andersen Squad's skills, meaning players connected to those skills should have realized that powerful True Self Players were present nearby. Jiang Zhe therefore had reason to gamble that Chen Yang was inside this secret chamber. Furthermore, he knew that Chen Ran would likely help him reach the chamber. The problem was that Chen Yang could apparently eject him at any time. Therefore, a direct [No Distance] clash was the correct move. Unfortunately for Jiang Zhe, having the correct tactical idea did not mean that his combat ability was sufficient to execute it. He collapsed almost immediately, leaving his opportunity to kill Chen Yang wasted.

Chen Yang then had Jiang Zhe sent away, and the other three looked at Zhang Fan's corpse. They initially assumed Zhang Fan had genuinely been killed. But when Chen Yang threatened to use another skill if Zhang Fan did not wake up, Zhang Fan stood up and pulled a Straw Man from inside his body. The Straw Man had a bullet hole in its head. The meaning was immediately obvious: Zhang Fan had never actually died. His passive [Mind Follows Will] had allowed him to substitute the Straw Man for himself.

From there, the whole exchange could be reconstructed. Chen Ran had intentionally mentioned Jiang Zhe because he knew Zhang Fan was already under suspicion. Zhang Fan understood the trap and deliberately followed Chen Ran's line of reasoning, claiming that Jiang Zhe was dead. Because [Mind Follows Will] was a passive ability, Zhang Fan could allow the subsequent judgment to hit the Straw Man instead of his actual body. This benefited him in two ways. First, Jiang Zhe would be teleported into the secret chamber, giving Zhang Fan the opportunity to observe the fight between Jiang Zhe and Chen Yang. Second, the suspicion surrounding [Mind Follows Will] had already been established, so sooner or later the other three would test it anyway. Rather than hiding the ability forever, Zhang Fan chose to reveal it at a moment where he could profit from revealing it.

This also explains why Zhang Fan was happy to let Jiang Zhe arrive despite knowing the danger. Jiang Zhe was effectively a free test subject. Zhang Fan could demonstrate the passive ability without risking his real body, while also allowing Chen Ran's Extreme Realm and Chen Yang's combat ability to be observed. It was a win-win situation. Jiang Zhe, unfortunately, entered the chamber with the correct tactical objective but insufficient ability to capitalize on it. He became useful as evidence rather than as a serious combatant.

The four had therefore reached the next stage of the struggle. Zhang Fan looked at the remaining preparation time and decided that continuing to hide their passive skills was no longer productive. He argued that all True Self Skills should possess passive effects. Chen Ran's system appeared to have none only because Chen Ran had already deactivated his. Zhang Fan himself clearly possessed [Mind Follows Will], while Ling Chi's ability necessarily required a perception-like passive component so that he could detect skills acting upon him across space or time. Chen Yang, as a True Self Player whose system involved destiny, almost certainly possessed a passive related to his multiple lives.

The deduction was therefore straightforward. Since Chen Ran had already shown that his passive could be deactivated, the other three should also possess the ability to deactivate

theirs. Otherwise the four-player game would be impossible. Passive effects that automatically interfered with every opponent's action would mean that no one could meaningfully attack anyone else. Therefore, the first problem was simple: all four should temporarily deactivate their passive abilities so that the actual infighting could proceed.

But Zhang Fan identified a second problem. Earlier, both skill destruction and causality attacks had ended up acting on Chen Ran's dungeon. That gave Chen Ran an unfair disadvantage because the other three were fighting him on his own timeline and could potentially interfere with his external environment. The solution was to recognize that the four players were not actually from the same time and place. Each should belong to a different dungeon at a different point in time, and each should have encountered an Andersen Squad corresponding to that point.

This meant there were four Andersen Squads that had to be dealt with. Otherwise, the internal battle could be manipulated externally by whichever Andersen Squad happened to control the corresponding timeline. Zhang Fan also identified another threat: followers. Every one of the four had some kind of "die-hard fan" or subordinate who might potentially enter the secret chamber through teleportation or a space-time skill. Zhang Fan himself could have controlled players through the Dao Heart Demonic Seed. Ling Chi had followers, demonstrated by the Nan Sheng Squad that had come to protect Chen Ran. Chen Yang would eventually establish the Underworld, creating another group of possible followers. Chen Ran might also possess future arrangements left behind by [Future Chen Ran].

The significance of these followers was greater than simply adding more enemies. If new players could continuously enter the secret chamber, then the four True Self Players would no longer be controlling the battle. Their future or past selves could influence the current struggle through subordinates. The result would no longer be a clean four-person infighting game. Therefore, three conditions had to be satisfied before the real battle could begin. Their passive effects had to be turned off, the four Andersen Squads had to be neutralized, and the arrival of unrelated players had to be prohibited.

The second problem was comparatively easy. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi could cooperate to erase the skills of the four Andersen Squads. The first problem was also manageable because all four could simply deactivate their passive effects. The difficult problem was the third one. The future Chen Ran needed to act, using [Eternal Prohibition] across the entire secret chamber so that outside skills, teleportation effects, and other interference could no longer reach them.

At this point, it might seem strange that they had not simply done this from the beginning. The answer was the battle over momentum and luck. None of the four had possessed enough certainty earlier to openly cooperate against the others. Every player was trying to make the other players reveal information first. If one of them had gained a clear advantage, the others would not have agreed to stop and solve the structural problems together. Therefore, the earlier fighting was not wasted time. It was part of the process that forced all four to exhaust their immediate tactical options until cooperation became the only rational move. The causality could

not be reversed: they were discussing the solution now precisely because nobody had won earlier.

Chen Yang then proposed a way to force the future Chen Ran to act. The method was surprisingly direct. They only needed to force the Omniscient and Omnipotent to intervene. Zhang Fan's causality effect could cross the boundary of the dungeon and reach the Eighteenth Layer. If he connected that causality effect to Ling Chi's skill, Ling Chi could erase skills that technically belonged to the Eighteenth Layer. This would allow the four to disrupt the Eighteenth Layer from inside the secret chamber. Once enough things were disrupted, the Omniscient and Omnipotent would have no choice but to intervene. When the Omniscient and Omnipotent intervened, the future Chen Ran would also have a reason to act.

The underlying trick was simple: Zhang Fan would use [Causality] to connect their current battle to the Eighteenth Layer. Then he would transfer the effects of abilities existing on the Eighteenth Layer onto Ling Chi. Ling Chi could then erase those abilities. For example, if an item in Chen Ran's possession had been created by a skill from the Eighteenth Layer, Zhang Fan could establish the causal connection and cause that skill's effect to fall onto Ling Chi. Ling Chi could then extinguish the skill that created the item. The example itself was only a metaphor, but the principle was much more important: the four intended to turn the entire Eighteenth Layer into a battlefield indirectly and force the Omniscient and Omnipotent to intervene.

Zhang Fan immediately used [All Rivers Run into the Sea - Night Rain Slows Down]. When the light returned, none of the four had suffered physical or conscious changes, but their watches showed that time was now moving approximately ten times more slowly. This was another example of Zhang Fan's enormous collection of devoured abilities. The others were surprised that a Five-Star player could possess so many strange and troublesome techniques. Zhang Fan then explained the reason. His original abilities had already been at the True Self level, so he deliberately remained at One-Star for a long period. During that time, rather than devouring more skills, he spent his Points gathering information. Once he eventually began devouring skills, he already knew exactly which low-star players possessed high-quality Superego skills. He therefore avoided random collection and went directly after predetermined targets.

This meant Zhang Fan's apparent weakness in star rating had never represented his actual accumulation. He had traded immediate cultivation for information. By staying at One-Star, he avoided attracting attention while identifying suitable targets. When he finally began devouring skills, he could acquire many powerful techniques in a short time. This was why the other three repeatedly underestimated the number and variety of skills Zhang Fan could produce. His entire development process had been constructed around concealment.

Zhang Fan then asked Chen Yang to buff him. Chen Yang used [Six Paths Reincarnation Ghost Seal], and a special status appeared on Zhang Fan's skill panel showing that he possessed nine lives. If Zhang Fan died, the life that died would be his next life rather than his current body. This was not equivalent to simply giving Zhang Fan nine lives. A normal nine-life status could potentially be directly broken by [Eternal Kingdom], causing Zhang Fan's current existence to disappear. Chen Yang's version was different because the effect was transferred into the next

life. Even if the current battle disrupted the mechanism, Zhang Fan himself would not necessarily die immediately.

Zhang Fan naturally joked about devouring Chen Yang's skill, but Chen Yang did not care. Zhang Fan's [All Rivers Run into the Sea] had not yet reached the True Self level, so it could not devour Chen Yang's True Self-ranked reincarnation ability. This was another important demonstration of the relationship between Zhang Fan's growth-type system and genuine True Self Skills. Zhang Fan could eventually become dangerous enough to devour almost anything, but his current state still imposed a ceiling.

The four then checked their watches. They had only given the Omniscient and Omnipotent one minute, which equated to ten minutes of actual time because of Zhang Fan's time-slowing ability. Chen Ran immediately warned them not to place all their hopes on this single plan. The others understood the problem. Their disruption of the Eighteenth Layer could indeed force the Omniscient and Omnipotent to intervene, and that intervention could potentially bring future Chen Ran into the situation. But it might simultaneously reveal which person was from the true timeline. That was dangerous because the Ninth True Self Player existed on the other timelines and possessed a position comparable to the Omniscient and Omnipotent. She would naturally protect the true-timeline player and would not allow the four to verify the answer so easily.

The battlefield therefore shifted outward. On the Eighteenth Layer, four players emerged from the Liar Killer Alliance Ancient Building while four more emerged from the Whisperer Alliance Ancient Building. Their identities and appearances were deliberately strange, but their behavior revealed one important fact: these were the eight Floor Masters that had been mobilized to contain the situation. The gentlemanly boy among them immediately offered to begin with a small demonstration. He used [Supreme Card], drawing the two of hearts, which increased his spirit tenfold. He then explained that if one of the other players provided a causal connection, he could use that increased spirit to kill the player involved.

The Liar Killer Alliance's Little Girl then used [Error of Karma]. Its key property was that other people's skills could not directly affect her. Instead, the consequences of those skills were transferred elsewhere. This created an immediate problem for Zhang Fan's plan. Any skill he tried to send toward her could instead be redirected toward the other Floor Masters. The other three players near her therefore instinctively moved away, but they could not prevent the effects that had already been established.

The gentleman's neck initially received the same lollipop-like mark as the others, but the effect disappeared immediately. This made it clear that the person appearing as the gentleman was not simply an ordinary Floor Master. The others inferred that Du Hongnian was likely hiding elsewhere while using a puppet to interact with them. More importantly, [Supreme Card] was not just a single buff. If the two of hearts increased spirit tenfold, then the remaining fifty-three cards could potentially contain fifty-three other status effects. This explained why a status-based system of this complexity was enough for Du Hongnian to maintain such an important position among the Floor Masters.

Now the situation became much worse for Zhang Fan's original plan. Eight Floor Masters were standing in the Eighteenth Layer, and the Little Girl's [Error of Karma] could redirect Zhang Fan's skills onto them and then further transfer those effects onto the Slaves. That meant Ling Chi would not necessarily be extinguishing the Floor Masters' own abilities. He would be destroying the skills of the Slaves carrying the transferred effects instead. The entire causal chain had been designed to prevent Zhang Fan and Ling Chi from directly attacking the actual controllers.

From a gods' perspective, the chance of forcing the Omniscient and Omnipotent to personally intervene had therefore fallen almost to zero. But the four players inside the secret chamber did not panic. Zhang Fan explicitly stated that there was no need to rush. His wording revealed the next principle governing the battle: the most obvious assassination method was frequently not the actual killing method. The visible attack on the Eighteenth Layer was only the bait.

Zhang Fan then activated [All Rivers Run into the Sea - Causality - Holographic Perspective]. He attempted to observe the Eighteenth Layer, but because of [Error of Karma], what he actually perceived was the gentlemanly player rather than the result he wanted. The gentleman removed his hat, gave Zhang Fan a polite bow, and essentially offered a final farewell. Then an enormous spiritual force crossed the causal connection and instantly blasted Zhang Fan into an idiot. His head slammed into the table while the other three simply stared at him. This was the immediate result of Zhang Fan testing the Eighteenth Layer without first bypassing [Error of Karma]. His first visible attempt had failed, but the more important point was that he had now obtained information about how the Eighteenth Layer's defensive structure operated.

Chen Yang pointed his Liar Killer at the Zhang Fan who was still pretending to be asleep and calmly judged him as lying. A short while later, Zhang Fan woke up, lit a cigarette, and created another Zhang Fan inside the secret chamber. The newly created Zhang Fan immediately used [All Rivers Run into the Sea · Karma · Reverse Future], but was blasted into an idiot again. Since he did not die, the skill effect itself had clearly remained. Chen Yang then used [Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal · Reverse Future], causing the effect to follow Karma toward the Eighteenth Layer. However, only a small section of the buildings and skills there cracked. This immediately showed that the Eighteenth Layer had already been divided into multiple independent spaces. Otherwise, a skill capable of following Karma across the boundary would have affected the entire layer rather than only one portion.

The principle behind the exchange was also important. Zhang Fan's [Karma] was not simply a projectile that traveled through space. It established a causal relationship between the user and the target. Therefore, when Chen Yang used [Return to Simplicity] against Zhang Fan's Karma, the Karma itself was also included in the effect being cracked. By the same logic, the karmic command effect produced by [Against All Odds] would also be cracked once it entered the same chain. Chen Yang and Zhang Fan therefore simultaneously raised their guns toward the ceiling and used [Return to Simplicity] against the effects that had already been established. The result was that the Little Girl's skill on the Eighteenth Layer was cracked, which caused the old man guarding the entrance to react. He immediately used [Guest Returns to Hometown], sending the two causal effects back to their origins. The result was that Chen Yang and Zhang Fan were both struck by their own previous commands. They looked at each other, exchanged the

obvious accusations that one of them had lied, and then slammed their heads onto the table and fell asleep.

Eight people suddenly appeared inside the secret chamber. Chen Ran immediately pulled all eight into [No Distance], changed his appearance inside the mental space, and activated the Self Extreme State. To the eight people, Chen Ran's raised foot became enormous, as though it covered the entire sky, and when it descended, all eight were instantly annihilated. The reason they could enter at all was that True Self Players could not personally enter the field, so these eight had entered with only a Half-Step Superego State of Mind. Against Chen Ran's Self Extreme State, that level of mental power was insufficient. Ling Chi was somewhat surprised by Chen Ran's reaction speed, but he also understood why Chen Ran had killed them immediately. Nobody knew which world line those eight people had come from, and allowing them to survive long enough to expose the identity of the person inside the secret chamber would have been dangerous.

After Zhang Fan and Chen Yang woke up, the three others examined what had happened to Chen Yang. His own [Return to Simplicity] had been reflected back and applied to himself, meaning that the skill should have been banned by [Return to Simplicity]. Yet Chen Yang had chosen to kill himself instead. This revealed that his [Extreme Imprint] did not possess the priority of a True Self enchantment. In other words, his [Return to Simplicity] had been used to ban [Return to Simplicity], leaving him unable to imprint the same effect again under the existing state. Suicide therefore became the simplest method of restarting the process and obtaining a fresh skill state. It was not a meaningless act of self-destruction; he was using death as a reset mechanism because the skill hierarchy had temporarily trapped his current version of the skill.

Zhang Fan then pointed out the larger problem : there were eight Floor Masters blocking the Eighteenth Layer in each of the four spaces. Zhang Fan possessed a Space Skill capable of breaking through one person's Eighteenth Layer and simultaneously reaching the corresponding Eighteenth Layers belonging to the other three people. However, every one of those four spaces had been constructed with the same arrangement: eight Floor Masters stood in the way. This could not be a coincidence. The Ninth True Self Player had deliberately made the four spaces identical so that Zhang Fan could not determine which person belonged to the true timeline by simply observing the Eighteenth Layer. Once Chen Ran and Ling Chi considered this, they also realized that there should be Chen Yangs in the other three spaces. Since Zhang Fan's skills could not create True Self Skills, those other Chen Yangs could only have been connected through Karma, similar to the mechanism previously seen with Yue Guanshan. The more they considered it, the more dangerous Zhang Fan's system appeared, because a mechanism capable of spreading information and effects across multiple timelines was itself difficult to contain. Yet if Zhang Fan could eventually be sealed, then the person capable of sealing such a mechanism would possess an even more terrifying mechanism.

Chen Yang simply looked at Zhang Fan and told him to begin his performance. Zhang Fan understood that there was no longer any reason to preserve the previous method. If eight Floor Masters stood in the way in each of the four spaces, then trying to solve them individually would waste too much time. He therefore chose brute force. He used [Flowers in the Mirror, Moon in

the Water] together with [Life is a Long Regret, Like Water Flowing East]. The secret chamber immediately went dark. The other three quickly realized that the names of these skills were already beyond the normal four-character structure. Chen Yang's commands could exceed four characters because he was a True Self Player, but Zhang Fan was not. Therefore, if a non-Superego player possessed skills with such abnormal names, the mechanism itself had to be extremely unusual. [Flowers in the Mirror, Moon in the Water] suggested duplication, while [Life is a Long Regret, Like Water Flowing East] suggested something more extreme. If the two were combined, the likely result was Infinite Copying, which was fundamentally different from ordinary copying because ordinary duplication still had a finite object to reproduce, whereas infinite replication implied that the duplication process itself could continuously generate more copies.

The three immediately realized that these were probably Zhang Fan's trump cards. They tightened their grip on their Liar Killers because if Zhang Fan had really obtained an infinite-copying mechanism, the battle could change instantly. But Chen Ran responded before they could see the result. He used [Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal · Extreme Imprint · Flowers in the Mirror, Moon in the Water] and [Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal · Extreme Imprint · Life is a Long Regret, Like Water Flowing East], directly imprinting the same two abilities. Zhang Fan, Ling Chi, and even Chen Ran himself were left speechless because Chen Ran had copied the supposedly hidden trump cards before Zhang Fan could demonstrate them. Chen Yang then seemed to remember something and used [Mind Follows Will] through [Extreme Imprint]. When the darkness cleared, Zhang Fan discovered that every skill on his panel had been cracked and banned.

The walls of the secret chamber were now covered with mirrors of different shapes and sizes. Zhang Fan immediately understood what had happened. Chen Yang had used the two skills Zhang Fan had just demonstrated to create the mechanism of Infinite Copying. The result was that one Chen Yang had copied one skill. Countless Chen Yangs could be produced, and each of those Chen Yangs could possess the imprinted skills. In a single moment, the entire collection of abilities Zhang Fan had accumulated could theoretically be reproduced through the endless chain of copies. Chen Yang then asked Ling Chi whether he wanted to erase every skill Zhang Fan had swallowed since entering Hell. The implication was that Chen Yang's objective was no longer simply to copy a few useful abilities. He had acquired the ability to reproduce Zhang Fan's entire accumulated arsenal. The reason he had waited until Zhang Fan exposed his two bottom-of-the-chest abilities was because the information itself had become the key that allowed Chen Yang to construct the larger mechanism.

The eight Floor Masters on the Eighteenth Layer were still waiting- the Gentlemanly Youth was holding an [8 of Spades], and the moment they sensed Zhang Fan's [Causality] effect again, they realized something was different. This time, the effect did not immediately strike them. The user was deliberately holding it back. The old man therefore suspected that the causal user had already understood [Guest Returning to Hometown] One of that skill's effects was [Reflect], or more accurately, [Relative]. However, [Causality] could not be reflected in the ordinary sense because its basic structure was already a relationship between "me and you." Even if the effect were redirected, it remained a causal relationship between the same two sides. Zhang Fan was

therefore testing whether the Floor Masters could actually reflect his causal connection or whether they were only making him believe that they could.

Immediately afterward, all eight Floor Masters' skills were deciphered. The Gentlemanly Youth disappeared under the effect of [Decipher], and before the remaining seven could respond, [Return to Simplicity] struck them. Seven Whisperer secret chambers then appeared around the remaining Floor Masters. Light rain fell inside those spaces, and every droplet became a mirror when it touched the ground. Multiple Chen Yangs crawled out of the mirrors and immediately used [No Distance] against the Floor Master inside each secret chamber. The Floor Masters were all in the Superego State of Mind and could theoretically kill one Chen Yang instantly, but there was no longer only one Chen Yang. There were countless Chen Yangs, and each one carried the effects of [Six Paths of Reincarnation Emperor Seal] and [Infinite Replication]. Even if one Chen Yang was killed, another could immediately appear. The normal method of eliminating the attacker had therefore become meaningless because the attacker was no longer a single individual.

At the same time, Chen Yang appeared before Du Hongnian on the ninth floor of the Whisperer Alliance Ancient Building. She was holding the [8 of Spades] and was preparing to reverse the causal relationship, but Chen Yang simply snapped his fingers and caused the card to disappear. He then showed her an image of another youth approaching the seven Whisperer secret chambers. The youth attempted to use [Decipher], only to discover that his own skill had already been deciphered by [Return to Simplicity] at some unknown point. Du Hongnian immediately realized that Chen Yang's preparation was faster than expected. Chen Yang told her that although she possessed many skill effects, they were useless against him, and he wanted to enter the database. Du Hongnian responded that he was underestimating the Floor Masters.

An object then appeared in Du Hongnian's hand, and ghost fire instantly consumed the Chen Yang in front of her as well as every Chen Yang inside the seven secret chambers. For a moment, it appeared that she had destroyed all of them. But the scene shattered, revealing that Chen Yang was still standing before her. He immediately recognized the mechanism as a Death Speaker-type ability. Du Hongnian then used [Wheel of Time] and froze him, allowing Chen Yang to walk toward the database. Yet only two steps later, he and all the Chen Yangs on the Eighteenth Layer were consumed by ghost fire again. When the scene shattered for a second time, Chen Yang stopped and began analyzing instead of continuing to charge forward.

He noticed that [Reverse Future] could not decipher Du Hongnian's skill. This meant that her [Supreme Card] status effect contained an ability that severed Causality. Du Hongnian had used that effect to cut the causal connection between Chen Yang and the other seven Floor Masters, preventing him from using [Causality Sense] to track them. Yet the Floor Masters still needed a way to attack Chen Yang, and that was the purpose of the [8 of Hearts]. Chen Yang immediately recognized it as [Causality Grafting]. The card functioned like a command skill, directing the abilities of the seven Floor Masters and grafting their causal relationship onto Chen Yang so that the severed connection could still be exploited.

Chen Yang knew he could not not attempt to remove the seven Floor Masters one by one, so he instead revealed that among the skills he had imprinted there was also an effect capable of severing Causality. He then asked Du Hongnian how many Chen Yangs she thought were currently present on the Eighteenth Layer. Countless Whisperer secret chambers immediately appeared and covered the buildings of the Eighteenth Layer. One after another, the buildings were deciphered and vanished until only the two Alliance Ancient Buildings remained. Du Hongnian then explained that Chen Yang had finally realized the truth: the Eighteenth Layer he had been attacking was not the real Eighteenth Layer at all. It was a replicated Eighteenth Layer. She had intercepted the Causality connection Chen Yang used to send his replicas there and grafted that connection onto the replicated space. Every time Chen Yang sent another replica through the causal connection, that replica was redirected into the false Eighteenth Layer. Thus, from the beginning, Chen Yang had been destroying a fake battlefield.

Du Hongnian believed that the number of Chen Yangs did not matter- whether there were one or countless versions, the destination remained the Eighteenth Layer, and if she grafted the causal connection from the real Eighteenth Layer onto the replicated one, she could continue throwing all of them into the same false space. Chen Yang then pointed out the flaw in this assumption. The Causality effect that had been grafted belonged to this particular Chen Yang, but Infinite Replication meant that there were countless other Chen Yangs, each possessing the same imprinted skill effects. If those other Chen Yangs also possessed the ability to sever Causality, then Du Hongnian could not assume that every causal route was passing through the one Chen Yang she had intercepted. Her mechanism could only control the connection she had grafted. It could not automatically control every independent causal connection created by the countless replicas.

Chen Yang then snapped his fingers. He and Du Hongnian appeared directly on the ninth floor of the real Eighteenth Layer. Du Hongnian immediately understood how she had lost. Chen Yang had deliberately used the earlier exchanges to test the effects inside her [Supreme Card]. His real purpose had not been to destroy the replicated Eighteenth Layer. He had wanted to determine whether the space was genuine. He had also used a True Self-level effect to negate her previous statement that she would not allow him to imprint her skills. Once her own skill was used to appear before him, Chen Yang could follow its reverse causal relationship back to its true origin. Everything he had done was therefore a calculated test. If Du Hongnian appeared in front of him, he could use that appearance as the final causal marker needed to locate the real Eighteenth Layer. She acknowledged that her mistake was not understanding how many different skill effects Chen Yang had available. A Superego player with outstanding skill mastery could still be overwhelmed by a Half-Step Superego player when the latter possessed a True Self-level system with enough unknown effects. Du Hongnian therefore stopped obstructing him.

Chen Yang then continued toward the database, but a woman suddenly appeared in front of him. Her face was obscured and her presence produced an overwhelming pressure that caused the soul itself to tremble. At the same time, Chen Yang's consciousness appeared in the Netherworld before Yama. Yama immediately bowed and called him "Master," but Chen Yang had no time to consider why Yama would react that way. He directly demanded the cultivation method for the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] and ordered him to prepare a vessel. Yama did not

respond because he had already been frozen. Sitting at Yama's desk was a man whose face was hidden. He picked up the cultivation method, looked at it, placed it down, and then exposed the actual purpose behind Chen Yang's actions. The Chen Yang in the Whisperer Alliance Ancient Building had been the obvious distraction. The real maneuver was the Chen Yang appearing in the Netherworld.

The man explained the logic directly : Chen Yang wanted the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] cultivation method because he intended to seize the consciousness of a player from the true timeline. If he could cultivate Zhang Fan's system and then occupy the consciousness of a vessel belonging to the true timeline, he could remain there permanently. This meant the entire game inside the secret chamber had been useful to him. Chen Yang had known from the beginning that Chen Ran was the true-timeline player. He could not say this openly because the other three would not believe him. Instead, he guided the battle toward a situation in which Zhang Fan would expose enough of his skills for Chen Yang to imprint them. Once Chen Yang had imprinted and deciphered Zhang Fan's abilities, he could ban Zhang Fan from using them. This prevented Zhang Fan from independently discovering that Chen Ran belonged to the true timeline.

Chen Yang's actual plan could therefore be reconstructed in sequence : He first allowed the four-person struggle to develop naturally, because forcing the others to behave differently would have made them suspicious. He then used the battle to obtain Zhang Fan's skills. With those skills, he could create another version of himself on his own timeline, using the Ninth True Self Player's timeline as the starting point. From there, he could enter the true timeline. The key assumption was that if the Chen Yang on the current timeline could think of this method, then the Chen Yang already existing on the true timeline would also be capable of thinking of it. Therefore, the true-timeline Chen Yang would have had the Netherworld prepare everything required in advance: the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] cultivation method and a suitable vessel. The method itself had only just been created by Zhang Fan from the perspective of the current secret chamber, but the true timeline was hundreds of years later. There would naturally be people who had already learned it, and the True Self Players might all have cultivated it.

Once the current Chen Yang obtained the cultivation method, he could cultivate the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed], seize the consciousness of the vessel, and effectively become a player on the true timeline. The result would be two Chen Yangs existing on that timeline. This was precisely why the plan was so dangerous. Omniscient should ordinarily have been able to detect an additional Chen Yang, but Omniscient and Omnipotent's skills did not work on Chen Yang. Chen Yang was effectively outside their system. The analogy was that Omniscient possessed both a Sky Eye and a household-registration system, but Chen Yang was an undocumented person who did not exist inside that registration system. By cutting Karma and using a clone to attract attention elsewhere, Chen Yang had therefore created what should have been an extremely clean infiltration.

The problem was that Omnipotent had still appeared. Therefore, there had to be an external factor that Chen Yang could not control. The answer was the Ninth True Self Player. Two Chen Yangs on the true timeline might have been advantageous to the Trio, but they were also

dangerous to the Ninth. If Omniscient and Omnipotent were eventually defeated, Chen Yang would become the next Omniscient and Omnipotent. Adding another Chen Yang therefore meant adding another competitor for the Ninth. There was no reason for her to permit Chen Yang to cultivate the Dao Heart Demonic Seed, seize a true-timeline player's consciousness, and establish himself permanently on the true timeline. Consequently, the Ninth was the largest uncontrolled variable in Chen Yang's entire plan.

From the outside, Chen Yang's actions appeared to have one obvious purpose. He was conquering the Eighteenth Layer, attacking the Whisperer Alliance, forcing Omniscient and Omnipotent to reveal themselves, and ultimately trying to obtain the Dao Heart Demonic Seed so that he could establish himself on the true timeline. But that objective alone did not explain the scale or precision of his actions.

Chen Yang's actual method was to construct a sequence in which every visible objective produced the resources required for the next stage. If Omniscient intervened, he gained information. If Omnipotent intervened, he gained another opportunity to use the resulting causal relationships. If the Ninth True Self Player intervened, he gained access to the part of the timeline she controlled. The apparent conflicts were therefore not isolated attacks. They were steps in a larger operation.

The key target was Han Fei. Han Fei had already been planted with a Dao Heart Demonic Seed, which meant that Zhang Fan's consciousness from the true timeline could potentially occupy that body. Chen Yang therefore did not need to defeat Zhang Fan's sealed Main Body directly. He only needed a way to obtain the cultivation method and then occupy a vessel that was connected to the true timeline. The Dao Heart Demonic Seed would give him access to the consciousness of that vessel and allow him to remain inside the relevant timeline without openly replacing Chen Ran.

This was still not the final layer. Chen Yang had effectively prepared several different winning routes at the same time. One route depended on provoking Omniscient, another on provoking Omnipotent, another on forcing the Ninth True Self Player to intervene, and another on allowing his Main Body to be dragged into No-Distance at the correct moment. Between these routes was a fourth operation involving Zhang Fan's past.

Chen Yang had already imprinted Zhang Fan's skills, so he could follow Karma backward to the moment when Zhang Fan first comprehended the Dao Heart Demonic Seed. That created a practical route to interfering with Zhang Fan's cultivation before Zhang Fan could act against him. But the Ninth controlled the timeline itself. Wherever Chen Yang chose to appear, she could send Future Chen Ran to the corresponding point and seal him there. The solution was therefore not to outrun the Ninth, but to make the timeline correction itself erase the evidence of the operation.

The Ghost Path Soldier became the most valuable result of this process. Chen Yang and Zhang Fan both attempted to reach the past point where Ling Chi first comprehended the system. Zhang Fan moved first in his own plan and used Infinite Replication to send copies backward,

but Chen Yang had already imprinted Zhang Fan's abilities and could predict that move. He therefore arrived at the destination first even though he had decided to act later. Every replica Zhang Fan sent into the past met another Chen Yang before reaching Ling Chi.

Chen Yang then deliberately allowed a contradiction to form around Empathy. If Ling Chi destroyed Empathy in the past while Empathy still existed in the future, the timeline would become inconsistent. The Ninth would then be forced to correct the contradiction. That correction could erase the historical evidence showing that Chen Yang and Zhang Fan had entered Ling Chi's past, including Zhang Fan's memory of Chen Yang obtaining the Ghost Path Soldier.

The important distinction was that the correction could remove the cause of the paradox without removing the result of the internal struggle. Chen Yang's acquisition of the Ghost Path Soldier had already become part of the contest between the four players. Erasing the Soldier itself would have meant deciding the result of that contest. The Ninth could therefore restore the timeline while leaving Chen Yang with the system he had obtained.

That was why Chen Yang's apparent objective and his real objective were not the same thing. Obtaining the Dao Heart Demonic Seed and finding a vessel on the true timeline were his broader strategic goals, but the Ghost Path Soldier was the concrete advantage that allowed him to turn those plans into something executable inside the Secret Chamber. By the time the other three understood what he had been doing, Chen Yang had already converted actions that appeared to belong to the present battle into resources obtained from another point in history.

The method used to stop that fourth move was simple once the timeline structure was understood. Someone only needed to wait at Zhang Fan's past point in time. Whenever a Chen Yang arrived, that person could apply [Eternal Prohibition] to him. The Ninth knew the entire timeline she had created better than anyone, so regardless of which moment Chen Yang selected, she could send the [Future Chen Ran] to exactly that same moment. The result would be a precision strike. Chen Yang could not simply teleport to an arbitrary point in Zhang Fan's history and assume that the future Chen Ran would be unable to follow. The Ninth controlled the timeline itself and could therefore turn every possible escape point into another interception point.

Chen Yang then stopped resisting. The Chen Yang on the true timeline appeared unable to provide meaningful assistance because most of his skills were defensive or life-saving. The current Chen Yang had only appeared so threatening because he had imprinted Zhang Fan's offensive abilities. Without those borrowed abilities, the true-timeline Chen Yang could not break through the combined pressure being placed upon him. Three powerful existences were already locking him down, and the future Chen Ran could add another layer of suppression. However, the current Chen Yang had not necessarily reached the end of his available options.

On the River of Time, Chen Yang was sitting cross-legged while a Taoist, a monk, and a scholar locked onto him. He could do nothing but watch as the future Chen Ran finally acted. [Dao Extreme · Eternal Kingdom] struck Chen Yang first and deciphered every skill on him, including

the skills he had imprinted from the other players. [Eternal Kingdom · Spacetime Prohibition] then struck the dungeon and isolated the relevant spacetime. Finally, [Eternal Kingdom · Shrinking Earth to an Inch] struck the secret chamber and imposed a regional prohibition. The result was absolute: from that moment onward, no skills could be used inside the secret chamber containing the four people. Chen Yang's consciousness therefore returned to his Main Body, where Chen Ran greeted him with a knowing half-smile.

Chen Yang ignored Chen Ran and looked at Zhang Fan. He then began speaking about the importance of grassroots experience and how people who rose from the bottom should never be underestimated. Chen Yang's example concerned a separate Secret Chamber arranged as the Gate of Hell, where eighteen people waited to be registered by a bearded judge, with Ox-Head and Horse-Face maintaining order. When asked whether he had committed evil while alive, Chen Yang answered that he had not. The judge immediately accused him of lying and attempted to shoot him, but the gun jammed and fell to the ground. Chen Yang picked it up, applied the same judgment to the judge, and killed him. When the remaining people questioned what had happened, an old man pointed out that the desk bore the name Gate of Hell while Ox-Head and Horse-Face had described the place as the Path to the Underworld. He concluded that lying was prohibited there and that a person identified as a liar could be killed. Chen Yang then tested this interpretation by accusing a woman of lying and shooting her, after which he ordered the crowd to kill Ox-Head, Horse-Face, and the old man, threatening to kill the remaining people if they refused.

The way Chen Yang obtained this result mattered more than the individual killings. The old man was a fallback prepared by the judge's group, but Chen Yang waited until the old man exposed himself before making him a target. Chen Yang also deliberately positioned himself as though he were protecting a frightened little girl from witnessing the violence. This apparent display of compassion influenced how the crowd interpreted his intentions, making them more willing to carry out his demands. Once the three people had been killed, Chen Yang checked that they were dead and proceeded to judge the remaining participants one by one, shooting them until only he and the girl remained. He then killed the girl as well, clearing the Secret Chamber in less than ten minutes. His earlier behavior had not been an attempt to earn the crowd's trust in any genuine sense; he combined coercion with a deliberately constructed appearance of kindness so that the participants would eliminate his intended targets for him before he disposed of the remaining witnesses.

The three True Self Players recognized how thoroughly Chen Yang had manipulated the situation, but the story also left a specific logical problem unresolved. The old man had apparently been among the people waiting to be registered by the judge, so he should have been subject to the same questioning procedure. If the judge's rule could detect and punish lies, the question was how the old man had avoided being exposed by that procedure. The example therefore demonstrated Chen Yang's ability to exploit a social situation, but the others could not simply accept every detail of his account without examining this remaining inconsistency.

The game was called [Lie]. Four people would take turns speaking, and they could say anything. If everyone told the truth, everyone would be obliterated. After the first round, the

person who spoke first would judge whether the other three had told the truth or a lie. The next round would begin with the second person from the previous round, and this process would continue. Once only two people remained, they could speak only the judgment command to one another. Any other speech would result in obliteration. When only one person remained, the game would be cleared.

The rules looked simple, but they were extremely difficult precisely because the four participants were not ordinary players. The game had originally been designed as a Five-Star dungeon because ordinary players could be killed through conventional means. These four could not. The only realistic method of eliminating them was to make them kill one another. Therefore, the stronger the participants were, the harder the game became. Chen Yang possessed the fastest growth in Hell. Chen Ran was the "One" among the ten True Self Players and possessed the ability to restart Hell. Zhang Fan had once been a beggar with almost no conventional knowledge, yet he had survived long enough that even the True Self Players feared him. Ling Ling Chi possessed so little recorded history that his existence was difficult to trace, but he had launched a war under Omniscient and Omnipotent's rule and subsequently survived by hiding among the Death Row Inmates. The scarcity of records surrounding him was therefore not evidence that he was weaker than the Ninth True Self Player. The Ninth had failed in her attempt to achieve her objective and had resorted to hiding within other timelines, whereas Ling Chi had remained among the Death Row Inmates without the Omniscient and Omnipotent being able to eliminate him. From this comparison, Chen Yang concluded that Ling Chi was stronger than the Ninth, at least in the relevant contest against the Omniscient and Omnipotent; his position among the Death Row Inmates represented an achievement that his limited historical record concealed rather than a sign of inferiority.

Zhang Fan's behavior during the previous sequence then became suspicious: he possessed [Dust Ruins Spirit Transformation] and understood skill combinations and devouring better than almost anyone. Yet while conquering the Eighteenth Layer, he had performed only moderately and had even allowed Chen Yang to imprint his abilities. That was irrational if his objective had simply been to win the battle. Therefore, the more likely explanation was that Zhang Fan had deliberately allowed Chen Yang to see enough of his abilities to determine who belonged to the true timeline. The benefit of doing so was not the identity itself. If Zhang Fan or Ling Chi were the true-timeline player, Chen Yang would target them anyway, so revealing their identity would change little. But if Chen Ran were the true-timeline player, Chen Yang would have a reason to protect him because Chen Ran's death could cause the Chen Yang on the true timeline to suffer as well. Chen Yang might appear to target everyone equally while secretly refusing to kill Chen Ran. That weakness could then be exploited.

Zhang Fan's structure therefore gave each person a different objective , as Zhang Fan and Ling Chi needed to target Chen Ran, while Chen Yang and Chen Ran would consequently be forced into cooperation. But there was an obvious contradiction: if Chen Ran really belonged to the true timeline, then his objective would also be to kill all three of them, including Chen Yang. The remaining uncertainty was whether Chen Ran himself knew that he was the true-timeline player. If he did, Chen Yang would be the natural first target. Zhang Fan therefore stated that extremely confident people often died because of their own confidence. Chen Yang had seen through the

general direction of Zhang Fan's plan, but he had still chosen to imprint Zhang Fan's skills because he believed his five winning moves would allow him to remain on the true timeline. His confidence in the plan had caused him to accept the risk.

Chen Yang did not become shaken by this interpretation. Instead, he explained that he had never truly lost before. He had been at the top in almost everything during his previous life and had therefore developed a "Heart of Certain Victory." This created a peculiar psychological effect. Someone who had won repeatedly accumulated enough momentum that others became reluctant to believe they were holding a bad hand. Even if such a person possessed a terrible hand in a gambling game, the opponent might still assume that the repeated winner possessed something better. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi therefore instinctively suspected that Chen Yang must still possess another solution. This itself became part of the infighting. Once they believed Chen Yang might have another hidden card, every subsequent action he made became difficult to interpret.

Chen Yang then deliberately proposed another possibility. If Chen Ran really were the player from the true timeline, perhaps Chen Ran's death would not necessarily be harmful to him. Perhaps the Ninth would simply allow Chen Yang to replace Chen Ran, creating a new Absolute Defense together with two Chen Yangs. Zhang Fan did not answer and smiled. This was a familiar tactic: by deliberately introducing multiple possible explanations, a player could prevent the opponent from determining which explanation was the actual objective. Chen Ran, meanwhile, watched the two brothers quietly. In a game of internal strife, influencing the opponent's thoughts was often more important than directly attacking them. Ling Chi therefore used his spirit to lock onto Chen Ran and Chen Yang, while Zhang Fan also locked onto them to prevent either brother from establishing the dangerous Future Lie that they would only tell the truth later. If either brother successfully established that Future Lie, Zhang Fan and Ling Chi could be forced into a situation where neither could safely judge him.

The first round of the Lie game therefore had to be analyzed from the rules rather than from ordinary assumptions. At least one person had to tell a Lie in every round, because if all four people told the truth, the chamber would immediately obliterate everyone. However, this did not mean that the liar would necessarily be the one who died. The first speaker had to judge the other three after the round ended, and a wrong judgment could itself become dangerous.

Suppose the speaking order was Chen Ran, Chen Yang, Ling Chi, and Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi was the only person who lied. Chen Ran would not know which of the other three had lied, so he would have to choose a judgment that preserved his own survival. He could accuse Chen Yang while declaring Ling Chi and Zhang Fan truthful. Ling Chi would know that the judgment was wrong, but he still could not safely judge Chen Ran in return, because doing so would reveal that Ling Chi himself had lied. Chen Yang was in a similar position. Even if he had told the truth and Chen Ran had wrongly judged him as lying, killing Chen Ran would leave Chen Yang facing Zhang Fan and Ling Chi alone, which was an extremely dangerous outcome. The result was that both the liar and the person who made the wrong judgment could survive, depending on what they knew about the future sequence.

This was why the Future Lie of "I will only speak the truth later" was so dangerous. A player who established it could potentially survive until only two people remained, because the other players could no longer safely judge him. The relationship between Chen Ran and Chen Yang made this even more dangerous. They were brothers and were capable of protecting one another, while Zhang Fan and Ling Chi had no such relationship. If either brother established the Future Lie, the other could potentially cooperate with him and force the other two into a losing sequence.

Chen Yang's ability to sacrifice himself made the situation even worse. If Chen Yang established the Future Lie, Chen Ran could safely continue telling the truth, leaving Zhang Fan or Ling Chi as the only possible liar. Chen Yang could then make a judgment against one of them. If that judgment failed, it would identify the other as the liar, allowing Chen Ran to judge that person afterward. Chen Yang could therefore sacrifice himself while ensuring that one of Zhang Fan or Ling Chi died with him. The result could leave Zhang Fan and Chen Ran as the final two, after which the rules would force Zhang Fan to make a judgment against Chen Ran. Because Chen Ran had not lied, that judgment would fail and Chen Ran would eventually become the survivor.

Zhang Fan and Ling Chi therefore did not need to believe that Chen Yang would actually choose to sacrifice himself. The possibility alone was enough to make the Future Lie unacceptable. Before the preparation period ended, the four therefore established several restrictions. Chen Ran and Chen Yang could not use shared memories, common experiences, codes, or secret languages from before death. The Future Lie promising to tell the truth or Lie later was forbidden. No-Distance was forbidden, suggestive movements were forbidden, and nobody was allowed to directly state whether a previous statement had been true or false. These restrictions did not solve the game, they just prevented the players from deciding the entire outcome through a single loophole before the actual speaking sequence began.

When the preparation ended, the four received name tags. Zhang Fan became Li Chengqian, Chen Yang became Li Chengze, Ling Chi became Li Chengqing, and Chen Ran became Li Chengman. According to the setting, Li Chengqian was the Crown Prince, and Zhang Fan was the first person to speak. He began by telling two stories from Feng Menglong's [Stories to Warn the World], one involving Wang Meiniang and Qin Zhong and the other involving Du Shiniang and Li Jia. He explained why the two women reached different endings despite both involving men spending their savings to redeem them. His conclusion was that Wang Meiniang and Qin Zhong succeeded because Wang Meiniang also contributed and did not force Qin Zhong to act independently, while Du Shiniang's tragedy occurred because she forced Li Jia to choose between her and his future. Zhang Fan then ended his speech.

The other three immediately began analyzing the hidden meaning. On the surface, Zhang Fan's statements about the stories were not lies. But his opening sentence created an unusual problem. He had said that he would analyze stories from "his era" and assumed that the others had heard of them. [Stories to Warn the World] was completed in 1624, while the Ming Dynasty fell in 1644. Ling Chi had been a general near the end of the Ming Dynasty, meaning he was likely born around or before the completion of the book. Zhang Fan was the Sixth True Self Player while Ling Chi was the Seventh, so Zhang Fan should have been born before Ling Chi. If

Zhang Fan and Ling Chi were separated by the normal decades or centuries between True Self Players, then Zhang Fan's statement was suspicious. Yet the two stories themselves had backgrounds from different historical periods. [Du Shiniang Sinks Her Jewel Box in Anger] was set during the Wanli era of the Ming Dynasty, while [The Oil Seller Wins the Courtesan] was set during the Jingkang Incident of the Northern Song. If Zhang Fan had been born during one of those periods, his claim that the stories were from his era could actually be true. Thus, the wording contained a deliberate ambiguity that appeared false on the surface while potentially becoming true under another interpretation.

The hidden meaning of Zhang Fan's speech was therefore not simply the historical accuracy of the two stories. Wang Meiniang and Qin Zhong represented a relationship in which the man followed the woman's wishes instead of independently forcing his own decision. Zhang Fan was using that structure as a message to Ling Chi: the two of them were cooperating, so neither should plot against the other. If they both told the truth, the game would remain manageable. Ling Chi then had to respond to that hidden message. His own story described his childhood with Ling Jū and Ling Runsheng. His father insisted that a general needed ferocity and that this ferocity came from the heart, but he deliberately kept Ling Chi away from the battlefield. Ling Chi argued that he possessed superior horsemanship, spear skills, and military strategy, but his father refused to acknowledge him as part of the family genealogy.

The story continued by explaining Ling Jū's concept of "Animality." A veteran soldier possessed a certain ferocity developed through experience, but Ling Jū considered this ferocity to be man's primitive Animality controlled by Reason. He demonstrated the concept through a cat that reacted violently to his presence. Ling Chi then analyzed the idea rather than simply accepting his father's explanation. A cat had no Reason, so its Animality was instinctive. Humans possessed Reason, which could control Animality. Ling Chi remembered that when he and his family had encountered danger on the road, the hair on his body had stood up before the bandits appeared. He therefore reasoned that Animality was connected to environmental danger and might be triggered by controlling the environment. His father immediately became angry and struck him, ordering him to kneel in the ancestral hall.

Inside the ancestral hall, Ling Jū finally revealed why he had treated Ling Chi differently. The Ming Dynasty's situation was already beyond recovery, and Ling Jū believed that the historical torrent could not be stopped. Ling Runsheng was his eldest son, so he was expected to die on the battlefield alongside his father. Ling Chi was different. Ling Jū had deliberately kept him out of the genealogy and raised him among the guards because he wanted Ling Chi to survive the fall of the dynasty. If the country collapsed, Ling Chi could change his name, take the family members away, and continue living. Ling Chi's desire to die alongside his father and brother was therefore not an act of filial piety from his father's perspective. It was a selfish choice that would also drag the soldiers' families and other dependents into the same death. Ling Jū forced Ling Chi to promise that if he and Ling Runsheng went to war, Ling Chi would instead escort the military families to safety.

The historical information complicated the story. Ling Jū and Ling Runsheng corresponded to actual historical records, including Ling Jū's service under the Southern Ming and his eventual

refusal to surrender. Ling Runsheng also died with him. What remained uncertain was whether a son named Ling Chi had actually existed and been excluded from the genealogy. The theory of Animality also appeared to fit Jie Mie's mental attack methods. More importantly, Ling Chi's story suggested that he had never fought on a battlefield or killed anyone, which was compatible with the previous-life conditions of a True Self Player. However, Chen Yang had received information that Ling Chi had been a general at the end of the Ming Dynasty, while Ling Chi's own story suggested that he had been deliberately kept away from military combat. One possible explanation was that Ling Chi later returned to the battlefield after escorting the military families to safety. But if he had done so, he would have killed people, which would conflict with the conditions associated with becoming a True Self Player. Another possibility was that "general" had merely been an honorary title arranged by Ling Jū so that Ling Chi could move among the military families without attracting suspicion. Therefore, Ling Chi's story could appear truthful while still containing a hidden lie.

This placed pressure on Chen Ran. Zhang Fan's story had conveyed that he would tell the truth, and Ling Chi's story had conveyed the same thing. If Chen Ran also declared that he would tell the truth, then all four could potentially be obliterated. Yet Ling Chi also understood that Chen Ran could use deterrence. If the other three dared to tell the truth, Chen Ran could simply tell the truth as well, making their survival depend on whether one of them was willing to lie. Thus, Zhang Fan and Chen Yang's apparent commitment to telling the truth placed Chen Ran under pressure, while Chen Ran's own threat of mutual destruction placed pressure back on them.

The deeper problem was the identity of the liar. Ling Chi reasoned that Zhang Fan would be the next person to make the judgment and therefore had to choose his words carefully. If Zhang Fan declared that Chen Yang was truthful, Ling Chi was truthful, and Chen Ran was truthful, then if Chen Yang had lied, Chen Yang would kill Zhang Fan, Ling Chi would kill Chen Yang, and only Ling Chi and Chen Ran would remain. Because of the speaking order, Ling Chi would then obtain the first judgment and could still be trapped by Chen Ran. Therefore, Zhang Fan could not safely make that judgment. The safer statement was that Chen Yang was lying while Ling Chi and Chen Ran were telling the truth. Ling Chi then simulated the three possible actual combinations behind that statement. One possibility was that Chen Yang lied and the other two told the truth. Another was that Chen Yang and Ling Chi told the truth while Chen Ran lied. The third was that Chen Yang and Chen Ran told the truth while Ling Chi lied. Under the second and third possibilities, the subsequent judgment order could allow Ling Chi to survive. Therefore, from Ling Chi's own perspective, he was forced to tell the truth. Since Zhang Fan could reach the same conclusion, Zhang Fan was also effectively forced into telling the truth. The remaining liar would therefore have to be Chen Yang or Chen Ran.

Chen Ran then appeared in his own mental simulation as a school student being bullied. He woke in a classroom after being beaten by three classmates led by Xue Qiang. The circumstances were constructed around a typical bullying situation. Xue Qiang demanded protection money, Chen Ran had reported the matter to a teacher, and the teacher apparently leaked the information back to the bullies. The next day, the three dragged Chen Ran into the bathroom and beat him. They threatened to demand one hundred yuan, a significant amount for a student in the early 2000s. After reconstructing the situation, Chen Ran returned to class,

where the other students either sympathized with him or enjoyed watching him suffer. His desk had been thrown into the trash, and the teacher who should have protected him ignored him.

The bullying escalated. Xue Qiang poured ink over Chen Ran's head and eventually attempted to humiliate him in front of the class. Chen Ran then went home, found an old Walkman, and became visibly excited. The Walkman was connected to the later solution because Chen Ran had begun constructing a record of the events. The next morning he returned to the teacher and pretended to cry while asking for help. The teacher blamed him for being bullied, and the other teachers avoided involvement because the class teacher had a relationship with the principal. Chen Ran responded with an unusually cheerful smile, then waited until class began. He locked the front door from outside, entered through the back door, locked that door from inside, and threw the key out of the sixth-floor window. He had deliberately created a closed environment in which nobody could leave.

Chen Ran then attacked Xue Qiang. He punched him, dragged him across the classroom, smashed his head into the wall, and continued beating him. When Xue Qiang's two lackeys attempted to intervene, Chen Ran allowed them to attack him before disabling them one by one. He then turned his attention to the teacher, mocked her previous question about why he was bullied while pointing out that she had failed to protect him, and repeatedly smashed her head against the door. He then forced other students to approach him and attacked them as well. Eventually, more than a dozen students were lying injured throughout the classroom. Chen Ran even struck the class monitor, despite remembering that the monitor had never bullied him. The reason was not personal revenge against the monitor. The monitor represented someone who had watched everything happen and done nothing.

Chen Ran then used the remaining students as tools. He broke Xue Qiang's leg and told Xue Qiang's two lackeys that if they wanted to leave, they had to break Xue Qiang's hands and feet. When the principal finally arrived and broke down the classroom door, Xue Qiang's limbs were broken, the lackeys were injured, and the teacher's mouth had been beaten badly. Chen Ran then struck the principal and the teachers who entered with him. Yet when the police later questioned him, he became a frightened, sobbing child. The Walkman contained recordings of him asking the teacher, grade director, and principal for help, along with their dismissive responses. To the police, the evidence therefore showed a bullied child who had repeatedly sought assistance and received none, followed by a violent incident after he had been abandoned by the adults responsible for protecting him.

The other three immediately recognized the apparent contradiction. If Chen Ran had really experienced such an incident during his life, Chen Yang should know about it because they were brothers. Chen Yang's silence therefore strongly suggested that the event had never happened. Yet Zhang Fan noticed something else. Chen Ran's description repeatedly used the language of someone waking from sleep, organizing memories, and reconstructing a sequence of events. That sounded less like a real memory and more like the process of solving a dungeon decryption. The school environment, the indifferent teachers, the principal, the absent parents, and the grandparents living elsewhere all created the exact kind of isolated environment commonly used by a decryption. Therefore, Chen Ran's story was likely not a literal account of

his previous life at all. It was probably a simulated plot he had encountered during a dungeon decryption or a story he had constructed as part of solving one.

Zhang Fan then realized that the surface facts were not necessarily the most important part. The four people had established Future Lies preventing them from directly announcing whether they were telling the truth, so their narratives had to communicate their positions through metaphor. Otherwise, all four could simply tell the truth and die. Zhang Fan's two stories therefore had a second meaning. Wang Meiniang and Qin Zhong represented a relationship in which the woman did not force the man to act according to his own independent judgment. Du Shiniang, by contrast, forced Li Jia into a decision. Zhang Fan's metaphor was therefore directed at Ling Chi: I will not plot against you, and you should not plot against me. We should both tell the truth.

Ling Chi's story contained the corresponding metaphor. His subjective desire was to go to the battlefield and die with his father and brother. Yet his father prevented him from doing so and forced him to protect the military families instead. In other words, Ling Chi did not act entirely according to his own subjective desire. He followed the decision imposed by his father. This matched Zhang Fan's metaphor of Qin Zhong following Wang Meiniang rather than acting independently. Therefore, Ling Chi's story communicated that he would also tell the truth. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi were consequently both signaling the same intention without directly violating the Future Lie restriction.

Chen Ran's metaphor was simpler. In his story, anyone who bullied him was eventually beaten by him. The corresponding message in the internal struggle was: if the other three continued to pressure Chen Ran, he would simply flip the table and drag everyone down with him. If necessary, he would accept his own death as long as the others died as well. The class monitor who had done nothing and was still slapped by Chen Ran represented Chen Yang. Chen Ran was therefore criticizing Chen Yang for standing aside or failing to act. That left Chen Yang. His story was superficially much simpler than the other three, because he did not seem to be presenting a complicated metaphor at all. He described his own experience inside the Novice Tutorial Secret Chamber, where eighteen people were gathered in a queue before the Judge, with Ox-Head and Horse-Face maintaining order. The central object was the Judge's Liar Killer. The chamber itself was designed around the same contradiction the four True Self Players were currently facing: people could be led into making Lies, while the person holding the gun possessed the ability to kill those who had already been determined to be Liars.

Chen Yang's behavior inside that chamber showed why he was so dangerous. The moment the Judge questioned him, Chen Yang answered that he had never committed an evil deed. The Judge immediately determined that he had lied, but the gun jammed and fell from his hand. Chen Yang understood the significance of this immediately. Because the Judge had failed the judgment, the gun no longer belonged to him. Chen Yang took advantage of the opening, picked up the weapon, and killed the Judge with his own command of the Liar Killer.

The rest of the chamber then became a test of whether Chen Yang could control people rather than just kill them. An old man quickly noticed that the words on the desk identified the location

as the Ghost Gate Pass while everyone in the queue had been repeating that it was the Yellow Springs Road. He therefore correctly inferred that the chamber was constructed to make people Lie. Chen Yang recognized that this old man was different from the others, because he understood the rules instead of blindly following them. Rather than immediately killing him, Chen Yang used him as part of the structure of the game.

Chen Yang first demonstrated that he did not need to personally kill everyone. He threatened the remaining people, ordering them to kill Ox-Head, Horse-Face, and the old man if they wanted to survive. When one of the stronger men tried to resist and even attempted to seize the gun, Chen Yang simply relied on the chamber's repulsion mechanism instead of wasting a bullet. He then deliberately protected the Little Girl from witnessing the violence. This created the appearance that Chen Yang possessed a degree of kindness and restraint. The others interpreted his behavior emotionally rather than strategically, and that misunderstanding became the basis for his next move.

The old man eventually tried to save himself by revealing the apparent loophole. He pointed out that the crowd had already been manipulated into Lying, while he and Chen Yang were the only two people who had not lied. From the old man's perspective, this should have made him safe. But Chen Yang had already anticipated the reaction. By standing in front of the Little Girl and appearing to shield her, he allowed the others to believe that he was merciful. The strong man therefore decided to kill the old man rather than risk waiting for Chen Yang to act. Once the old man was dead, Chen Yang no longer needed anyone else.

He simply raised the Liar Killer and began judging the remaining people one by one. Since the others had already been made to Lie, the gun worked exactly as expected. In less than ten minutes, the entire secret chamber had been cleared, leaving only Chen Yang before finally killing the Little Girl as well. The important point was therefore not that Chen Yang possessed the strongest ability. It was that once the gun was in his hands, he no longer needed to participate in the normal cycle of mental deception. He could allow the other people to deceive one another, use their own assumptions to produce the necessary actions, and then clean up the result with the Liar Killer.

However, Chen Yang's story contained an obvious contradiction. The old man had been present in the chamber before the registration began, meaning that he should also have been questioned by the Judge. If he was truly a hidden member of the Judge's group, then he should have needed some way to pass the Judge's questions without being exposed. Since Chen Yang had waited for him to reveal himself, his earlier answers must have been sufficiently convincing. The simplest explanation was that the old man's previous evil actions had genuinely been committed under coercion, allowing him to answer the Judge's questions without actually making a Lie. In other words, the old man's ability to remain hidden was itself consistent with the rules rather than evidence that Chen Yang had fabricated the story.

The far more important contradiction concerned the deaths of Ox-Head and Horse-Face. Chen Ran, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi had previously inferred that ordinary physical fighting was prohibited by the rules of the Eighteenth Layer. Yet Chen Yang had just described a crowd

literally beating people to death. Taken at face value, that should have been an obvious Lie. Chen Yang was unlikely to make such a basic mistake, so the contradiction pointed toward a deeper distinction: the Novice Tutorial Secret Chamber was not actually an ordinary dungeon secret chamber.

This connected directly to the greatest Gui Yu of the Eighteenth Layer. Once the Eighteenth Layer had been blockaded by the Unity of Heaven and Man, the normal connection between the Eighteenth Layer and the Eternal Land had been severed. The easiest way to understand this was to imagine a house whose interior rooms remained intact but whose entrance had been sealed. The house still existed, but the outside world could no longer enter it through the normal route.

The Novice Tutorial Secret Chamber therefore functioned as the entrance rather than as an ordinary room inside the Eighteenth Layer. Before the blockade existed, the Eternal Land and the Eighteenth Layer had belonged to the same larger structure. After the blockade, the entrance to that structure had effectively been sealed directly outside the Novice Tutorial Secret Chamber. This explained why players did not proceed directly from the Tutorial Chamber into the Eighteenth Layer after completing the tutorial. They were instead redirected into a Novice Instance.

This also explained why the Novice Tutorial Secret Chamber could obey rules that appeared impossible under the normal restrictions of Hell. It followed the rules and order associated with the entrance of the Eternal Land rather than simply inheriting the restrictions of the blockaded Eighteenth Layer. Therefore, the people inside Chen Yang's story really could be beaten to death. The apparent contradiction only existed because the four True Self Players were unconsciously treating the Novice Tutorial Secret Chamber as though it were an ordinary dungeon.

The importance of this discovery was much larger than Chen Yang's story itself. Chen Ran had previously been able to infer the greatest Gui Yu of the Eighteenth Layer and use that understanding to identify a method of Deciphering it. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi had reached the same general solution from a different direction. The Novice Tutorial Secret Chamber was therefore not an introductory dungeon. It was connected to the original entrance between the Eternal Land and the Eighteenth Layer, which was precisely why it remained capable of interacting with the blockade created by the Unity of Heaven and Man.

Chen Yang's story therefore contained a deliberate double layer. On the surface, he had described an outrageous massacre and seemed to be telling a story that should have been impossible under the rules of Hell. Underneath that surface, however, the story was logically consistent once the status of the Novice Tutorial Secret Chamber was understood. Chen Yang was effectively telling the other three: I am telling the truth, and the apparent contradiction comes from your understanding of the rules rather than from my statement.

This placed the other three under even greater pressure. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi had already used their own stories to communicate that they intended to tell the truth. Chen Yang had now

provided a second piece of evidence supporting the same position, while simultaneously demonstrating that he understood a structural secret about the Hell system that the others had not fully recognized. The question was therefore no longer simply whether Chen Yang was lying. The real problem was that his story had been constructed so that the people judging it had to distinguish between an apparent violation of the rules and a genuine contradiction in the rules themselves.

The resulting deduction was that Zhang Fan, Ling Chi, and Chen Yang all appeared to be telling the truth, while Chen Ran's statement appeared to be the only one being treated as a Lie. However, that conclusion was not enough to solve the problem, because Chen Ran had deliberately constructed his story so that the Lie-detection principle and the behavioral rules of the Secret Chamber did not possess exactly the same information.

The Lie-detection principle only needed to determine whether Chen Ran's statement could be established as a Lie. The problem was that Chen Ran's speech could be interpreted in more than one way. Under one interpretation, the statement was false. Under another, the same words could describe a true situation. The objective facts therefore did not give the system enough information to determine which interpretation Chen Ran had intended. His statement existed in a state that could not be cleanly classified as either truth or falsehood.

That ambiguity became dangerous when Chen Ran was asked to judge another player. His judgment would reveal which interpretation he himself was treating as valid. If Chen Ran judged Zhang Fan and that action established that his previous statement had been made under the truthful interpretation, then the chamber's rules could finally determine that all four players had effectively told the truth. The universal obliteration condition would then become active, killing the other three. Chen Ran therefore could not safely judge Zhang Fan.

This meant that refusing to judge was not simply a passive decision. It was the action that preserved the uncertainty surrounding Chen Ran's own statement. Zhang Fan faced the same problem from the opposite direction. If he judged Chen Ran and that judgment supplied the missing information needed to classify Chen Ran's statement, then Zhang Fan might accidentally resolve the ambiguity in Chen Ran's favor. Chen Ran had therefore transferred the danger of his own uncertain statement onto the person trying to judge him.

The important distinction was therefore between what the players themselves knew and what the rules of the Secret Chamber could establish. Chen Ran knew what he intended to say, but the rule system did not possess enough information to distinguish the possible meanings. His Extreme Realm had not merely produced a clever sentence. It had placed the rule system itself into a position where its own method of determining truth could no longer produce a stable answer.

That was why the obvious judgment was itself dangerous. Zhang Fan could theoretically declare Chen Yang truthful, Ling Chi truthful, and Chen Ran a liar. But doing so required him to provide the very information Chen Ran had designed the chamber to lack. The trap was therefore not simply that Zhang Fan might choose the wrong answer. The trap was that choosing any definite

answer could itself resolve the ambiguity and activate the mechanism Chen Ran wanted to avoid.

Zhang Fan therefore judged Chen Yang to be telling the truth, Ling Chi to be telling the truth, and Chen Ran to be lying. Chen Yang showed no reaction to the first judgment, confirming that the judgment was correct. Zhang Fan then judged Ling Chi truthful, which was also consistent with their cooperative arrangement. Finally, he stated that Chen Ran was lying. Chen Yang and Ling Chi both placed their hands on their Liar Killers but did not immediately draw. If Zhang Fan were absolutely certain that Chen Ran was lying, then he should have drawn first. The fact that he had not done so indicated that he himself was not yet certain how Chen Ran's statement should be interpreted. Chen Ran remained relaxed, which further suggested that he had deliberately constructed a situation in which being judged was itself dangerous.

The three then activated their own systems to analyze Chen Ran's operation. Zhang Fan could use [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] to split his consciousness into countless simulations. Chen Yang could use [Three Corpses Transformation Art] to consume Points and increase his brain activity. Ling Chi could use [Ghostly Path Soldier] to eliminate incorrect thoughts and control the direction of his own reasoning. Yet all three methods were still external systems that temporarily boosted their ability to think. Chen Ran's Self Extreme State was fundamentally different. When Chen Ran used the Extreme Realm to think, his mental consumption was essentially zero. The other three had to spend enormous amounts of mental energy to simulate what Chen Ran had already constructed naturally.

The actual trick was that Chen Ran had been a web novel author before his death. Everything he had said in the school story except the final sentence was content from a story he had written. The protagonist of that story happened to be named Chen Ran and experienced school bullying. Chen Ran was therefore not claiming that these events had happened to him. He was reciting a story he had written. The final sentence, "The above is the content of what I said," was not part of the story. That distinction created the loophole. When someone recites an entire poem or book passage, the person is not lying just because the events in the poem did not happen to them. They are simply reproducing existing content. Likewise, Chen Ran was simply reciting the contents of his own story.

The final sentence could then be interpreted in two different ways. It could mean that everything above was the content that Chen Ran had personally said, in which case the statement was false because he had only recited the story. Or it could mean that everything above was the content of the speech Chen Ran had just delivered, in which case the statement was true. The rules for judging Lies could not determine which interpretation Chen Ran intended because the objective facts supported both readings. Therefore, Chen Ran's words existed in a superposition of truth and falsehood. The secret chamber could not directly classify them as one or the other. Since the rules could not determine whether Chen Ran had lied, the obliteration condition could not simply treat all four as truthful and activate.

This created the real mechanism behind Chen Ran's survival. If Chen Ran judged Zhang Fan, the judgment would establish through his behavior that Chen Ran had chosen the interpretation

in which his statement was true. That would allow the rules to determine that all four had told the truth and obliterate the remaining three. Therefore, Chen Ran could not safely judge Zhang Fan. By refusing to judge, he kept his own statement in the unresolved state between truth and falsehood. Zhang Fan's judgment of Chen Ran was similarly trapped in the same uncertainty. Chen Ran had therefore transferred the risk that belonged to himself onto Zhang Fan. Zhang Fan could not kill Chen Ran because doing so would provide the very behavioral evidence required to resolve the ambiguity in Chen Ran's favor.

The broader principle was that rules could not be perfectly airtight. The Eighteenth Layer itself already contained numerous examples of players exploiting gaps between the written rule and the actual behavior required by the rule. A player could use a Whisperer secret chamber to bypass a restriction that technically applied to the player but not to the space they created. Similarly, the rules surrounding the Lie game could be exploited if the player discovered a situation where the rule system lacked sufficient information to classify an action. Chen Ran's Self Extreme State had therefore found a loophole in the rule system itself. The Extreme Realm was not simply a stronger form of mental calculation. It allowed Chen Ran to stand outside the normal assumptions used by the rules.

Zhang Fan and Ling Chi now faced a direct problem. Theoretically, they could violate the Future Lie restriction and use [No Distance] to wear Chen Ran down. But they could not trust Chen Yang. If Chen Yang agreed to help them weaken Chen Ran and then betrayed them at the correct moment, Chen Ran could judge all three to death. Chen Yang could transform what would normally be a one-for-one trade into a one-for-two trade. Therefore, Zhang Fan and Ling Chi could not simply cooperate with Chen Yang even when doing so appeared rational. Chen Yang's previous behavior had already demonstrated that he could construct multiple layers of deception, while Chen Ran's new loophole meant that the consequences of one incorrect judgment were catastrophic.

The four were therefore left in a situation where Chen Ran could not be safely selected, Zhang Fan and Ling Chi could not safely trust Chen Yang, and Chen Yang could not openly reveal everything he knew without changing the entire structure of the game. The apparent simplicity of the rules had disappeared because each statement now carried two separate questions: what did the speaker literally say, and what objective fact could the rules actually establish from that statement? Chen Ran had exploited the gap between those two questions. Zhang Fan, Chen Yang, and Ling Chi could understand the result, but understanding the loophole did not immediately give them a method to eliminate Chen Ran. They had to continue reasoning from the distinction between what the rules could know and what the players themselves could know.

The first problem was that Chen Ran's operation had produced an erroneous result inside the rule system. From the perspective of the principles used to judge Lies, Chen Ran's narration could not be directly classified as a Lie, because whether he had actually written that story in his previous life was still an Unknown Lie to the other three. However, the rules themselves had already produced a different result: Chen Ran had been judged as lying because the first round had not ended in everyone's obliteration. These two results could not coexist normally. One side treated Chen Ran as telling the truth, while the other side treated him as telling a Lie, and

because the rules prioritized behavior rather than the reasoning of outside observers, Chen Ran could not simply be selected through an ordinary judgment.

The important point was that the two systems could not be mixed together. The principle of judging Lies used objective evidence to determine whether a statement was true or false, while the rule system determined whether a person's own behavior violated the rules. Zhang Fan's judgment that Chen Ran was telling the truth could establish the truth of Chen Ran's statement under the Lie-detection mechanism, but that judgment did not retroactively become Chen Ran's own behavior. Therefore, it could not be used as evidence that Chen Ran had violated the rule requiring everyone to be truthful. Only Chen Ran himself could produce such evidence through his own actions. This was why Chen Ran had succeeded in moving the danger from himself onto Zhang Fan while simultaneously producing an incorrect judgment result inside the secret chamber.

The next question was how long that incorrect result could remain in effect. The answer depended on the structure of the game rather than on the first round itself. The rules stated that after the first round ended, the first speaker would comment on the other three people's statements, and the following round would begin with the next person in the original speaking order. Since the rule system prioritized behavior, a new action could potentially change an earlier judgment. However, that correction had to occur through behavior as well. Chen Ran could not go back and alter the first round with words alone. The only relevant behavior capable of affecting Zhang Fan's previous judgment was Chen Ran actually judging Zhang Fan.

This created a temporary protection for the second round. Until the end of that round, Chen Ran still possessed the ability to correct the erroneous result produced by the first round. If he judged Zhang Fan and that judgment succeeded, the rules would obtain direct behavioral evidence from Chen Ran himself, proving that Chen Ran had chosen the interpretation in which his previous statement was true. At that point the earlier uncertainty would disappear, the first-round result would be corrected, and the rule concerning everyone's truthful statements could be activated. Therefore, the three could not simply assume that Chen Ran's unselectable status meant he was permanently safe. His apparent protection depended on the timing of the game's own judgment mechanism.

That was precisely why the situation remained dangerous. Chen Ran only needed one appropriate action to destroy the protection of everyone else, while Zhang Fan, Ling Chi, and Chen Yang needed to understand every possible consequence before making a move. Their mental exhaustion was also becoming increasingly severe. Chen Ran had constructed the operation naturally through the Extreme Realm, meaning he had already internalized the entire logical structure of the deception. The other three had to reconstruct it from the outside, repeatedly testing what the rules would recognize as objective evidence and what they would treat as nothing more than an observer's interpretation.

At this point, Chen Yang changed the nature of the struggle. The three men had been treating the secret chamber as a contest over how to exploit its rules, but Chen Yang had begun examining what would happen if the rule intended to prevent everyone from surviving became

useless. His thinking quickly reached a dangerous result: an Unknown Lie follower could make the erasure rule ineffective. If the fourth speaker deliberately repeated an Unknown Lie spoken by another person, then from the perspective of Lie detection the follower was not lying, while the rule system could still potentially judge the statement as a Lie because it evaluated the objective fact independently. This separation created another gap between the two systems.

Chen Yang then used that gap to construct the next stage of the conflict. If the fourth speaker could always use an Unknown Lie follower identity to avoid the condition in which everyone telling the truth caused universal erasure, then nobody had to risk telling an ordinary Lie. The obvious result would be a stalemate. The first three people could continue speaking truthfully, the fourth could repeatedly use an Unknown Lie follower identity to prevent the group from being erased, and the chamber would never be cleared. Nobody could safely break the equilibrium because deliberately telling a Lie would create the very danger everyone had been avoiding.

But Chen Yang saw that this stalemate itself would force the players into another type of behavior. The speaker making the final judgment had no reason to trust the statements of the previous three, because any one of them might have used an Unknown Lie. The previous three, knowing that the last speaker would protect himself by relying on an Unknown Lie follower identity, would have no reason to protect the last speaker either. The constraint created by the erasure rule had therefore been removed without removing the need to survive the next judgment.

The key was that Unknown Lies did not all possess the same probability of being judged as true. An Unknown Lie involving a number with countless possible values might have an extremely low probability of being true. If someone claimed that Hell contained a particular enormous number of people, the listener could not immediately know whether it was true, but there were countless possible numbers, making any one specific answer overwhelmingly likely to be false. A different Unknown Lie could have only two meaningful outcomes. If someone said that they had raised a cat before dying, the listener might have no evidence either way, leaving roughly a fifty-percent possibility of truth and a fifty-percent possibility of falsehood.

This difference allowed Chen Yang to turn the previous equilibrium into a trap. The fourth speaker could use an Unknown Lie with an overwhelmingly high probability of being judged as a Lie to preserve himself, but the first three speakers could also use Unknown Lies with roughly even probabilities. Once that happened, the commentator would no longer know whether the second and third speakers had spoken truthfully. There would be several combinations of truth and falsehood that remained objectively possible, and any judgment made against those statements carried a real chance of being incorrect.

The danger therefore passed from one speaker to another. The first commentator could know whether his own statement was true, but he could not know with certainty whether the second and third statements would eventually be revealed as Lies. When the second person became the next commentator, the same uncertainty appeared again. Each participant would understand that the person after him could exploit an Unknown Lie, and that participant would

understand the same thing about the following speaker. This created a chain of suspicion in which every person had a reason to undermine the person whose turn came after them before that person could undermine them first. Repeating this cycle would gradually make every participant accumulate the possibility of possessing the lying attribute, even if no one initially intended to tell an ordinary Lie.

Chen Yang had therefore transformed a simple rule into a self-sustaining human behavior. The problem no longer depended entirely on the written restrictions. Once each participant believed that the next participant might use an Unknown Lie to protect himself, cooperating became irrational. The rational response was to act first. That was why Ling Chi realized that Chen Yang's approach was fundamentally different from Chen Ran's. Chen Ran had found a weakness in the rule system itself. Chen Yang was constructing a situation in which the psychological reactions of the four people would produce the behavior the rules needed without Chen Yang having to force them directly.

There was another layer to Chen Yang's operation. The fourth speaker's Unknown Lie could be judged as a truth under the Lie-detection principle while simultaneously being treated as a Lie by the behavioral rule system. Because the secret chamber itself contained the Gui Yu equating those two systems, the commentator was forced to deal with the contradiction. The safest comment would therefore be to identify the fourth person's statement as truthful from the standpoint of Lie detection, because that avoided contradicting the apparent fact that the fourth person had not been lying according to the principle used to judge Lies. Chen Yang had chosen his wording so that his later judgment would remain consistent with this structure.

Ling Chi also noticed a much more dangerous implication. Chen Yang had deliberately set a Future Lie stating that he would certainly repay a kindness. A normal Future Lie would have little direct relationship to the rules of this secret chamber, so there was no obvious reason for Chen Yang to include it just to satisfy the current game. That meant the sentence almost certainly served another purpose. Chen Yang and Chen Ran were brothers, yet the information being revealed suggested that the two did not belong to the same period. Chen Yang had been transported hundreds of years into the past, while the person in the iron window had apparently entered Hell naturally and therefore belonged to Chen Ran's era.

If the person in the iron window belonged to Chen Ran's era, the person who would eventually repay Chen Yang's kindness should theoretically be the Chen Yang existing on that later timeline, not the Chen Yang currently standing in front of them. This made Chen Yang's certainty suspicious. For him to confidently predict that this person would eventually repay the kindness, the two timelines had to possess some relationship that allowed information from one to constrain the other. Yet Chen Yang knew that Chen Ran was probably connected to the true timeline while Chen Ran himself did not possess the same certainty. Therefore, the Future Lie could function as an emotional trap as much as a logical one.

Chen Ran could interpret Chen Yang's statement as an implicit indication that Chen Yang knew he belonged to the true timeline. If Chen Ran accepted that interpretation, he would naturally believe that Chen Yang was prepared to make a one-for-one exchange and would therefore

become less suspicious of him. That was precisely the danger. Once Chen Ran's suspicion was lowered, Chen Yang could exploit the gap at the decisive moment and turn the arrangement into a backstab. Ling Chi understood that if this happened during an actual gunfight, Chen Ran's reaction speed under the Self Extreme State would make the situation extremely dangerous for him and Zhang Fan.

The pressure became even greater when Chen Yang deliberately entered his complete form. His previous cultivation and rapid advancement had produced a strange limitation: because he possessed an extremely strong belief in certain principles, there were actions he would not willingly perform. His extensive experience during his time in the living world, however, had gradually created something else inside him. He had accumulated observations of human nature from countless incidents, and those experiences formed an increasingly detailed understanding of how people could behave under extreme pressure.

One case had particularly deepened that understanding. Several years earlier, while working at the Xishui Town government, Chen Yang had attended the interrogation of a man named Zhang Shengli. Chen Yang had already heard the basic details of the case, but the more he listened, the less sense the motive seemed to make.

Zhang Shengli had once lived a relatively ordinary and successful life. He had received a university education in the late 1990s, found a decent job, and later entered business. For a period of time, his business succeeded well enough that he became one of the wealthier people in Xishui Town. That life eventually collapsed. He went bankrupt and accumulated heavy debts, then borrowed money from friends and relatives in an attempt to start over. His second attempt also failed. His friends and relatives gradually abandoned him, his marriage ended, and his debt problems eventually caused him to lose custody of his child.

By ordinary standards, Zhang Shengli had reached the lowest point of his life.

There was, however, one person who never abandoned him.

His childhood friend Zhang Kui continued to support him even after everyone else had left. Zhang Kui had helped Zhang Shengli in the past, and when Zhang Shengli went bankrupt, he went even further. He used his savings to help him and even mortgaged his own house to give Zhang Shengli another opportunity to recover. After the second failure, Zhang Kui still did not demand anything in return. He continued treating Zhang Shengli as a friend and even gave him part of his salary whenever he was paid.

From Chen Yang's perspective, this should have made Zhang Kui the one person Zhang Shengli would never harm. Instead, Zhang Shengli killed him.

That contradiction was precisely why Chen Yang had been curious enough to attend the interrogation. He wanted to understand what kind of mentality could make someone destroy the person who had helped him the most.

Zhang Shengli himself appeared strangely calm during the interrogation. He did not try to disguise what had happened or pretend that he hated Zhang Kui. On the contrary, he openly acknowledged how much Zhang Kui had done for him. Zhang Kui had protected him when he was younger, supported him when he went bankrupt, and continued giving him money when nobody else was willing to help.

But Zhang Shengli had eventually reached a conclusion that was completely different from the one an ordinary person would reach.

Zhang Shengli had become obsessed with recovering his former status. He could not accept remaining at the bottom of society, living with debt, humiliation, and the knowledge that everyone who had once respected him had now abandoned him. Because Zhang Kui was the only person who still trusted him, Zhang Shengli realized that Zhang Kui was also the only person from whom he could continue extracting value.

He therefore began exploiting the very kindness that had kept him alive.

He obtained money from Zhang Kui. He deceived him into taking on additional loans. He even arranged accident insurance around him. In Zhang Shengli's mind, every act of trust represented another opportunity to obtain resources for his comeback. The more Zhang Kui trusted him, the more completely Zhang Shengli could exploit him.

This was what finally shocked Chen Yang, as Zhang Shengli did not kill Zhang Kui because he hated him, but he killed him because Zhang Kui was valuable.

The person who loved him the most had therefore become the person he regarded as the most useful. Gratitude did not prevent exploitation. In Zhang Shengli's desperation, gratitude itself became another mechanism through which exploitation could operate.

Chen Yang realized that the important lesson was not simply that Zhang Shengli was cruel. It was that human motives could overlap in ways that appeared completely contradictory from the outside. Someone could genuinely feel gratitude toward another person while simultaneously viewing that same person as a resource. Someone could recognize another person's kindness while becoming even more determined to take advantage of it. The desire to recover one's position could overpower the ordinary moral conclusion that kindness should be repaid with kindness.

This experience gradually accumulated with the countless other observations Chen Yang had made during his time in the living world. Each incident gave him another piece of information about how people behaved when placed under pressure. Over time, these experiences formed an enormous internal model of human behavior, allowing him to reason not just about what a person should do, but about what a person might actually do when driven by fear, desperation, greed, resentment, gratitude, pride, or the desire to regain lost status.

That understanding became especially dangerous after Chen Yang entered Hell.

The cultivation of the Three Realms of the Spirit Platform required the cultivator to gradually abandon ordinary common sense and replace it with the common sense of Hell. For an ordinary person, developing a deeper understanding of human goodness and morality might simply make that person more compassionate. For Chen Yang, however, the same understanding could produce the opposite result after the restrictions imposed by his faith were removed.

This was the contradiction at the center of Chen Yang's cultivation.

The more deeply he understood the nobility of human beings, the more clearly he also understood the weaknesses that existed beneath that nobility. He knew how people could be persuaded, manipulated, pressured, frightened, tempted, or pushed into betraying principles they sincerely believed in. His faith had previously prevented him from using that knowledge without restraint.

That was why the Three Corpses Transformation Art had been so important to him. Chen Yang needed an unusually active and rational mind to resist the corrupting influence of Hell's environment and preserve the principles he had developed in the living world. His system was not simply a method for increasing strength. It was also a structure that allowed him to preserve the part of himself that still believed certain actions should never be taken.

But an opponent who could genuinely threaten him changed the equation, as Chen Yang had spent too long being invincible.

His rapid rise to Five-Star, the speed at which he cultivated his state of mind, and his creation of an independent system had given him an unusual problem. He had rarely experienced a situation in which he was genuinely cornered. As a result, he did not know the true boundary of his own strength. The secret chamber had finally presented him with something he wanted: an opponent capable of forcing him to discover that boundary.

So Chen Yang removed his own restraint- he unsealed himself.

The change was not simply an increase in strength. His entire temperament changed. The Chen Yang who had entered Hell while carrying the principles of his former life had still possessed a clear distinction between what he understood and what he was willing to do. After falling into Demonhood, that distinction disappeared.

This was the principle of extremes meeting their opposite.

A police officer is trained to understand criminals and investigate crimes. But what happens when that same person becomes a criminal himself? The knowledge that once existed to oppose evil can be redirected toward committing it.

Chen Yang was now in the same position.

He had accumulated a lifetime of observations about human goodness and human weakness. He understood how ordinary people thought, how they justified their actions, how they protected themselves, and how they could be manipulated through the things they valued most.

Once his faith-based restrictions were removed, that knowledge no longer existed only to help him understand people.

The previous Chen Yang was therefore only one incomplete side of his personality. The Chen Yang standing before the other three True Self Players after unsealing himself was his complete form: a person who possessed an extraordinarily detailed understanding of human nature while no longer allowing morality to restrict the ways in which that understanding could be used.

That was why Chen Ran immediately recognized that the Saint had fallen into Demonhood.

Chen Yang had not become dangerous because he suddenly became more intelligent, but had become dangerous because all of the intelligence and experience he had accumulated while preserving his faith could now be used without those restraints. Now, for the first time, Chen Yang was willing to discover exactly how far he could go.

He first helped the man's family after the man's father died, arranging the funeral and finding a burial location. The prisoner was moved by this unexpected kindness and promised that if he ever obtained the opportunity, he would repay the debt. The conversation then turned toward ghosts and Hell. The prisoner described seeing what he believed was the soul of his executed great-grandfather returning to the living world.

Chen Yang's response contained several separate layers. Within the story, he told the prisoner that there were no ghosts or gods in the living world and that his great-grandfather had not returned. He also inserted the statement that he had personally encountered souls from Hell during his lifetime. Finally, after the prisoner had finished speaking, Chen Yang repeated the claim that the great-grandfather had returned to the living world and then stated that he could now say with certainty that the prisoner would repay his kindness.

The first three immediately noticed that these statements could not be judged as an ordinary Lie. The claim that the great-grandfather had returned would normally be an Unknown Lie because neither the listener nor the speaker necessarily possessed enough information to determine whether it was true. More importantly, Chen Yang had already used the statement that he had encountered souls from Hell during his lifetime to break the Gui Yu that there were no supernatural beings in the living world. A Ninth True Self could return to the living world, so the earlier absolute statement that souls could not appear there was not genuinely absolute once this information was established.

After the Gui Yu had been broken, Chen Yang's repetition of the great-grandfather's claim became an Unknown Lie follower statement. The prisoner had been the initiator, while Chen Yang was only repeating his words. Under the principles of judging Lies, the follower did not become a liar just by repeating an Unknown Lie. Yet the rule system operated independently. It only cared about the objective fact of whether the great-grandfather had actually returned. If the

event had occurred, Chen Yang's statement would be true. If it had not, the rules would treat his statement as a Lie. The other three could not know which outcome the rules would produce because they lacked the information necessary to determine that past fact.

The Gui Yu connecting Lie detection with the rule system made the situation even more dangerous. Under the Lie-detection principle, Chen Yang was an Unknown Lie follower and therefore had not lied. The rules, however, might still classify the same statement as a Lie according to the objective event. Once again, the same sentence produced two different statuses depending on which system was used. Chen Yang had shown Zhang Fan and Ling Chi exactly how an Unknown Lie could be used as a weapon against the secret chamber.

That was also why his story was directed at Chen Ran. The statement that the prisoner would definitely repay Chen Yang's kindness wasn't another piece of evidence for the current game. Chen Ran immediately connected the promised repayment to Chu Yun. If the two timelines were connected in the manner Chen Yang suspected, then Chen Yang's statement was effectively telling Chen Ran that he knew something about his true identity and future. The threat was not expressed directly, because doing so would have surrendered information that could be used against Chen Yang, but the implication was enough.

By the time the explanation of Chen Yang's story had been reconstructed, the first three were no longer dealing with one simple deception. Chen Ran had already demonstrated how to exploit a gap between what the Lie-detection principle could establish and what the rule system could establish. Chen Yang had now demonstrated that Unknown Lies could be used to create another gap while simultaneously manipulating the expectations of the other three players. The next problem was no longer simply finding the correct answer. Each participant had to determine what the other three would do after discovering the same loophole, because knowing that the loophole existed changed the behavior of everyone who knew about it.

Ling Chi recognized that Chen Yang had deliberately given them a weapon that looked useful. If the fourth speaker could safely become an Unknown Lie follower, then the erasure rule appeared almost powerless. But once everyone understood that fact, the first three speakers could also deliberately choose Unknown Lies with uncertain probabilities, forcing the next commentator to make judgments without sufficient evidence. The resulting suspicion chain would steadily increase the probability that someone eventually made an incorrect judgment. Chen Yang had therefore not removed the danger of the chamber. He had moved the danger into the players themselves, forcing them to create the conditions that would eventually destroy one another.

At this point, Chen Yang changed the nature of the struggle. The problem was no longer simply whether someone was lying. The more important question was whether the Lie-detection principle and the actual rule system would classify the same statement in the same way.

There were two different situations that could be called an Unknown Lie. In the first, the speaker personally knew that the statement was false, but the listener lacked enough information to prove that it was false. From the listener's perspective, the statement remained an Unknown

Lie, even though the speaker knew the truth. In the second situation, neither the speaker nor the listener actually knew whether the statement was true. The story about the prisoner's great-grandfather belonged to this second category. When Chen Yang repeated the statement, he was not asserting a known falsehood. He was following a statement whose truth or falsehood could not be established by either side.

That distinction allowed Chen Yang to create an Unknown Lie follower. The original speaker had made the Unknown Lie, while Chen Yang merely repeated it. Under the Lie-detection principle, the follower was not automatically treated as a liar because he had no independent knowledge proving the statement false. The rule system, however, did not care about that distinction. It only cared about the objective fact. If the great-grandfather had returned, the statement was true. If he had not, it was a Lie. The two systems therefore reached different conclusions about the same words.

The probability of an Unknown Lie being true was also important. A statement involving an enormous number of possible values might have an almost zero probability of being true, yet it would still remain an Unknown Lie because the listener could not exclude the possibility that the speaker had chosen the correct value. By contrast, a statement with only two possible outcomes, such as whether someone had raised a cat before death, could have an approximately fifty-percent probability of being true.

This gave the first three speakers a way to attack the next commentator. The fourth speaker could protect himself with an Unknown Lie follower whose probability of being true was extremely small, while the first three could use Unknown Lies whose probabilities were much closer to fifty percent. The commentator therefore could not know whether the second and third statements were actually true or false. With two such statements, several combinations remained possible, and any definite judgment carried a real chance of being wrong.

The danger then became self-reinforcing. The last speaker already knew that the first three could use Unknown Lies and therefore had no reason to trust their statements. The first three knew that the last speaker would protect himself with an Unknown Lie follower and therefore had no reason to protect him. Each participant also knew that the person speaking after him would have a rational reason to undermine him before he could be undermined himself. The result was a suspicion chain in which betrayal became rational even when nobody originally intended to betray anyone.

Repeating the same structure across multiple rounds meant that each participant would eventually become the commentator while facing three statements whose truth values he could not establish with certainty. Every round therefore created another opportunity for a player to make a false judgment. After enough repetitions, the probability that all four had accumulated the lying attribute became extremely high.

The important point was that Chen Yang had not actually removed the danger of the Secret Chamber. He had moved it. Chen Ran had found a weakness in the written rules, while Chen Yang had created a system in which the players' own expectations would reproduce the

conditions needed to destroy one another. Once everyone understood the loophole, the loophole itself became the source of the conflict.

Ling Chi recognized that Chen Yang had essentially created another set of rules, except these rules were no longer written inside the secret chamber. They were rules of human behavior. Chen Ran had previously found a way to exploit the mechanical loopholes of the dungeon, while Chen Yang had found a way to make the players themselves produce the necessary conditions for conflict. In such a system, understanding the rules was not enough. A player had to predict how the other players would behave after understanding those rules.

That was when Ling Chi recalled the lesson from his previous life. By then, Chen Ran and Chen Yang had already exposed the systems they intended to use in the internal struggle. Chen Ran had the ability to deceive the rules through the Extreme Realm, while Chen Yang could manipulate the psychology created by those rules. If Ling Chi could not reveal something capable of countering them, the balance would collapse. Chen Ran could simply kill Ling Chi and Zhang Fan after the secret chamber ended, while Chen Yang would have successfully manipulated the other three into destroying their own trust.

Ling Chi therefore returned to a memory from his time in the mortal world. He had been traveling with his family when Uncle Fu told him that the descendant of the Prince of Lu was in a nearby tent. The information immediately awakened Ling Chi's ambition. He imagined the possibility of supporting that descendant, rebuilding the Great Ming, and using his own military ability to change the future.

Uncle Fu then casually told him that he had been lying.

Ling Chi's anger was followed by another apparent confirmation. Uncle Fu pointed out that Ling Chi was better at riding and archery than the Eldest Young Master, suggesting that the Master had chosen him for the escort mission precisely because his abilities were useful. This made Ling Chi believe again that there really was a descendant of the Prince of Lu in the tent. Uncle Fu then denied it once more. When Ling Chi demanded a definite answer, Uncle Fu alternated between "there is" and "there is not," eventually forcing Ling Chi to confront the real problem: he was obsessed with obtaining an answer from someone else instead of deciding what he himself wanted to do.

The tent became a symbol of the choice he had been avoiding. If there was no descendant of the Prince of Lu inside, Ling Chi would have to return to his original problem. The wives, children, and elderly family members around him depended on him, and he possessed the ability to protect them. Yet if he spent his entire life protecting them, he would never use his abilities to pursue the ambitions that had originally made him feel alive. He was trapped between two possible actions because he had never determined which desire actually belonged to his heart.

Uncle Fu therefore told him that the most difficult thing in life was making a choice. The person tossing a coin had already made the choice to accept whichever result appeared, while the

person who refused to toss the coin was still trapped by hesitation. Ling Chi understood that his problem came from placing Action before Heart. He repeatedly imagined what he could do, only to discover that reality forced him toward a different action. Because his actions and his desires were moving in opposite directions, his mind remained divided.

The conclusion he reached was that Heart had to come first. Before deciding how to act, he had to determine what he actually wanted. That was the beginning of his own Heart Cultivation. He questioned whether the answer produced by his heart was necessarily correct, then recognized another contradiction: he had multiple answers within himself. If he wanted to achieve Unity of Knowledge and Action, he could not allow contradictory versions of himself to continue making decisions simultaneously.

In his mind, two versions of himself appeared, each holding a spear and each asking him the same question: who did he want to kill? Ling Chi realized that they were both himself and yet neither represented the complete self he wanted to establish. He needed a single "me" capable of making a decision without hesitation. That self would become the Dictator over all the other versions of himself.

The Dictator was therefore not another personality in the ordinary sense. Ling Chi constructed it according to his personality, experience, background, knowledge, morality, judgment, and understanding of right and wrong. He was effectively creating a set of internal rules for himself. Whenever one of his thoughts contradicted those rules, the Dictator would immediately eliminate that thought rather than allowing it to remain and compete with the others.

When Ling Chi returned to the present, he had finished his cigarette. He looked toward Chen Ran and Chen Yang, then smiled. He had found a system of his own that was specifically suited to internal struggles. Countless versions of Ling Chi appeared inside his consciousness, each representing a different possible line of thought. Above them all was the Void Throne. The expressionless Dictator sat upon it, holding absolute authority over every other thought.

The Dictator then stepped down from the throne and entered the crowd of Ling Chi's thoughts with a spear in hand. His role was straightforward: correct the errors. Any thought that violated the rules Ling Chi had established for himself would be eliminated immediately. This was different from Chen Ran's method of allowing countless possibilities to exist until he found the correct result. Ling Chi was instead creating a final authority that would destroy incorrect possibilities before they could interfere with his decision.

The change was immediately felt by the other three. Ling Chi had not activated No Distance or launched a mental attack, but the atmosphere surrounding him had changed. Before this point, he had been like a weapon that had not yet been drawn. Now the blade had left its scabbard. The three of them could sense the change without needing a visible attack. Chen Yang, Chen Ran, and Zhang Fan had all reached this point in their own systems, and Ling Chi had finally shown that he had also been hiding a method specifically designed for the internal struggle.

The problem was that Ling Chi's next speech was crucial. Under Chen Yang's human-nature structure, Chen Ran had no reason to betray Chen Yang yet, while Zhang Fan was expected to use an Unknown Lie to break the erasure rule. That left Ling Chi as the person whose words could determine whether Chen Yang would be forced into a false judgment during the current cycle. If Ling Chi failed to create that opportunity, the following rounds would continue moving through the suspicion chain, and every commentator would become increasingly likely to be tricked into possessing the lying attribute.

Ling Chi then began telling the story of his encounter with the young Daoist.

The scene began with Ling Chi traveling through the mortal world after a battle. His armor was stained with blood, his horse carried his broken spear and worn saber, and he eventually reached a riverbank where he stopped to wash himself. When he finished, a pavilion had appeared beside the river. A young Daoist sat inside drinking tea while staring at a chessboard, and another cup had already been placed on the table.

Ling Chi drank the tea because he could perceive that it contained no poison. The young Daoist immediately identified this as a particular state of mind and then mentioned the Ghostly Path Soldier. That instantly made Ling Chi suspicious because he had never told anyone about the technique. He therefore struck the young Daoist with his saber, cutting off his head.

The young Daoist simply picked up his head, replaced it on his neck, and continued the conversation.

He explained that he had entered Ling Chi's dream because he wanted to verify something. He wanted to know whether Ling Chi was a good person. Ling Chi found the question absurd because the souls who had died beneath his spear already numbered more than one hundred. Yet the young Daoist did not judge him from that fact alone. Instead, he snapped his fingers and revealed another Ling Chi hidden nearby.

The second Ling Chi possessed no killing intent.

The young Daoist immediately understood that Ling Chi's Ghostly Path Soldier allowed him to possess a Soldier that he could control absolutely. He then killed the first Ling Chi, effectively eliminating the violent Soldier rather than the main personality. After doing so, he closed his eyes and finally explained why he had come. Ling Chi's lifespan was ending, and the young Daoist wanted to remove the baleful aura from his body because the Soldier would eventually become a major problem for both Ling Chi and the young Daoist's own side.

The conversation then revealed something much larger. The young Daoist had once believed that reaching the place beyond the world meant that he had become an immortal. Instead, he had found nothing there. Thinking he was the first person to achieve immortality, he founded the Heavenly Court and gathered others around him. But the people living for such a long period eventually developed Heart Demons. As life became meaningless, they sought stronger stimulation simply to feel alive, and the Heavenly Court gradually became Hell.

The young Daoist explained that Heart Cultivation was therefore essential. Without it, time itself would eventually destroy a person's heart. His own cultivation method, Highest Good is Like Water, was insufficient to achieve Eternal Thought, so he selected nine extraordinary people from across the River of Time and worked toward a higher cultivation system. Ling Chi was one of those nine people.

The purpose of this new cultivation was One Thought Eternity.

Simply put, if someone becomes True Self for even a single second, then they are True Self for all eternity. A True Self Player can later reproduce the process through which they attained True Self and reach that state again through simulation.

In other words, True Self Players are no longer fundamentally constrained by the distinction between past, present, and future. Once One Thought Eternity is established, that result cannot simply be changed by altering another point in time.

The Heavenly Court, however, needed to be guided by a good person. The young Daoist therefore needed to determine whether Ling Chi and his Soldier should be considered the same person for the purpose of that judgment. He did not immediately tell Ling Chi what answer he wanted. Instead, he told him to follow his heart.

The dream then ended. Ling Chi woke beside the river and discovered that the Qing army had already surrounded him. The soldiers drew their bows and prepared to kill him. Ling Chi accepted that his lifespan truly ended that day. The general then shouted that he had ridden eight horses to exhaustion just to capture him.

Ling Chi repeated that sentence as his final Unknown Lie.

The three immediately noticed that it had an extremely high probability of being judged as a Lie. If one man had actually ridden eight horses to death merely to pursue Ling Chi, then the ordinary soldiers running on foot would have collapsed long before they reached him. The statement was therefore almost certainly false according to the rules, while still remaining an Unknown Lie under the Lie-detection principle.

But the important information was everything surrounding that sentence. Ling Chi had killed more than one hundred people and yet claimed that the young Daoist had judged him a good person. His explanation was that the people he had killed belonged to his Soldier, which was a Sub-personality absolutely controlled by his main personality. The young Daoist therefore killed the Soldier and judged the main personality separately.

That interpretation was absurd enough to make Chen Ran and the others suspicious, but it was also internally consistent. If the young Daoist really could not determine whether Ling Chi was a good person simply by observing the Soldier's crimes, then personally entering the dream to kill the Soldier would be necessary. The existence of the Ghostly Path Soldier therefore provided a

plausible explanation for the contradiction between Ling Chi's enormous number of murders and his classification as a good person.

The larger revelation was much harder to accept. According to Ling Chi, the Heavenly Court had ultimately become Hell. That meant the origin of Hell was connected directly to the ancient civilization established by the first True Self Player. The story also suggested that the young Daoist had already understood the importance of Heart Cultivation long before the current structure of Hell came into existence.

Chen Ran immediately began testing the story for inconsistencies :

The first question was the era of the young Daoist. Philosophical Taoism had already appeared during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, while religious Taoism emerged during the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Taoist robes could even be traced back as far as the reign of King Wu of Zhou. However, Ling Chi had specifically called the figure a “young Daoist,” and the robe he recognized resembled the form standardized by Lu Xiujing during the Southern Dynasties.

Zhang Fan's position provided another restriction. Because Chen Yang's return to the past had shifted Zhang Fan from the Sixth to the Seventh True Self Player, Zhang Fan should belong to the Northern Song period. Therefore, the young Daoist should theoretically have existed sometime between the Southern Dynasties and the Northern Song Dynasty.

Chen Ran felt that this deduction itself contained a problem.

If the young Daoist had really been from the Southern Dynasties, there would only have been roughly 371 years before Zhang Fan, a Northern Song person, was born in Hell. Within those 371 years, the young Daoist would have had to establish the Heavenly Court, allow its inhabitants to live long enough to develop Heart Demons, experience the collapse of the Heavenly Court, and also accommodate the appearance of the Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth True Self Players- the timing was simply too compressed.

Chen Ran therefore became more inclined to believe that the young Daoist came from a much earlier period, possibly the Zhou Dynasty.

The deeper problem was what had existed before the young Daoist entered the Eternal Land. If civilization already existed in the mortal world by that time, then people should have reached the Eternal Land before him. Yet the story treated the young Daoist as though he had encountered the place almost by himself. There were only a few possible explanations, one of which was that previous inhabitants had already died out before he arrived.

Heart Demons provided an explanation for that disappearance. A person who lived for an excessively long period would gradually lose the novelty that made life meaningful. The things that once provided entertainment would stop producing the same emotional response. To escape that emptiness, such people would begin seeking increasingly extreme stimulation, eventually developing Heart Demons and turning against each other.

That same process could explain the destruction of the Heavenly Court itself. The young Daoist might have arrived in the Eternal Land after an earlier civilization had already destroyed itself through the erosion of time. He then founded a new Heavenly Court, only for the same problem to appear again. The realization that even he could not escape the effect of endless time forced him to seek a cultivation method capable of protecting the heart rather than just extending the lifespan.

This made the nine True Self Players significant for a different reason. They were not simply nine talented people selected at random. Their talents came from hearts that had endured extraordinary suffering during their lives, causing each of them to develop a distinct Ultimate. The young Daoist gathered those nine people precisely because they possessed the kind of hearts that could survive the cultivation of Eternal Thought.

The result was the system that eventually produced the current True Self Players and the Hell they inhabited. The first True Self Player created the foundation, the nine successors inherited different forms of Heart Cultivation, and internal conflict among them eventually produced the structure of Hell.

Chen Ran then turned back to the Ghostly Path Soldier. The young Daoist had said that the direction of the Heavenly Court needed to be held by a good person. Ling Chi had committed more than one hundred killings, yet the young Daoist had still concluded that he himself was good. That only made sense if the murderous entity he observed was genuinely separate from Ling Chi's main personality under the rules governing good and evil.

Soldier was therefore a black glove. Ling Chi could allow the Soldier to commit acts that his main personality would not personally commit, while retaining absolute control over it. This also explained the young Daoist's warning that the Soldier could become a major problem for both Ling Chi and their side if it reached the wrong place in the future. If the cultivation method behind the Ghostly Path Soldier leaked into Hell, the consequences would be difficult to predict.

Chen Ran immediately understood why Ling Chi had chosen this particular story. He was not simply revealing the existence of the Ghostly Path Soldier. He was placing the cultivation method itself onto the table as a bargaining chip. Anyone who wanted access to that method could potentially intervene on Ling Chi's behalf. Chen Ran's Self Extreme State immediately reacted to the possibility that the Ghostly Path Soldier could provide him with a controlled external entity capable of taking actions in his place.

On the River of Time, the True Self Players watching the secret chamber also realized that something had changed. The four people inside were now using fundamentally different systems, and the spectators could no longer confidently reconstruct their thoughts. Ling Chi's story contained too many hidden implications, particularly because he seemed to know about the future version of himself who would become a Death Row Inmate.

His story could therefore be understood as a time-loop operation. Even if the Ling Chi currently inside the secret chamber could not determine whether he belonged to the true timeline, he

could still prepare information and conditions that would benefit the future version of himself if the timeline turned out to be the correct one. He was effectively placing a fallback plan inside the current game.

One of the True Self Players watching eventually asked Chen Yang who would win.

Chen Yang answered immediately that he would.

When asked for his reason, he only replied that Ling Chi needed a second lesson.

That answer mattered because it implied that Chen Yang did not regard Ling Chi's newly revealed system as a complete reversal of the situation. Chen Yang had already constructed a human-nature trap, while Chen Ran had already found a method for deceiving the rules. Ling Chi had now revealed that he could impose an internal authority upon his own thoughts. None of these systems directly canceled the others. The next stage would depend on whether Ling Chi's Dictator could actually prevent the suspicion chain from forcing a false judgment, while simultaneously turning Ling Chi's Unknown Lie into a weapon against Chen Yang.

Zhang Fan, meanwhile, began reconstructing the most suspicious part of Ling Chi's story. Chen Yang's Unknown Lie follower operation had already established that an Unknown Lie was the most dangerous tool inside the secret chamber. If Ling Chi possessed countless possible Unknown Lies because of his knowledge and experiences, there was no reason for him to choose the bizarre sentence about riding eight horses to death unless the choice itself carried another purpose.

The answer appeared when Zhang Fan reconsidered the Soldier.

A Sub-personality created before death was treated by Hell as an independent existence because it possessed its own criminal history. But a Sub-personality created only after a person had already entered Hell had no independent life in the mortal world and therefore had no separate crime that could send it to Hell. Such a Sub-personality would normally be regarded as part of the player rather than an independent person.

That distinction created a critical timing problem:

Ling Chi had possessed his Soldier before death, and the young Daoist had killed that Soldier before Ling Chi himself died. Therefore, when the mortal rules judged Ling Chi and the Soldier, they could be treated as separate entities. But after Ling Chi arrived in Hell, he could once again use the Ghostly Path Soldier to create another Soldier. If the new Soldier had been born only after Ling Chi entered Hell, Hell's rules should logically treat it as part of Ling Chi rather than as an independent person.

This created another question. The rules of the mortal world and the rules of Hell did not necessarily recognize a Sub-personality in the same way.

The mortal world's rule was effectively that the law did not recognize the existence of a Sub-personality. Hell's rules were different: they could recognize a Sub-personality as an independent existence. These were simply different rules applied by different systems.

The example of the young Daoist judging Ling Chi made the situation even stranger. The young Daoist only judged Ling Chi to be a good person after killing the Soldier. Before the Soldier died, Ling Chi and the Soldier had been acting through the same body, yet the Soldier's crimes had not been enough to make the main personality itself a bad person after the Soldier was removed.

This meant that rules did distinguish between the main personality and the Sub-personality, but the judgment was behavior-first. While the main personality and Soldier existed together in the same body, the behavior of that body could be judged as a whole. Once the Soldier was killed and separated from Ling Chi, the main personality could then be judged independently.

That seemed to contradict Hell's treatment of a Soldier created after entering Hell.

A Sub-personality born before death possessed its own history and criminal actions, so Hell could recognize it as an independent existence and eventually allow it to become an instance. A Sub-personality created only after the player had already arrived in Hell had no mortal-life history and had committed no crime before death. It therefore could not independently enter Hell again or become an instance in the same way. The apparent contradiction could be resolved through the timing of the rules.

Ling Chi's original Soldier had already existed before Ling Chi died. Therefore, when the good-and-evil judgment concerning his mortal life took place, Ling Chi and the Soldier were already separate entities. The same principle applied if a player entered the Secret Chamber while already possessing a Soldier: the Soldier had existed before that rule was applied and could therefore be recognized separately.

A different situation occurred when Ling Chi first arrived in Hell and only then created a Soldier. Hell had already established Ling Chi as the player. The newly created Soldier had not independently existed before that judgment and had no separate mortal history. It would therefore be treated as part of Ling Chi rather than as another person for that rule.

The chicken-and-egg problem was therefore the key. Whether the Soldier was recognized independently depended on whether the Soldier already existed when the relevant rules established the player's identity or judgment.

The three finally understood the implication. The Ghostly Path Soldier was not merely a combat technique. By controlling when a Sub-personality existed relative to a rule's judgment, Ling Chi could potentially manipulate whether the Secret Chamber treated the main personality and Soldier as one participant or separate participants.

All three looked toward Ling Chi, yet his expression did not change.

Chen Yang immediately identified the idea as another form of rule exploitation. Chen Ran was more direct, wondering whether seventeen cards would be enough to kill him under such circumstances. Zhang Fan, caught between the three systems now revealed inside the secret chamber, was left without an equally obvious answer.

Chen Ran was the first to face the problem created by Ling Chi's repeated speeches. He did not immediately speak because the existence of the Soldier had changed the meaning of the turn-based rules. The first round had already ended, so any Soldier that existed before the second round should technically have been included together with the main personality when the rules counted the participants. The situation was different if Ling Chi created a new Soldier during the second round. A newly created Soldier could potentially be recognized as an independent individual, especially if Ling Chi separated it from his own body and then destroyed it after another person had already taken their turn.

That possibility was enough to make Chen Ran hesitate. Suppose the two speeches Ling Chi had just given were both spoken by Soldiers. Once Chen Ran began his own speech, Ling Chi could immediately destroy the Soldier that had spoken. The rules would then recognize that Soldier as an independent participant who had already completed its turn, while Ling Chi's main personality had not yet spoken. Chen Ran would consequently have spoken before Ling Chi's main personality had completed the required sequence, meaning he would be violating the turn order and could be erased immediately. The advantage was entirely on Ling Chi's side because Chen Ran had no reliable method of determining whether the person in front of him was the main personality or a Soldier.

Zhang Fan was trapped by essentially the same problem. His first instinct was that the three of them should simply use No-Distance to kill Ling Chi before he could use the Soldier again, but Future Lies prevented them from safely turning this into a direct mental battle. Once one of them initiated a No-Distance attack, the arrangement of the final gunfight became too dangerous. Chen Ran could eliminate Chen Yang and Zhang Fan almost instantly, and if either Chen Ran or Chen Yang died first, the remaining Chen brother would also become a target for Zhang Fan and Ling Chi. There was no clean way to remove one side without creating another fatal exchange.

The three were therefore forced to wait. None of them wanted to speak, because the cost of being wrong was immediate death. Ling Chi understood this and deliberately remained silent for a long time. When he finally opened his eyes, he repeated the same statement as before and added a new sentence at the end: “I am finished speaking.”

That tiny change complicated everything further. The three now had two pieces of nearly identical evidence, but the second speech contained information that the first one did not. If Ling Chi's main personality had spoken once and his Soldier had spoken once, then there was no immediate danger in Chen Ran taking his own turn. If both speeches had been spoken by Soldiers, however, the danger remained exactly the same. The additional sentence therefore looked like useful information while actually refusing to settle the question.

Chen Ran began running through both possibilities. If both speeches belonged to Soldiers, speaking now would allow Ling Chi to destroy the current Soldier and leave his main personality still waiting to speak. Chen Ran would then have violated the order and would be erased. If one speech belonged to the main personality, the turn order would remain intact, but another issue appeared. A Soldier could be destroyed and recognized as an independent participant, potentially increasing the effective number of speakers to five. In that case Zhang Fan would become the additional person beyond the permitted four-person limit and would be erased. Once Zhang Fan disappeared, Chen Ran and Chen Yang would have no reason to restrain their mental attacks on Ling Chi, and Ling Chi would be forced into an unfavorable exchange.

The safest conclusion was that Ling Chi was deliberately creating a situation in which either Chen Ran spoke and risked immediate death, or everyone remained silent and slowly exhausted themselves. Ling Chi could not know exactly what Chen Ran would choose, which meant that he too was trapped. If he continued sending out his main personality and Soldiers in succession, he risked creating too many participants and killing Zhang Fan instead. If he stopped, the four would remain locked in a stalemate.

Chen Ran therefore considered the situation from another angle : If both of Ling Chi's previous speeches had been made by Soldiers, Chen Ran could not safely speak. If Ling Chi continued speaking with his main personality later, Zhang Fan would become the fifth participant and be erased.

Either Chen Ran spoke and risked being erased, or Ling Chi continued speaking and risked Zhang Fan being erased. Ling Chi could not know in advance which choice Chen Ran would make, so he was trapped by the same uncertainty he had created.

Chen Ran finally reached the only conclusion that kept the game from collapsing immediately: The person speaking from beginning to end was Ling Chi's main personality.

Chen Ran eventually placed his hand on the Liar Killer. He did not know which interpretation was objectively correct, but he could make the consequences of a wrong judgment sufficiently dangerous that Ling Chi would be unable to act freely. He then gave the name of his skill, Eternal Kingdom, and announced that he had finished speaking. The three immediately understood the meaning behind the move. Chen Ran was preparing for a mutual-destruction outcome. If he judged Zhang Fan and activated his Liar Killer at the wrong moment, all four could potentially be erased. More importantly, Chen Ran's reaction speed was fast enough that even if the three of them used No-Distance against him immediately before the judgment, he could break out of the control and complete his action.

The existence of Eternal Kingdom made the threat worse. None of the other three knew whether Eternal Kingdom could restrict the very same system that had created the Secret Chamber. From their perspective, there was at least a possibility that Chen Ran could use it to interfere with the rules of the room itself. They therefore could not casually gamble on killing him first.

Ling Chi looked at the situation and recognized the same problem from the opposite direction. Chen Ran was too difficult to kill because his Extreme Realm allowed him to calculate a response even while the others were attacking him. Chen Yang was equally difficult to manipulate because the three of them had already discovered that his system could exploit human behavior rather than the written rules. Ling Chi had therefore deliberately moved the battle toward his own Ghost Path Soldier system, while Chen Ran had simply ignored that field and built another trap around his Extreme Realm.

The struggle had become a matter of each person refusing to fight on anyone else's terms. Chen Ran had exposed the vulnerability in the rules and now used that knowledge to threaten mutual destruction. Chen Yang had taken the same information and constructed a behavioral pattern that forced the other three into suspicion. Ling Chi had used the Ghost Path Soldier to create uncertainty over who was actually speaking. Each of them was trying to make the other three enter his own system without exposing himself to theirs.

Before Zhang Fan began his own analysis, he reconstructed the situation through another Secret Chamber.

In this Secret Chamber stood a young man and three identical figures.

The First Person's rule was that an Unknown Lie follower identity could circumvent the lying consequences caused by the rules and construct an Unknown Lie that the commentator could not determine.

The Second Person's rule was that he could be locked by rules or choose not to be locked by rules.

The Third Person's rule was that he could kill anyone who spoke after him at any time, while also being able to make a rule-breaking comment himself.

The young man first asked the Second Person why he had not avoided being locked by the Third Person's rule.

The Second Person's answer was that there was no reason to choose a complicated method when the simplest method was sufficient.

The young man then asked whether the Second Person could be locked by the First Person's rule.

The Second Person answered that he could and could not, depending on his mood.

The young man next questioned the First Person. His rules would eventually lead everyone toward lying, so why had he constructed them? Did he have a way to circumvent his own rules?

The First Person immediately judged the young man's question to be a Lie and shot him.

Another young man appeared and asked the same question more carefully.

This time, the First Person explained that he could theoretically circumvent his own rules. He pointed out that the Second Person had already cheated the rules during the first round of speech. The fact that the last speaker could use a 99.99%-false Unknown Lie follower identity meant that the Second Person did not need to act immediately.

If the Second Person acted in the first round, everyone could end up being judged truthful and be erased.

If he acted in the second round, however, the First Person would become the one to die. After only three people remained, the Second Person would risk being attacked repeatedly by the other two and dragged into No-Distance before he could even draw his gun.

Therefore, the Second Person would wait until the third round.

The First Person had effectively patched the Second Person's weakness with the human-nature rules he had constructed. The 99.99%-false Unknown Lie mechanism created a fallback: even if the Second Person judged the commentator, the group would not necessarily be judged as four truthful speakers and erased.

The young man and the Third Person therefore discovered that they had been led into a trap.

The First and Second Persons were both numerical monsters. The Second Person was a pure numerical monster, while the First Person, after his increase in mental power, could barely reach the same realm.

That allowed the two of them to achieve synchronized thinking. The First Person had unknowingly patched the Second Person's rules. Then, the Third Person then identified another problem.

When his turn came, how would the others determine whether the person commenting was actually the Third Person or his Soldier?

The speaking-order rule was the key.

The Second Person would need to wait until his own turn to judge the Third Person. But if he judged the Third Person and the Third Person immediately killed the Soldier, that Soldier would become an independent participant. The Third Person's main personality would still not have taken his turn, meaning the Second Person would have violated the speaking order and would be erased.

Therefore, as the situation currently stood, the young man was the only person certain to die.

The young man finally understood the full structure.

When his turn came later, it would not matter what he said. The First Person would use a 99.99%-false Unknown Lie, the Third Person would tell the truth, and the Second Person would cheat the rules.

The dangerous point would be the judgment of the person who had cheated the rules.

The Second Person would judge the young man. Even if the young man were locked by that judgment, the First Person had already supplied the 99.99%-false Unknown Lie, so at least one person would be lying and the four would not all be erased.

The young man would therefore die in vain, and this was the certain-death trap hidden inside the rules constructed by the three.

The Second Person consequently would not act in the third round either. He would wait until the sixth round. The young man's only remaining method of survival was therefore to reproduce the result of the first round during the fifth round.

The Second Person would have to cheat the rules again, The Third Person would have to tell the truth, and most importantly, the First Person would have to tell the truth.

If that fifth round exactly reproduced the first round, then when the Second Person attempted to act against the young man in the sixth round, the fifth-round result could establish that the Second Person was telling the truth, causing the four-person group to be erased.

The speaking order in the fifth round would therefore be:

Young man, First Person, Third Person, Second Person.

The Second Person would need to cheat the rules, so he would not use an Unknown Lie to circumvent them, The Third Person was an ally and would tell the truth. So, the First Person was the problem. How could the young man guarantee that the First Person would tell the truth?

As long as the First Person used another 99.99%-likely-false Positional Lie in the fifth round, the young man could still be killed, and The First Person had no reason to tell the truth.

Then it was Zhang Fan's turn.

He closed his eyes and entered his own mental world. The Secret Chamber appeared around him, and three figures identical to himself appeared in front of him. They became Chen Ran, Chen Yang, and Ling Chi. Behind them, another set appeared, then another, and another. The process repeated until the entire mental space had expanded to the size of an enormous arena filled with countless versions of the same figures.

Zhang Fan was attempting to reconstruct the other three systems through pure simulation. He could reproduce Chen Ran's Extreme Realm, but he quickly discovered the limitation. Understanding Chen Ran's method did not mean Zhang Fan could simply imitate it. The

Extreme Realm required a specific form of emotional control. Zhang Fan could understand the calculations intellectually, but he could not guarantee that his own emotions would remain separate from those calculations. Entering a field where Chen Ran had already reached an extreme level without possessing the same foundation would therefore be dangerous.

The same problem appeared when he tried to reconstruct Chen Yang's Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique. Zhang Fan could follow the logic of Chen Yang's human-nature calculations, but he still could not reproduce the precise mental structure that made the system effective. His remaining hope was Ling Chi.

He recalled Ling Chi's two speeches. The first had explained the nature of the Ghost Path Soldier through the story involving the young Daoist. The second had gone deeper into the relationship between Ling Chi and his Soldier, explaining that the Soldier was an independently controllable existence born from the contradiction within the main personality.

Zhang Fan had already noticed that every True Self Player's system corresponded to something fundamental about that person. Chen Ran specialized in absolute suppression through the Extreme Realm. Chen Yang's cultivation emphasized overwhelming mental power and control. Ling Chi's system was connected to the aggressive nature of his Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction. Zhang Fan therefore suspected that his own Dao Heart Demonic Seed should correspond to his ability to absorb, simulate, and integrate other systems.

That was why Ling Chi had been giving him clues.

The first speech had not simply been a story about his previous life. It had shown Zhang Fan the basic psychological foundation behind the Ghost Path Soldier: contradiction. Ling Chi's main personality could have multiple conflicting desires at the same time. Rather than suppressing all of them, the system allowed the contradiction to take form. The resulting Sub-personality became the Soldier, an existence that Ling Chi could control absolutely.

Zhang Fan therefore created countless versions of Ling Chi in his mental world and ordered them to reproduce the cultivation process. Most failed. Some could identify the contradiction but could not reconcile it. Others separated too quickly and lost the connection between the main personality and the Soldier.

Then one of the simulated Ling Chis changed.

A trace of baleful aura appeared around his body.

Zhang Fan immediately focused on him, only to discover that the figure was suffering. His head shook violently, his expression repeatedly changed between hesitation and madness, and he seemed trapped between two incompatible decisions. The stronger his understanding became, the more violently the contradiction tore at him.

He finally stood up and screamed that there was no path in front of him and pursuers behind him. He alternated between wanting to move forward and wanting to retreat. The Ghost Path

Soldier required him to make those contradictory impulses coexist, yet he could not find a point where both could remain intact. Eventually, the simulated Ling Chi drew a sword and killed himself.

Zhang Fan understood the result. The cultivation of the Ghost Path Soldier contained its own form of Loss of Self. The contradiction within the cultivator could become so intense that the original identity itself began to split. One part wanted to move east while another wanted to move west, and neither could convince the other. Once the conflict reached its limit, the spirit could tear itself apart.

That also explained Ling Chi's earlier story. The Ghost Path Soldier was not produced simply because Ling Chi possessed an extraordinary amount of mental power. It came from the repeated contradictions he had faced in life. He had wanted one thing while doing another, accepted one responsibility while longing for another life, and repeatedly encountered situations where two mutually incompatible decisions were both compelling.

Zhang Fan continued experimenting.

The countless simulated Ling Chis disappeared and were replaced by countless versions of himself. He began examining the contradiction from his own perspective. Contradiction existed everywhere, and every major change in his life had resulted from two opposing forces colliding. Even this secret chamber existed because the four of them were simultaneously cooperating and fighting. The existence of the Secret Chamber itself was therefore another expression of contradiction.

A trace of baleful aura began to form around Zhang Fan.

For Chen Ran, Chen Yang, and Ling Chi, that moment immediately became dangerous. Zhang Fan already possessed the skills of Devour and Possession, and his system was based around simulation. If he successfully combined those abilities with the Ghost Path Soldier, he could potentially devour another person's skill, take over their body, and then reconstruct their cultivation system for himself.

Yet nobody could safely interrupt him.

Ling Chi's own response was that Zhang Fan could be allowed to continue because Ling Chi knew the cultivation method far better than Zhang Fan did. Even if Zhang Fan's mental power surged after completing the Loss of Self, the strength of the resulting system would still remain within a range the others could handle. Killing Zhang Fan during his breakthrough would also create the same problem that had haunted the entire secret chamber: the first death would immediately destabilize the balance between the remaining players.

Zhang Fan soon opened his eyes, but rather than attacking anyone, he immediately pulled out handcuffs and tape. He restrained himself, swallowed the key, and wrapped the tape around his mouth. The other three watched him in silence.

Then Zhang Fan began struggling.

His entire body twisted on the floor. He could not speak because his own mouth had been sealed, and his hands could not move because of the handcuffs. His body jerked violently as though he were fighting something inside himself. The scene resembled the simulated Ling Chi who had experienced Loss of Self moments earlier.

Chen Ran and Chen Yang immediately understood what was happening. Zhang Fan had entered the same state, but instead of allowing one personality to split completely away from the other, he was attempting to force the contradiction toward a stable point.

The struggle lasted for a long time. Eventually the movements became weaker. Zhang Fan's breathing steadied, and when his eyes opened again, the confusion had disappeared.

He had obtained part of the insight.

The situation outside the mental world remained unchanged, but Zhang Fan had become far more dangerous. His ability to simulate another person's system meant that once he understood the Ghost Path Soldier, he could potentially reproduce aspects of it himself. Chen Ran therefore slapped his Liar Killer while looking at Zhang Fan, and Chen Yang quietly withdrew his hand from his own weapon. Both had briefly considered whether Zhang Fan should be killed during the breakthrough.

Ling Chi immediately rejected the idea. If they used No-Distance, Chen Ran could instantly turn on the remaining players. Neither Chen Ran nor Ling Chi was willing to give Chen Yang an opening, and Chen Yang likewise had no intention of becoming the first person to attack.

The stalemate resumed, but the balance had changed.

Chen Yang and Chen Ran also began trying to reconstruct the Ghost Path Soldier. Zhang Fan had already shown that it could be done, so the question was no longer whether the system could be understood. The problem was whether they could reproduce the same mental state without suffering the same Loss of Self.

While they were still attempting this, Zhang Fan's body moved again.

The Lost Self returned.

This time he did not even have the ability to scream because his mouth was still taped shut. He writhed silently against the ground, his body twisting like someone trapped between two opposing forces. Chen Ran and Chen Yang both recognized the pattern immediately.

Ling Chi's system really did require a form of Loss of Self.

The implication was important because Loss of Self increased mental power once completed. Zhang Fan's original mental strength was not as absurd as Chen Ran's or Chen Yang's, but if

he successfully completed another stage, he could potentially compensate for that difference. His combination of Devour, Possession, and Simulation made him unusually dangerous once given enough time to develop.

After Zhang Fan finally stabilized, the three remaining players returned their attention to the Secret Chamber. Nobody dared attack him while he was vulnerable. A sudden mental attack against a person who had not yet completed the process could easily turn into an exchange in which all four died.

Then Zhang Fan revealed the result of his cultivation.

He had wrapped his head and mouth, swallowed the key, and used the struggle itself to test whether the main personality and Soldier could coexist. Ling Chi immediately recognized that Zhang Fan had understood the essential problem. The Soldier could not simply be an independent duplicate with a different desire. There had to be a point where the two contradictory selves could coexist while remaining under the authority of one consciousness.

The realization also made Zhang Fan's earlier behavior inside the mental Secret Chamber clearer. He was not attempting to eliminate contradiction. He was studying how contradiction could be given a stable form.

That brought the four of them back to the question of Chen Yang.

Chen Ran had noticed that Chen Yang had shown no surprise when Zhang Fan's Soldier became apparent. More importantly, Chen Yang had previously judged Ling Chi as telling the truth even though Ling Chi had used an Unknown Lie with an overwhelmingly high probability of being false. That judgment should have been impossible without additional information.

Chen Ran began examining the possibility that Chen Yang had already learned the Ghost Path Soldier before the internal struggle started.

If Chen Yang had secretly learned it during his attempt to conquer the Eighteenth Floor, then his previous confidence suddenly made sense. He would not have needed to guess whether Zhang Fan or Ling Chi was using a Soldier. He would already know that the system existed and would have had a way to determine which consciousness was actually speaking.

This immediately raised another question: why had the True Self Players watching the secret chamber not stopped Chen Yang from learning it?

The answer depended on what Chen Yang was trying to accomplish.

If Chen Yang had learned the Dao Heart Demonic Seed in order to escape the Ninth Player's chosen timeline, that would interfere directly with the timeline system and therefore provoke intervention. But learning the Ghost Path Soldier solely for use during an internal struggle was different. It did not allow Chen Yang to escape the timeline. It merely gave him another weapon

inside the secret chamber. Stopping him would therefore amount to directly interfering in the internal competition between players.

That was why the spectators had allowed it.

Chen Ran then considered something even more troubling. Chen Yang had entered the previous stages with Zhang Fan's skills Imprinted. If he had been able to read Zhang Fan's information, there was a possibility that he had also absorbed memories related to Ling Chi. Therefore, Chen Yang might have known that Ling Chi's statement was truthful without needing his own Soldier to investigate it.

Either possibility explained why Chen Yang had ignored the danger that frightened Chen Ran and Zhang Fan.

Chen Ran's Extreme Realm then supplied him with another chain of deductions. The first was that an Unknown Lie follower did not lie under the Lie-detection principle. The second was that Chen Yang's judgment had to be regarded as truthful because there was no evidence that he himself had lied. The third was that Chen Yang's complete lack of concern about Zhang Fan's Soldier strongly suggested he already knew about the Ghost Path Soldier.

From there, Chen Ran reconstructed Chen Yang's actions before the secret chamber.

Chen Yang had apparently claimed that his goal was to obtain the Dao Heart Demonic Seed and remain on the true timeline while Chen Ran still existed. But even a much stronger Chen Yang would have difficulty defeating the True Self Players controlling that timeline. A Five-Star Chen Yang therefore had no realistic way to force himself onto the true timeline against their will.

That meant the stated objective could not have been the whole purpose of his actions.

The more plausible targets were the Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm and the Ghost Path Soldier.

The Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm was difficult to steal because the Ninth Player had personally selected this timeline and created Future Chen Ran. The Ghost Path Soldier was different. Obtaining it would provide an enormous advantage inside the secret chamber without violating the larger rules of the timeline.

Chen Ran therefore reached a disturbing possibility: the person who had just been able to make the correct judgment may have been Chen Yang's Soldier.

If that were true, Chen Yang had possessed an additional independent consciousness inside the secret chamber from the beginning.

Chen Ran then examined the speaking order.

The first round had been Zhang Fan, Chen Yang, Ling Chi, and Chen Ran. Had Chen Yang possessed the Ghost Path Soldier at that point, he could potentially have eliminated the other three immediately. But Ling Chi had been directly after him in the speaking order. If the person speaking after Chen Yang had been Ling Chi's Soldier, Chen Yang's attack could have killed Chen Ran and Zhang Fan while leaving himself and Ling Chi alive.

The rules would then require Chen Yang to judge Ling Chi first.

That would be fatal to Chen Yang if Ling Chi survived as an independent participant.

The speaking order had therefore accidentally protected everyone from Chen Yang's most direct attack. Chen Yang could not risk killing the other three until he knew exactly which consciousness belonged to each player.

That explained why his actions had seemed strangely restrained.

Chen Ran then used the Extreme Realm to predict the third round. From the apparent perspective of Ling Chi and Zhang Fan, both Chen Ran and Chen Yang had an extremely high chance of dying. Ling Chi could send out a Soldier, forcing Chen Ran to choose between speaking and being killed by the turn-order rule, or remaining silent and entering a prolonged stalemate.

But Chen Ran realized that Ling Chi knew this as well. Therefore Ling Chi's next statement could not be taken at face value. He was preparing a statement specifically designed to manipulate Chen Ran's choice.

Ling Chi snapped his fingers.

The three others immediately felt that familiar sensation of being cut.

Their Second Realms activated simultaneously, and a Spirit Body appeared beside Ling Chi. It looked exactly like him, with the same height, clothing, expression, and posture.

It was his Soldier.

The obvious interpretation was that Ling Chi was showing them the Soldier so they would understand that the person who spoke next was his main personality.

Ling Chi inhaled from his cigarette and calmly said, “My name is Ling Chi.”

His statement was deliberately simple. Since Chen Yang was the last speaker in this rotation, Ling Chi knew Chen Yang would almost certainly use the high-probability Unknown Lie Servant identity. Ling Chi's own words therefore had little value as evidence. The important part was the physical arrangement of the Soldier.

The three watched it carefully.

The Soldier remained outside Ling Chi's body while he spoke.

That suggested the main personality had spoken.

But Chen Ran immediately identified the gap.

How many Soldiers could Ling Chi create?

Nothing proved that there could only be one.

If Ling Chi could create another Soldier, then the external Soldier seen by the three might simply be the first Soldier while a second Soldier occupied Ling Chi's body and delivered the speech. Chen Ran therefore could not safely conclude that the speaking person was the main personality.

Ling Chi then repeated the same sentence.

“My name is Ling Chi.”

The three immediately became alert.

If both statements had come from separate Soldiers, the first two positions in the current speaking cycle had already been occupied by independent Soldiers. Only two positions remained.

Then Ling Chi added, “My name is Ling Chi, I'm finished speaking.”

The situation became even stranger.

If all three speeches had been made by three different Soldiers, then Ling Chi had already consumed three of the four available speaking positions. Only Chen Ran could still speak. Zhang Fan and Chen Yang would consequently be placed outside the allowed structure and could be erased.

From Chen Yang and Zhang Fan's perspective, that seemed to imply that Ling Chi intended to remove all three of them at once.

Chen Ran, however, saw another possibility.

Perhaps Ling Chi was deliberately making the three believe that multiple Soldiers existed because he wanted Chen Ran to make exactly that deduction.

The Ghost Path Soldier created another problem because Hell did not always treat the main personality and the Soldier as separate participants. The distinction depended on when the Soldier came into existence.

Ling Chi's original Soldier had existed before his death. It therefore possessed its own history and its own crimes, which allowed the rules of the mortal world to distinguish between Ling Chi and the Soldier. The young Daoist could kill the Soldier and then judge Ling Chi's main personality separately. A Soldier created only after Ling Chi had already entered Hell was different. It had no mortal-life history and had not existed when Hell first established Ling Chi as the player. Under those circumstances, the newly created Soldier could normally still be treated as part of Ling Chi.

That timing difference was crucial. A Soldier existing before the relevant rule was established could be recognized as an independent entity, while a Soldier created afterward could remain part of the player. The Ghost Path Soldier was therefore not merely a combat ability. By controlling when the Soldier existed relative to the rule being applied, Ling Chi could potentially manipulate whether the Secret Chamber treated the main personality and the Soldier as one participant or as separate participants.

The consequence became obvious once the speaking sequence continued. Ling Chi made another statement while a Soldier remained outside his body. The obvious interpretation was that Ling Chi's main personality had spoken and the Soldier had merely been displayed beside him. But nothing proved that there was only one Soldier. The visible Soldier could have been one entity while a second Soldier occupied Ling Chi's body and delivered the speech.

That created two completely different interpretations. If Ling Chi's main personality had spoken, then the turn order remained normal. If separate Soldiers had delivered the statements, then multiple independent speaking positions might already have been consumed.

The dangerous case was the second one. Suppose the speeches had been delivered by separate Soldiers. If Chen Ran now spoke and Ling Chi subsequently destroyed the Soldier that had just spoken, the dead Soldier would become an independent participant under the Secret Chamber's rules, while Ling Chi's main personality would still not have taken its own turn. Chen Ran would therefore have inserted himself into the sequence before the proper speaker had completed the required order and could be erased immediately.

Zhang Fan faced the same danger. If he tried to use his own Soldier to bypass the problem, the resulting dead Soldier could become another independent participant. The chamber would then potentially count more than four people in the speaking sequence, pushing Chen Yang or another original participant into a position that the rules did not permit. The exact identity of the speaker therefore mattered more than the words being spoken.

Ling Chi deliberately stopped after the third statement because continuing would force the others to commit to one interpretation. If the three statements belonged to his main personality, nothing had gone wrong. If they belonged to three separate Soldiers, however, then the speaking order had already been altered. Chen Ran could not safely move forward without knowing which interpretation was correct.

The result was that the main battlefield was no longer simply the truth or falsehood of Ling Chi's statements. It was the identity of the person who had physically and mentally spoken them. Ling Chi had spent the previous rounds making that identity impossible to establish with certainty, and the turn order itself had become the weapon.

That was why Chen Ran chose the only response that did not immediately commit him to either interpretation. He placed his hand on the Liar Killer and let the others believe that he might judge Zhang Fan at any moment. He then said that his skill was called Eternal Kingdom and announced that he had finished speaking. The statement was deliberate because Chen Ran did not actually need to know which of Ling Chi's identities had spoken. He only needed to make the others believe that judging him or attacking him could produce a mutual-death outcome.

Eternal Kingdom created an additional uncertainty. None of the other three knew whether the skill could prohibit the use of Eternal Kingdom itself or interfere with the Secret Chamber directly. From their perspective, there was at least a possibility that Chen Ran possessed a method capable of dispelling the entire chamber. Even if they used No-Distance immediately before he acted, Chen Ran's reaction speed inside the Extreme Realm was so fast that he could potentially break free long enough to complete his judgment. The result was a position where killing Chen Ran first was itself dangerous.

Ling Chi immediately recognized the problem. The person who had originally laid the trap for Chen Ran had now been forced to acknowledge that Chen Ran could simply wait. If they entered a prolonged stalemate, nobody could be sure who would eventually crack first. The three systems had begun to interfere with one another, but each participant was still trying to pull the struggle into the field where his own abilities were strongest.

Chen Ran had exposed a weakness in the rules and continued exploiting the rules. Chen Yang had transformed that discovery into a system based on human behavior. Ling Chi had ignored both methods and concentrated on the Ghost Path Soldier. None of them wanted to enter another person's framework because doing so meant accepting assumptions that the other person had already prepared. The three were effectively fighting three different games at the same time, each hoping that his own game would be the one that mattered when the final exchange came.

That left Zhang Fan.

Rather than immediately speaking, he closed his eyes and entered another state of epiphany. He had been studying Ling Chi's previous revelations about the Ghost Path Soldier, and the system was beginning to reveal more of itself to him. The earlier warning that the Soldier was absolutely controlled by the main personality had not been incidental. It meant the Soldier could be used as an externalized form of thought while still being directed by the original personality. Once Zhang Fan fully grasped that relationship, he would no longer need to fight Ling Chi solely through the rules of the Secret Chamber. He would be able to attack Chen Ran through the same type of externalized spiritual entity.

Chen Ran recognized the danger immediately. The Future Lie established earlier had forbidden the four from using No-Distance against one another, but nobody had ever stated that the Ghost Path Soldier's manifestation method itself was forbidden. Ling Chi had deliberately withheld that information when the Future Lie was formed. There was therefore a loophole in the agreement. If Ling Chi and Zhang Fan sent their Soldiers out to attack Chen Ran directly, they would not technically be using the prohibited method.

That explained the timing of Ling Chi's plan. From the beginning, he had been giving Zhang Fan enough information to reconstruct the Ghost Path Soldier without openly revealing how far its applications could go. Once Zhang Fan reached the first layer, the two of them could attack Chen Ran from outside the range of his direct mental attacks. Chen Ran was proficient in No-Distance, but without No-Distance his ability to fight an opponent who attacked him through an independent spiritual entity was severely limited.

Chen Yang understood that as well. He also understood the weakness in Chen Ran's approach. Chen Ran liked to wait until a problem appeared and then solve it using whatever information the problem itself revealed. That style required an enormous reservoir of knowledge and an ability to adapt to almost any situation, but it also meant that the first move usually belonged to the opponent. Chen Yang regarded this as a limitation of Chen Ran's Military Form philosophy. Chen Ran, however, had always viewed the person creating the problem as the real target. If he could destroy that person, the problem disappeared along with them.

While the three men were thinking through this conflict of styles, the baleful aura around Zhang Fan gradually settled. His first layer of Ghost Path Soldier was almost complete.

Then Chen Ran moved.

A violent spiritual fluctuation erupted from his body. Ling Chi and Chen Yang immediately released their Second Realms, and they saw something extraordinary. A figure appeared inside Chen Ran and attempted to break free from his body. Ling Chi's first reaction was that Chen Ran somehow knew the Ghost Path Soldier as well.

The figure failed to leave.

That brief moment of relief vanished almost immediately when the figure extended an arm unnaturally, stretching it like rubber until it entered Zhang Fan's body. It grabbed another figure from inside Zhang Fan and dragged it out. Around Chen Ran, the spiritual perception of the others suddenly produced a completely different scene.

An arena appeared.

A referee materialized inside it, followed by a boxer wearing enormous gloves and dressed in ridiculous shorts. The boxer was Chen Ran. Opposite him stood Zhang Fan, whose expression was blank and whose body swayed unsteadily.

The boxer Chen Ran drew back his fist.

"Gomo Gomo no!"

The punch landed directly on Zhang Fan and blasted his spirit apart.

The real Zhang Fan immediately opened his eyes and vomited, his face drained of color. His spirit had been struck so severely that his entire mental state became unstable. Ling Chi reacted without hesitation. His Soldier rushed toward the arena, intending to kill Chen Ran's strange spiritual attacker before it could strike again.

A referee appeared in front of the Soldier.

He introduced himself as Wen Tailai the Thunder Hand and tried to stop Ling Chi from entering the arena. The Soldier immediately killed him. Yet the moment the referee disappeared, the arena and the boxer also vanished, leaving Ling Chi's Soldier standing in empty space.

Then it struck Chen Ran's body.

The spear made contact and produced a metallic clang, as though it had hit solid steel. Ling Chi immediately understood that Chen Ran had switched to the Extreme Realm. The numerical enhancement of the Extreme Realm was so great that even though Chen Ran himself had not mastered the Ghost Path Soldier to a high level, the defensive increase alone made his body extremely difficult to penetrate.

The Soldier withdrew its spear.

The strange figure inside Chen Ran's body emerged again, but this time it wore a sheep's head mask and possessed bronze-colored skin. It picked its nose, rolled the result into a small ball, and said, "Arigato, Mei Yang Yang-san."

It flicked the object toward Ling Chi's Soldier.

The Soldier tried to dodge, but Ling Chi prevented it from moving away. The object struck directly, and the Soldier's appearance immediately changed into Mei Yang Yang from the cartoon. Opposite it, Chen Ran's spiritual attacker transformed into the Big Bad Wolf. The wolf assembled a small Robot and sent it toward Mei Yang Yang. The Robot approached, waved, and said goodbye.

The Soldier vanished.

Ling Chi immediately sensed that something was wrong. His Soldier had not simply been destroyed. It had been thrown outside the current Secret Chamber, through the second Secret Chamber, then through the first Secret Chamber of the instance, and continued moving outward. Ling Chi's Soldier finally used the cicada-shaped technique it possessed to return to the Secret Chamber.

By then the positions had changed. Chen Yang looked genuinely confused, Chen Ran wore a faint smile, and Zhang Fan's spirit remained badly damaged.

Ling Chi finally understood the structure of Chen Ran's spiritual attack. It was a bizarre application of Ghost Path Soldier based on Supreme Goodness Is Like Water: Joy. If Ling Chi attacked Joy directly, his Soldier could destroy it immediately. The problem was that Chen Ran's Joy could switch forms as soon as it sensed danger. It could retreat into the Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm and exploit the enormous numerical increase of the Extreme Realm to become practically untouchable.

The difference in their cultivation was therefore strange but not contradictory. Zhang Fan had already obtained the basic method for creating a Soldier, yet Chen Ran's half-developed Ghost Path Soldier was still able to crush Zhang Fan's Soldier because the power of the system did not come purely from the technique. The state of mind supporting the technique mattered just as much. Chen Ran's Supreme Goodness Is Like Water: Joy had reached a level strong enough to contend with Yue Guanshan's Ghost Immortal state, while Zhang Fan had only constructed his Soldier from one of the ten mental states he had assembled.

Ling Chi's Soldier was different again. Its spiritual attack method itself had reached an extremely refined level. Against Joy directly, it had the advantage. But Chen Ran simply refused to let the two states meet on equal terms. Joy would retreat into the Extreme Realm before Ling Chi could destroy it, and the battle would reset.

There was another cost. Maintaining a Soldier outside the body required Ling Chi to spend spirit continuously. If he kept the Soldier manifested solely to suppress Chen Ran's Joy, he would be consuming his reserves while Zhang Fan remained vulnerable. Zhang Fan had already been struck once and nearly had his spirit shattered. Forcing him back into an epiphany under those conditions was risky.

Ling Chi then noticed something even more unreasonable about Chen Ran. The spiritual fluctuation produced by Joy had been enormous. Yet Chen Ran's main body did not appear exhausted afterward. The explanation was that the Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm separated his three forms. The consumption belonged to Joy, while the Ego Extreme Realm could remain almost completely unaffected. The other two forms were effectively resting while one form spent its resources.

That meant the four of them had initially misunderstood Chen Ran's mental strength.

The extremely powerful spiritual fluctuation they had sensed earlier did not necessarily represent the entirety of Chen Ran's available state. Joy, Half-Step Superego, and Ego Extreme Realm could function as separate forms, allowing one to expend spirit while another retained a full reserve. His three forms could therefore replace one another depending on what the situation required.

Ling Chi could only stare at him.

The balance had shifted again. His original arrangement had been simple: he and Zhang Fan would use the Ghost Path Soldier to remove Chen Ran, then turn against Chen Yang. Chen Ran had already refused to cooperate with that plan by finding a way to wait. Now Chen Yang had remained silent long enough for the next layer to appear.

The Secret Chamber suddenly became unnaturally quiet.

Ling Chi felt the sensation of being watched by something hidden in the grass.

He immediately activated his Second Realm.

Another Chen Yang was standing beside the real Chen Yang.

This figure held a sniper rifle unlike any firearm the three had previously seen. It was extremely simple, yet the shape was unnaturally beautiful. The moment Ling Chi identified it, the duplicate raised the weapon.

"Radiant Triple Kill · Sword of Heaven and Earth."

The trigger was pulled.

A single bullet emerged.

It had eyes, a mouth, and small hands. While flying through the air, it somehow produced a tiny sword and charged toward Ling Chi while making an absurd squealing sound. The appearance looked ridiculous enough to be mistaken for a joke, but none of them had time to laugh.

Ling Chi immediately sent out a spiritual body and teleported the bullet away.

The bullet tore through space and returned.

It slashed the spiritual body into pieces and continued flying.

A Deep Abyss Maw emerged from Ling Chi's body and swallowed the projectile. An explosion occurred inside the maw, which then spat out smoke. The chamber fell silent again.

All four spirits were badly depleted.

Ling Chi's spirit had become weak. Chen Yang's had also weakened. Zhang Fan had already been in a damaged state from Joy.

Then they noticed something terrifying.

Chen Yang's spirit was recovering.

The amount consumed by the Sword of Heaven and Earth was enormous, but Chen Yang's absorption speed was even more absurd. The damage caused by the attack would therefore

disappear gradually while Chen Yang replenished his spiritual reserves. Based on their observations, he could recover to his previous peak after roughly half an hour.

A spiritual attack capable of severely damaging Ling Chi required only thirty minutes before Chen Yang could use the same method again.

Ling Chi understood immediately where the attack had come from.

Chen Yang knew the Ghost Path Soldier.

Not just the basic technique.

He had mastered it to a level that was at least comparable to Ling Chi's own.

The answer could only have been hidden in Chen Yang's conquest of the Eighteenth Floor. His supposed attempt to obtain the Dao Heart Demonic Seed had been a distraction. The True Self Players would never allow a Five-Star Chen Yang to remain on the true timeline while Chen Ran was still alive, because the difficulty of that operation was far beyond what Chen Yang's current strength could overcome. Even a much stronger version of Chen Yang would have been unable to force his way past those opponents.

Yet Chen Yang still entered the floor and continued searching for a method.

That meant the Dao Heart Demonic Seed had never been his real target.

The Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm was protected by the Ninth True Self Player and the existence of Future Chen Ran. The Dao Heart Demonic Seed was also effectively beyond his reach because the True Self Players would not allow him to steal it. The other cultivation systems did not present the same value. Chen Yang already knew No-Distance, while the unknown system possessed by the Omniscient and Omnipotent was not something he dared touch without understanding its consequences.

One system remained.

The Ghost Path Soldier.

Chen Yang had used the skill obtained through Imprint to travel into the past, arrived at the moment when Ling Chi gained enlightenment on the Ghost Path Soldier, and then used Empathy to steal the system. More importantly, he did not merely steal it and return. He remained in the past.

He could cultivate there for as long as Ling Chi had cultivated the Ghost Path Soldier himself.

That explained why Chen Yang's Sword of Heaven and Earth had reached such an exaggerated level. He had effectively possessed the same cultivation time that Ling Chi had possessed. Then he had combined that technique with the enormous numerical foundation of the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique.

The result was an attack whose power was fundamentally different from Ling Chi's.

Ling Chi had created a Soldier through an extraordinarily refined spiritual technique. Chen Yang had taken the same technique and put a vastly greater amount of mental power behind it. The Soldier itself was no longer the limiting factor. His statistics had become the foundation supporting it.

Ling Chi finally understood the trap he had fallen into.

He had spent the previous stage arranging a situation in which Chen Ran could not safely speak or wait. Chen Yang had watched that operation from the side and then built a nearly identical trap for Ling Chi himself. If Ling Chi spoke, the other three could immediately attack him. If Ling Chi waited, Chen Yang would recover and use the Sword of Heaven and Earth again.

Thirty minutes later, the second attack would come.

After another thirty minutes, the third.

Even if Ling Chi survived one, there was no reason to believe he could withstand an endless sequence.

The same logic that had made Ling Chi's earlier trap effective now worked against him.

Chen Yang's Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique had increased his cognitive activity to an entirely different level. All four had originally been operating in the same mental dimension, where even a combined attack could rarely force an immediate decisive result. Chen Yang's system had raised his processing capacity to the point that he could make preparations while the other three were still solving the previous layer.

That was why the three of them could join together and still fail to catch up.

And this was where the source of Chen Yang's Ghost Path Soldier was revealed.

Time moved backward.

Ling Chi sat alone at the entrance of an instance that had already been cleared. He was meditating and trying to raise the Ghost Path Soldier to a higher level when he suddenly sensed something strange. He had already cut off his Ego, so spontaneous intuition should have been almost impossible. Yet he had now felt the same unexplained sensation twice.

His first assumption was that something had happened in the past and then been corrected, leaving behind only a vague trace in his consciousness.

The timeline moved back another twenty seconds.

During the first ten seconds, Ling Chi suddenly opened his eyes and looked toward a dignified young man smoking against the wall. The young man asked him why he had not used Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction.

Ling Chi was immediately startled.

When he checked his Liar Killer panel, he discovered that a skill called Empathy had appeared.

Before he could react, a cold voice sounded in their minds.

"Whisperer: Dao Extreme: Space-Time Reincarnation: Wheel of Time: Wheel of Space."

The next ten seconds were different.

Ling Chi opened his eyes again and stared at an empty section of wall. He somehow sensed that something was about to appear there. A moment later, Zhang Fan materialized.

The young man froze as soon as he realized where he was, but there was no time to respond. He was pulled into another space before he could act, and the same Whisperer announcement rang out.

The timeline returned to the present.

Ling Chi did not know that two people had just appeared in his past.

In another pair of small Secret Chambers within the same structure, Chen Yang and Zhang Fan stood opposite one another. Both smoked quietly.

Chen Yang looked at Zhang Fan and said, "Sorry, no stealing."

Zhang Fan immediately pointed out the obvious contradiction: Chen Yang had also come here to steal.

Chen Yang's response was that he had already finished stealing, which was precisely why he was preventing Zhang Fan from doing the same.

The two had independently formed the same idea.

They could return to the point in history when Ling Chi comprehended the Ghost Path Soldier, use Empathy to steal the system, and then ensure that nobody else would be able to obtain it afterward by warning Ling Chi about what was happening.

But their arrival in the past created a time paradox.

Ling Chi had never originally seen these two people.

Now he had.

That meant the past had been altered, which proved the current timeline was not the original true timeline.

The Ninth True Self Player consequently had to intervene and correct the contradiction. The correction would erase the existence of the paradoxical event from the true timeline after the internal struggle was over.

There was, however, a loophole.

The act of stealing the Ghost Path Soldier itself was part of the internal conflict between the players. Directly erasing the stolen system would therefore count as interference in that internal struggle. The Ninth True Self Player could correct the time paradox, but could not simply remove the spoils obtained through the internal struggle without directly deciding the outcome.

That explained why Chen Yang could retain the Ghost Path Soldier even though the event that allowed him to obtain it was later corrected.

Chen Yang then explained how he had prevented Zhang Fan from stealing the system first.

Both of them had used Infinite Replication and traveled into the past, but Zhang Fan had made his move earlier from his own perspective. When Zhang Fan first began testing everyone's systems, he had no idea that Chen Yang possessed Zhang Fan's Imprinted skills. He therefore did not anticipate Chen Yang being able to follow him into the same moment in history.

Chen Yang did.

He had already accounted for the possibility that Zhang Fan would travel backward to steal the Ghost Path Soldier, so he simply arrived first and trapped Zhang Fan's replicas one after another.

That was why Chen Yang called the move "striking later but arriving first."

Zhang Fan had moved earlier in his own plan, but Chen Yang had predicted that move and therefore reached the destination before him.

There was another purpose behind Chen Yang's behavior.

He had known that Chen Ran was the player belonging to the true timeline. He also knew that the future existence of Empathy created a contradiction if Empathy had never existed during Ling Chi's original history. Therefore, Chen Yang deliberately warned Ling Chi about Empathy, forcing Ling Chi to destroy that skill and all the other stolen abilities.

If Ling Chi really destroyed Empathy in the past, then Empathy could not legitimately exist later.

But it did exist.

That contradiction forced the Ninth True Self Player to intervene and correct the timeline.

In the internal Secret Chamber, Zhang Fan should therefore have no memory of Chen Yang possessing the Ghost Path Soldier. The information that led to that discovery had been removed through timeline correction.

The Ghost Path Soldier itself remained because removing it would have changed the outcome of the internal conflict.

That distinction was the foundation of the entire operation.

The same principle applied to other interventions by the True Self Players. Creating an event at another point in history without directly deciding the outcome of the internal chamber was permissible. Applying an external force directly inside the Secret Chamber and determining who survived was not.

Zhang Fan stared at the countless screens around him. Each one showed another of his replicas being caught by another Chen Yang. Every attempt to reach Ling Chi ended in the same result.

There was no remaining route for him to steal the system.

He finally looked at Chen Yang and asked whether he was a devil.

Chen Yang only smiled and admitted that if he had possessed Zhang Fan's skills from the beginning, he would have wondered whether anyone in Hell could still be his opponent.

Then Chen Yang snapped his fingers, and the two appeared before Ling Chi. Both Ling Chi and Zhang Fan looked at the 2-

The past and present had now collided, and the time paradox was complete.

A voice sounded simultaneously in the minds of all three.

"Whisperer: Dao Extreme: Space-Time Reincarnation: Wheel of Time: Wheel of Space!"

The correction began.

The time paradox had now been created. Chen Yang and Zhang Fan had entered Ling Chi's past, attempted to seize the Ghost Path Soldier, and then been pulled back to the point where Ling Chi was present. The crucial problem was that this event could not simply be allowed to overwrite history. If Chen Yang had never learned the Ghost Path Soldier in the original history, then his appearance in Ling Chi's past created a contradiction. The Ninth True Self Player therefore had to correct the timeline, removing the portion of history in which the paradox had been introduced. However, that correction could not extend to the result of the internal struggle itself. Chen Yang obtaining the Ghost Path Soldier was now part of the competition between the four players, so erasing the system after the fact would amount to directly deciding the result of

their struggle. The correction could remove the cause of the paradox without removing the thing Chen Yang had gained from it.

This distinction was easier to understand by imagining an ordinary worker repairing a damaged concrete floor. Two children had stepped into freshly laid cement while competing to see whose footprints would be deeper. The worker could simply smooth the floor and erase their footprints. In that case, he was only repairing the consequences of their actions and had nothing to do with the competition itself. But if he went to find the children afterward and punished them in order to invalidate the competition, he would no longer be a worker merely performing his duty. He would be interfering in the result. The Ninth True Self Player stood in the first position. She could repair the paradox in the timeline, but she could not erase the Ghost Path Soldier Chen Yang had obtained without crossing the boundary into direct intervention.

That also explained why Zhang Fan's memory of Chen Yang knowing the Ghost Path Soldier had disappeared. In the corrected timeline, Zhang Fan should never have witnessed Chen Yang obtaining the system, so the information naturally vanished from his history. Chen Yang, however, still retained the system because keeping it was part of the internal struggle rather than part of the correction itself. The two facts looked contradictory only if the correction was treated as an attempt to restore every detail to the exact state it had possessed before Chen Yang interfered. The Ninth True Self Player was instead repairing the timeline while leaving the legitimate result of the contest untouched.

The same principle explained why Chen Yang had deliberately warned Ling Chi about Empathy. He had already obtained the Ghost Path Soldier and then traveled into the past, where he informed Ling Chi about the existence of Empathy. Ling Chi subsequently destroyed Empathy, meaning that from the perspective of the original history, the ability should never have survived to appear later. Chen Yang had created a contradiction specifically designed to force the Ninth True Self Player to intervene. Once the correction took place, the cause of the paradox disappeared from the record, while Chen Yang's stolen Ghost Path Soldier remained. Zhang Fan was therefore left without a memory of the event, even though the consequences of that event were still active in the Secret Chamber.

What Chen Yang had done during the Eighteenth Floor became much clearer after this. His stated goal had always been to remain on the true timeline while Chen Ran was still alive. That plan could never realistically have succeeded by the means he appeared to be using. Even a Ten-Star Chen Yang would struggle to confront the True Self Players protecting that timeline, so a Five-Star Chen Yang had no realistic method of forcing the Ninth True Self Player to accept him as a replacement for Chen Ran. The obvious objective of his actions was therefore almost certainly a decoy. He had needed the Dao Heart Demonic Seed as a believable explanation for his behavior, while his actual goal was the Ghost Path Soldier.

The Ghost Path Soldier was especially valuable because Chen Yang had entered the past carrying Zhang Fan's Imprinted skills. He could therefore use those skills to reach the exact point when Ling Chi obtained the system, then steal it through Empathy. That meant Chen Yang could cultivate the system with essentially the same amount of accumulated time that Ling Chi

possessed. His understanding of the Ghost Path Soldier inside the Secret Chamber was consequently far deeper than anyone had assumed.

This was the reason Chen Yang had been so confident when he judged Ling Chi's statement as truthful. Zhang Fan had already noticed the problem. Ling Chi's speech had contained the phrase about exhausting eight horses to death, an Unknown Lie with an extremely high probability of being judged false by the rules. Chen Ran had treated the same situation as dangerous enough to prepare for mutual destruction. Chen Yang, however, had simply judged Ling Chi as telling the truth and showed no concern that the Ling Chi who had spoken might have been a Soldier.

There were two possible explanations. Chen Yang might have learned the Ghost Path Soldier before the struggle and therefore already possessed a method to distinguish Ling Chi's main personality from his Soldier, or he might have read Ling Chi's memories while using Zhang Fan's Imprinted abilities. Either way, Chen Yang's certainty showed that his understanding of the current game extended far beyond what the others had initially assumed. The fact that he had not prepared for Zhang Fan being a Soldier was itself evidence. Someone who had only discovered the Ghost Path Soldier moments earlier would have been cautious. Someone who already understood the system would know exactly what distinction mattered.

Chen Ran drew the same conclusion through another route. His Extreme Realm assumed that Chen Yang's judgment was truthful, because Chen Yang had no reason to risk such a direct judgment without confidence. From that premise, the rest could be reconstructed. Chen Yang already knew the Ghost Path Soldier. If the other three all possessed the technique, then Chen Ran himself either needed to obtain it or had to pretend that he had not. He also needed to prevent Chen Yang from passing the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique to him later, because Chen Yang's future move would almost certainly be connected to the third round. Chen Ran's own Extreme Realm calculated that he had roughly a ninety-nine percent probability of dying during that stage, with only the remaining one percent belonging to the unpredictable factor created by the internal struggle itself.

Chen Ran's reasoning also changed how he interpreted Chen Yang's apparent fall into Demonhood. The visible transformation could not necessarily be treated as the moment when Chen Yang first discarded his moral restraints. Chen Yang had already obtained the Ghost Path Soldier, anticipated the dangers posed by the other participants, and conducted preparations that preceded the moment when the others recognized his full capabilities. If he had already been carrying out those operations when he first entered the Secret Chamber, then the later act of Demonic Corruption could not have been his initial transformation. Chen Ran instead suspected that Chen Yang had undergone Demonic Corruption from the beginning of the confrontation and that the later, visible act was a second use intended to conceal the preparations he had already made. This distinction mattered because the others might otherwise attribute Chen Yang's earlier behavior to the restrained personality they had initially encountered, when the underlying manipulation could already have been underway.

The structure of the third round made that prediction reasonable. By that point Ling Chi possessed a Soldier, Zhang Fan had begun to master the same system, and Chen Yang probably did as well. If Ling Chi's Soldier spoke first and Chen Ran then spoke as though Ling Chi's main personality had already taken its turn, Ling Chi could erase the Soldier and cause the rules to recognize it as a separate participant. Chen Ran would then have spoken before Ling Chi's main personality, violating the turn order and triggering his own erasure. Refusing to speak would create a different problem. Ling Chi could continue forcing the same uncertainty while Zhang Fan completed his own cultivation. Chen Ran would eventually face a situation in which there was no safe action. The only sensible conclusion was that Ling Chi's next speech contained a trap designed specifically to make Chen Ran choose incorrectly.

From Chen Ran's perspective, the best defense was therefore to predict the shape of the trap before Ling Chi revealed it. If Ling Chi wanted to kill him, he would emphasize that the main personality was speaking. If Chen Ran believed that claim and acted on it, Ling Chi could use the Soldier's independent status against him. If Chen Ran refused to believe it, Ling Chi could continue waiting until Zhang Fan and his Soldier were ready. Either direction ultimately forced Chen Ran into the position of reacting.

This was the point where the earlier distinction between Military Form and the Four Schools of Military Strategy became important. Chen Ran tended to wait until the opponent created a problem and then destroy the person who had created it. Ling Chi was the opposite. He had been preparing the pieces necessary to attack Chen Ran several moves in advance. The Ghost Path Soldier had been passed to Zhang Fan before Chen Yang had even finished constructing the human-nature rules, and the entire third-round arrangement had been built around the assumption that Chen Ran would react to the immediate situation instead of anticipating the complete sequence.

The timeline correction therefore had a second effect on the struggle. Chen Yang had not only obtained the Ghost Path Soldier. He had demonstrated that someone could use the past, future, and time itself as part of a pre-arranged strategy. Zhang Fan, who possessed a system similar to lesser omnipotence, had still been thinking primarily from the present. Ling Chi had begun thinking across time, but he still assumed that the skill he had cultivated was the highest weapon available in the current exchange. Chen Yang had already operated beyond those assumptions.

The implications became clear when Chen Yang's Soldier appeared beside the three.

Chen Yang had not needed to send his main personality. His Soldier was sufficient. It looked exactly like him, but spoke with complete confidence about the three opponents being half-baked. Ling Chi had chosen to place his moves in advance and therefore assumed that his opponent would only respond after seeing those moves. Chen Yang explained that the same premise was already obsolete because he also possessed the ability to plant pieces in advance. If Ling Chi had only learned one simple relation, he was assuming every later relation that he could not currently perceive was wrong. His problem was not insufficient intelligence in the

ordinary sense. It was that his current range of cognition defined the limits of what he was willing to consider possible.

Chen Yang then turned toward Zhang Fan. His criticism was even more direct because Zhang Fan possessed a skill bordering on lesser omnipotence yet still remained confined to the present. During his search of the Eighteenth Floor, Chen Yang had looked across the entire range of space-time and had never found another version of Zhang Fan using the Dao Heart Demonic Seed to preserve the true timeline. Zhang Fan had been afraid of being sealed in advance and therefore never seriously attempted the maneuver. That fear itself showed that he had not yet understood what the True Self Players were actually competing over. They were not fighting only for strength. They were fighting over perspective.

A person whose thoughts remained within the present would naturally regard a sealed future or altered past as an impossible danger. A person whose Spirit Vision had broken free of those limitations could treat the same future and past as pieces on the board. Zhang Fan had the technical means to operate on a larger scale, but he had not yet developed the corresponding way of seeing. Chen Yang regarded that short-sightedness as Zhang Fan's greatest weakness.

Finally, Chen Yang's Soldier looked at Chen Ran.

Chen Ran's problem was different. He already understood the danger posed by Future Chen Ran. He knew that the future version of himself existed for a reason, and he knew that the relationship between the current Chen Ran and Future Chen Ran was abnormal. But precisely because he knew that danger, he had been hiding his own threat level. Chen Yang told him that this was the wrong direction. The existence of Future Chen Ran should not become a reason for him to reduce his own danger coefficient. It should make the opposite true.

A nuclear weapon had value precisely because everyone knew what it could do. If nobody knew about it, nobody had reason to restrain themselves around it. Once the danger was publicly recognized, opponents had to spend enormous effort discussing how to deal with it. Chen Ran's identity as the potential replacement for the future version of himself could function the same way. The more openly dangerous he appeared, the greater the cost of anyone trying to destroy him.

Chen Yang therefore argued that Future Chen Ran should not be treated as an unavoidable chain around the present Chen Ran. If the two were truly competing for the same position, then Chen Ran should treat the future self as an opponent rather than a superior version that had to be protected. The question was no longer whether the future Chen Ran would eventually influence his growth. The question was whether the current Chen Ran would have the courage to reject that predetermined path.

The speech then moved beyond the four players. Chen Yang pointed toward the sky and identified the Ninth True Self Player as the larger threat. The Omniscient and Omnipotent wanted to kill them, but his actions were restricted by the structure of the Eighteenth Floor. The Ninth True Self Player was different. She had created the Fate Layer and therefore possessed a

direct ability to shape their future. Chen Yang argued that fighting one another inside the Secret Chamber was wasteful when the four of them had a common enemy capable of controlling their destiny.

The suggestion of cooperation sounded reasonable enough that even Chen Ran had difficulty rejecting it immediately. Ling Chi, Zhang Fan, and Chen Ran were already operating at a severe disadvantage. Joining forces with Chen Yang could preserve all four players rather than leaving three of them dead. Yet none of the three accepted the proposal on trust. Zhang Fan immediately suspected that Chen Yang still wanted the Dao Heart Demonic Seed. Ling Chi noticed that Chen Yang's spiritual reserves appeared to have recovered by more than half despite the tremendous expenditure of the previous exchanges. Chen Ran, meanwhile, was stuck on Chen Yang's statement that other scholars would naturally debate his status and could not help wondering what that actually meant for his own future.

The four therefore reached the same practical conclusion for different reasons: cooperation was the most rational option available, even if none of them trusted the person proposing it. The difference was that the three understood this cooperation only as a temporary arrangement, while Chen Yang already appeared to be thinking beyond the Secret Chamber.

That brought the entire cultivation system into focus.

There were ten mental states divided across three broad forms of cultivation: the Three Realms of the Spirit Platform, Supreme Goodness Is Like Water, and Unity of Heaven and Man. The Three Realms of the Spirit Platform were fundamentally about breaking mental shackles. The player first escaped the control of raw emotion, then the restrictions imposed by common sense, and finally the limitations created by subjective feeling.

Supreme Goodness Is Like Water moved in another direction. Rather than breaking free from shackles, it emphasized following the heart. The appearance of the Ghost Path Soldier transformed this cultivation into a powerful means of mental attack because the cultivator could turn the movement of the heart itself into an external force.

Unity of Heaven and Man and Unity of Heaven and Man Thought had seemed comparatively simple when the four first encountered them. Their immediate use had been to reason through whether a person should conform to or resist the rules of the environment. But that interpretation was too narrow. The limitations affecting a player were not restricted to the written rules of an instance. They also included space, time, life and death, reincarnation, and even the boundary between being inside an instance and being outside it.

An orange grown south of the Huai River remained an orange there, but the same plant grown north of the river became a trifoliate orange. The difference was caused by space. A tadpole eventually became a frog, making the same existence behave differently across time. A spring silkworm could spin silk until its death, creating a limitation imposed by life and death. Flowers bloomed and withered in recurring cycles, showing the restriction of reincarnation. A person could lie within an instance and then step outside the instance where that same prohibition no

longer applied. Each was a different limitation, but the player's fundamental choices remained the same: comply or resist.

From that perspective, the real function of Unity of Heaven and Man was Spirit Vision. Before cultivating it, a player's thinking remained trapped within the point in time, place, life, death, reincarnation, and instance occupied by the player. At its highest level, the restriction itself could be stepped outside mentally. The player could look at an entire timeline or space rather than being confined to one point inside it. The people involved in the situation were naturally unable to see the entire structure because they were part of it, while an observer capable of stepping outside those restrictions could perceive the larger arrangement.

A separate observation broadened this deduction. When Chen Ran and Chen Yang activated their Second Realms, they captured a blurry Spirit Body that quickly dissipated, revealing that a Soldier could leave its host instead of remaining confined to the physical body. They then noticed that the True Self Players watching the battle across the River of Time also appeared as Spirit Bodies. This raised the possibility that those observers had also cultivated the Ghost Path Soldier, although their appearance alone could not prove that they all possessed the same system.

The four consequently compared the underlying functions of their respective cultivation systems. The Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm increased the limit of a person's Spirit, the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique could replenish Spirit rapidly, the Dao Heart Demonic Seed enabled possession, and the Ghost Path Soldier appeared to provide more fundamental control over Spirit rather than merely functioning as an unusual mental attack. The Ninth True Self Player's No-Distance, meanwhile, behaved more like an inner world. The remaining question was how the True Self Players could observe events occurring across the Eighteenth Floor without every individual needing to possess an independent projection skill.

A separate system capable of spiritual coverage provided a more plausible explanation. A cultivator using such a system could extend Spirit over a selected region, potentially covering the entire Eighteenth Floor and sensing the events occurring within it. This was the Outer World system, which Chen Ran attributed to Unity of Heaven and Man. The implication was that the highest level of Unity of Heaven and Man could provide area-wide spiritual perception, allowing its user to observe events beyond the immediate location of their physical body. This was related to Spirit Vision but added a more specific explanation for how a True Self Player could monitor a distant region without necessarily entering it in person.

That was why Chen Yang's transformation through Saint's Demonic Fall had increased the gap between him and the other three. His Spirit Vision had already moved beyond theirs. His earlier behavior had therefore been a demonstration of a higher level of Unity of Heaven and Man rather than simply a stronger method of psychological deception.

The order of cultivating the three systems consequently became clearer. The Three Realms of the Spirit Platform formed the foundation because without them the player remained trapped by emotions, common sense, and subjective feelings. Unity of Heaven and Man should come next

because it determined the scale at which the player could perceive and plan. Supreme Goodness Is Like Water came after that as a powerful supplementary system for mental attacks.

There was one exception.

If a player obtained the Ghost Path Soldier, Supreme Goodness Is Like Water immediately became far more valuable because the Soldier provided an unusually powerful form of mental offense. That was precisely why Ling Chi had been able to threaten the others despite lacking Chen Yang's Spirit Vision. His Soldier could attack on a level the others were not prepared to defend against. But because Ghost Path Soldier was a secret system that could not be openly taught throughout Hell, most players could not rely on it. For the vast majority, Unity of Heaven and Man remained the more important path after the foundational Three Realms.

This also explained why the Ninth True Self Player had been willing to reveal No-Distance without revealing every other True Self cultivation system. If Ghost Path Soldier were made universally available, then the advantage created by one person's mastery of it would disappear. The same would be true of the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique or any other specialized system. If every top player gained access to every True Self cultivation method, the distinction between the ordinary experts and the True Self Players would shrink into a simple difference in skill. That would destroy the balance of the Eighteenth Floor.

No-Distance itself was an exception because it was a remnant of the earlier war rather than a newly opened cultivation route.

This was why Chen Ran, Qiu Yinong, Lin Xuan, and Jiang Zhe could all reach a point where killing the Seven-Star Players became extremely difficult. Their numerical foundations were too similar and their basic mental cultivation had not created a decisive gap. At that level, Spirit Vision became the real separator. A player who could plan across time while the opponent remained trapped in the present possessed a structural advantage regardless of how close their ordinary mental strength was.

The principle then moved naturally back to the internal struggle.

Chen Ran, Ling Chi, and Zhang Fan had all been trying to solve the Secret Chamber from within it. Chen Yang had already begun treating the Secret Chamber as one event inside a much larger timeline. That difference in perspective explained why he could prepare the Ghost Path Soldier in the past, hide the evidence through timeline correction, and still arrive in the present with the system already cultivated.

The conflict had consequently moved beyond the four-person chamber.

The True Self Players watching from the River of Time began to notice the same danger. Chen Yang's speech about cooperating against the Ninth True Self Player was not merely a proposal to stop killing each other. It was a declaration that the four players had finally reached the point where the internal struggle itself might become less important than the conflict outside it.

The Cold-Faced Youth and the Saint stepped forward on the River of Time while the Omniscient, the Omnipotent, the Little Monk, the Confucian Scholar, and the Ninth True Self Player watched the Eighteenth Floor. Before the confrontation fully developed, the number and identity of the participants began changing. The Black Lotus in Han Fei's consciousness started spinning and released a tremendous mental fluctuation that penetrated the instance, passed through Hell, and reached the Eighteenth Floor. A blurred Spirit Body appeared beside the Cold-Faced Youth and the Saint. Although its strength was negligible compared with that of the Half-Step True Self Players, it seized the Black Lotus when it emerged from the Saint and absorbed it, refining it until its mental power condensed into a youth identical in appearance to Zhang Fan. This was not simply an additional observer: the newly formed figure had acquired a body capable of participating in the confrontation.

Another figure emerged from the space opened by the Death Row Inmate, manifesting as a Soldier with Ling Chi's face. It took its place beside the Cold-Faced Youth, the Saint, and the Zhang Fan-like figure, adding another participant whose existence was connected to Ling Chi's system. The balance changed again when the Little Taoist arrived from the Eternal Land and stood beside the Omniscient and Omnipotent, strengthening the opposing side. A Masked Woman subsequently appeared from downstream of the River of Time and stood beside the Eleventh Half-Step True Self Player. Those two initially remained observers, but they would later step forward and join the group containing the Cold-Faced Youth, the Saint, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi.

The moment the Cold-Faced Youth raised the Pure White Liar Killer, the balance that had existed among the spectators disappeared.

The gun fired, yet nothing happened to the Ninth True Self Player.

Instead, the Pure White Liar Killer in the Cold-Faced Youth's hand vanished.

The effect of Eternal Kingdom had targeted the Ninth True Self Player, yet the weapon carrying the technique had been erased as though the rule itself had turned back onto its owner. Nobody had seen such a phenomenon before.

The strange result immediately triggered an attack from everyone present. Ten No-Distances opened at once, each one different from the ordinary No-Distance used by players in the lower realms. Ten worlds of the heart descended simultaneously, overlapping, collapsing, and rebuilding themselves. Each side carefully controlled the range rather than trying to expand outward, because the objective was not to destroy the surrounding River of Time. They only wanted enough space to trap the opposing mental worlds inside the same battle.

For a moment, the side containing the Cold-Faced Youth, the Saint, Ling Chi, and Zhang Fan began losing ground. The two numerical monsters supporting the opposing side prevented an immediate collapse, but they could not crush the four instantly. That delay was enough for another figure to move.

Supreme Goodness Is Like Water stepped forward and looked toward the sealed Eighteenth Floor. Nobody present knew the complete details of his attack system. He reached out toward the Eighteenth Floor itself.

The sealed space shook.

It was only a momentary tremor, but the Eighteenth Floor appeared to have become slightly smaller.

Something then materialized in Supreme Goodness Is Like Water's hand.

A Liar Killer.

He used Whisperer · Sui Han · Gui Yuan, and the order of the rules immediately took hold. The Cold-Faced Youth, the Saint, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi were forced backward through time to the moment before the Cold-Faced Youth had fired Eternal Kingdom. The Pure White Liar Killer was once again resting at the Cold-Faced Youth's waist.

Supreme Goodness Is Like Water calmly told him that it was not time to return it yet.

The situation was interrupted by another attack. The Saint raised his hand and unleashed Radiant Three-Kills · Heavenly Emperor's Sword. The attack gathered the mental strength of countless players into a single sword. The peerless blade descended toward Supreme Goodness Is Like Water with enough force to make everyone watching instinctively tense.

Supreme Goodness Is Like Water simply withdrew his spirit and disappeared.

The attack was left for the Omniscient to contain with Chains of Rules, while the Little Monk covered the remaining force with Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. The sword and the chains were erased together, leaving the River of Time calm again.

Then the most powerful mental fluctuation of the battle appeared.

The Cold-Faced Youth's body slowly gave birth to another version of himself. The new figure had the same appearance but a noticeably calmer expression, creating a clear contrast between the two.

The spectators were not particularly concerned with the Cold-Faced Youth himself. The real problem was the Pure White Liar Killer at his waist.

That Liar Killer belonged to Chen Ran.

The Ninth True Self Player therefore had no choice. She drew her own Liar Killer, pointed it toward the Cold-Faced Youth, and used Whisperer · Dao Extreme · Wheel of Time.

The Cold-Faced Youth vanished.

Only the Pure White Liar Killer remained floating above the River of Time, yet nobody dared to pick it up.

The weapon still carried Chen Ran's ownership, and the special existence of Future Chen Ran made that ownership abnormal. It then shot downstream along the River of Time and disappeared, only to reappear again when the Ninth True Self Player used Sui Han · Gui Yuan.

The Cold-Faced Youth's mental body returned and slowly took hold of the weapon, and at that moment the balance could no longer be described as four against six.

The Eleventh Half-Step True Self Player and the Masked Woman stepped forward and joined the four.

Eleven people stood against one another.

Then all eleven released their strongest attacks simultaneously. The River of Time filled with separate worlds of the heart, each carrying its own rules, order, and conceptual structure. Rules collided with rules, order with order, and different mental worlds attempted to overwrite one another.

Amid that chaos, the Cold-Faced Youth once again raised the Pure White Liar Killer and pointed it toward the Ninth True Self Player.

Ling Chi had originally arranged the third round around a very simple calculation. He and Zhang Fan would use their newly developed Soldiers to deal with Chen Ran first, and once Chen Ran was removed, they would turn their attention toward Chen Yang. The trap inside the speaking order was supposed to force Chen Ran into an impossible choice: if he spoke, he risked being caught by the ambiguity surrounding Ling Chi's three speeches; if he refused to speak, the four of them could remain trapped until someone else created an opening. Zhang Fan therefore had enough time to continue his epiphany and finish mastering the first layer of the Ghost Path Soldier. From Ling Chi's perspective, this was already a sufficient advantage. Chen Ran might have been extraordinarily strong, but as long as he could neither speak safely nor obtain enough time to recover, the other three could eventually wear him down. The problem appeared only when Chen Ran revealed that his mental system had another layer hidden inside it.

A violent spiritual fluctuation suddenly emerged from Chen Ran's body while Zhang Fan was still attempting to stabilize his newly formed Soldier. Ling Chi and Chen Yang immediately activated their Second Realms, expecting to discover another attack from the outside, but what appeared instead was a figure struggling to emerge from within Chen Ran himself. Its body could not completely detach from Chen Ran's physical form, which initially relieved Ling Chi because it suggested that Chen Ran had not actually mastered the Ghost Path Soldier well enough to create an independent Soldier. That relief lasted only until the figure stretched its arm unnaturally into Zhang Fan's body and pulled something out. The scene changed at once inside their spiritual perception. An arena appeared around Chen Ran, and the figure standing inside it was another Chen Ran wearing enormous boxing gloves while Zhang Fan stood opposite him with a dull expression. The boxer raised his fist, shouted a ridiculous attack name, and struck

Zhang Fan hard enough to blow his spirit apart. Zhang Fan, whose eyes had been closed in the real world, immediately opened them, vomited, and felt his Spirit Body wither.

Ling Chi reacted before the others could. His Soldier rushed into the arena to attack the strange Chen Ran, but a referee appeared and tried to stop him, claiming authority over the battlefield. Ling Chi's Soldier killed the referee, and the instant the referee disappeared, the arena and the boxer vanished with him. The attack had already achieved its purpose. Ling Chi's Soldier returned to the actual Secret Chamber and stabbed Chen Ran directly, yet the spear only produced the sound of metal striking steel. Chen Ran's Ego Extreme Realm had already been activated. Even though the Spirit Body inside Chen Ran had not completely become an independent Soldier, the numerical reinforcement provided by the Extreme Realm was enough to make his physical defense extraordinarily difficult to penetrate. Ling Chi immediately realized that Chen Ran had deliberately allowed the attack to appear vulnerable and then switched forms the moment danger approached.

The strange Spirit Body emerged again before Ling Chi could continue his attack, but its form had changed completely. It now wore a sheep's head mask, possessed bronze-colored skin, and casually rolled a piece of dirt from its nose into a tiny ball before flicking it toward Ling Chi's Soldier. Ling Chi wanted to dodge, but he himself restrained the Soldier, allowing the attack to strike. Its appearance immediately changed into the cartoon character Mei Yang Yang, while the other Spirit Body transformed into the Big Bad Wolf. The wolf quickly built a small mechanical toy and sent it toward the sheep. The toy waved goodbye, after which Mei Yang Yang simply disappeared from the Secret Chamber. Ling Chi immediately sensed that his Soldier had not been killed in the ordinary sense. It had been expelled from the current Secret Chamber, then thrown through the second Secret Chamber of the instance, then through the first, continuing outward until Ling Chi used the cicada-shaped technique to pull it back. By the time it returned, Chen Yang was staring at the scene in confusion, Chen Ran wore a faint smile, and Zhang Fan's Spirit Body was already badly weakened.

Ling Chi finally understood the nature of the attack. Chen Ran had developed a crude version of the Ghost Path Soldier, and the mental state supporting it was Supreme Goodness Is Like Water: Joy. Under normal circumstances this Joy could be killed instantly by Ling Chi's own Soldier because Ling Chi's attainment in the actual Soldier technique was far superior. Chen Ran's advantage was not the sophistication of the technique itself. It came from the mental foundation supporting it. Supreme Goodness Is Like Water: Joy had already reached a level capable of fighting Yue Guanshan's Ghost Immortal state, while Zhang Fan's newly created Soldier was built from only one of the ten mental states he had assembled. The difference could therefore be compared to a martial artist wielding an imperfect technique while possessing overwhelming internal energy. A superior move did not automatically defeat a vastly stronger foundation. Ling Chi's Soldier could theoretically destroy Joy in an instant, yet Chen Ran had no reason to let the two clash directly. The moment Joy sensed danger, Chen Ran could shift into the Ego Extreme Realm, allowing the overwhelming statistics of that state to protect him.

The result put Ling Chi in an awkward position. He could keep his Soldier outside his body and force Chen Ran's Joy to remain hidden, allowing Zhang Fan to continue his epiphany without

fear of another ambush. The cost was continuous spiritual consumption on Ling Chi's side, while Zhang Fan had already suffered one direct attack from Joy and therefore could not safely withstand another forced breakthrough. Ling Chi also noticed something else. The violent spiritual fluctuation surrounding Chen Ran during the earlier attack had been enormous, suggesting that Joy itself had spent a substantial amount of spirit. Yet Chen Ran showed no obvious weakness afterward. That seemed impossible until Ling Chi remembered that Chen Ran's Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm had three forms: Joy, Half-Step Super-Self, and Ego Extreme Realm. If Joy had exhausted itself, that did not mean Chen Ran's entire system had been exhausted. Another form could remain on standby, with its own Spirit and statistical foundation untouched by what had just happened.

The realization changed Ling Chi's estimate of Chen Ran completely. The Chen Ran who had just displayed an overwhelming mental fluctuation was only one of the three forms. The other two could remain available while Joy spent its resources. That meant Chen Ran possessed something extremely rare inside the Secret Chamber: redundancy. Most players could only fight with the mental strength they currently had. Chen Ran could shift between different forms of the same system, allowing one to consume Spirit while another remained ready. His advantages in skill, statistics, and Military Form all pointed toward the same kind of combat. He did not need the opponent to give him a single perfect opening. He could simply force the battle to continue until one of his separate resources became decisive.

Ling Chi also realized that his earlier trap had therefore failed in a very specific way. He had successfully created a situation where Chen Ran dared not speak, but he had not created a situation where Chen Ran dared not wait. Chen Ran could remain inside the stalemate, recover through his unused forms, and continue attacking Zhang Fan whenever Zhang Fan tried to complete his cultivation. The speaking-order problem had not trapped him after all. It had merely prevented him from taking the most direct action. As long as waiting remained available, Chen Ran could continue grinding away at the other three.

Before Ling Chi could decide how to handle that problem, the atmosphere inside the Secret Chamber changed again. Nothing had been said, yet the spirits of the other three suddenly became extremely quiet. Ling Chi felt the same kind of danger one experiences when realizing a poisonous snake has been watching from nearby grass. He immediately activated his Second Realm. This time, the figure he detected was another Chen Yang standing beside the real one. The duplicate carried a strangely beautiful minimalist sniper rifle, and the three of them had never seen anything resembling it. Chen Yang's duplicate raised the rifle, announced the Seventh Heaven and Earth Sword, and fired a single bullet. The projectile itself looked absurd, possessing eyes, a mouth, and tiny hands, even pulling out a small sword while flying toward Ling Chi, yet the attack was genuine.

Ling Chi reacted immediately by sending a Spirit Body to intercept the projectile and teleporting it away. The bullet shattered the space into which it had been moved and continued its pursuit. It eventually slashed the Spirit Body apart before striking Ling Chi himself, at which point the Deep Abyss Maw emerged from within him and swallowed the projectile. A violent explosion occurred inside the maw, which then expelled smoke. The Secret Chamber became quiet again, but the

cost was obvious. Ling Chi's Spirit was weakened, Chen Yang's Spirit was weakened from launching the attack, and Zhang Fan had already been severely weakened by Joy. Chen Ran himself was left staring at the situation, apparently uncertain how Chen Yang had produced such an attack.

The most disturbing detail was that Chen Yang's Spirit was already recovering. His Spiritual Energy had been depleted during the attack, but the absorption speed provided by the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique was so high that the lost Spirit was steadily returning. The other three estimated that Chen Yang would need only about half an hour to return to his previous peak. In exchange for thirty minutes of recovery time, he had nearly crippled Ling Chi with a single strike. If the same exchange happened again, the advantage would accumulate. Ling Chi immediately recognized the real danger. Chen Yang could afford to trade Spirit at a rate that the others could not. Even if they somehow survived the first Heaven and Earth Sword, the second would arrive after another period of recovery, and then a third. The Secret Chamber could turn into a process where Ling Chi was gradually battered into incapacity while Chen Yang repeatedly recovered between attacks.

The only remaining question was how Chen Yang had obtained the Ghost Path Soldier. Ling Chi went back through everything that had happened on the Eighteenth Floor. From the perspective of the True Self Players, Chen Yang's pursuit of the Dao Heart Demonic Seed had always been a distraction. His actual objective was to increase his probability of winning the internal struggle. That meant obtaining another system was the obvious target, but the candidates were limited. Chen Ran's Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm was protected by the future version of Chen Ran. The other three systems did not provide enough reason to risk seizing them, while the Dao Heart Demonic Seed was too heavily guarded by the True Self Players. Chen Yang already knew No-Distance. The only remaining system that would dramatically increase his combat strength was the Ghost Path Soldier.

Ling Chi then reconstructed the exact operation. Chen Yang had used Zhang Fan's Imprint-derived abilities to return to the specific point in history when Ling Chi first comprehended the Ghost Path Soldier. He had used Empathy to obtain the system and then remained there. Because that point existed in the past, he could continue cultivating the system for an enormous period of time before returning to the current moment. In other words, Chen Yang had not merely copied the method and started learning it from the beginning. He had effectively borrowed the same span of historical cultivation time that Ling Chi himself had spent mastering the technique. Since Chen Yang also possessed the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique, the resulting Soldier could then receive an enormous statistical enhancement. The technique and the system amplified each other.

That also explained why Chen Yang had been hiding in the background instead of immediately attacking. He had no need to challenge Ling Chi head-on when he could wait until Ling Chi had already committed his own pieces. Ling Chi had spent his effort creating an arrangement that trapped Chen Ran; Chen Yang had watched that arrangement and used it as cover while waiting for the proper moment to cripple Ling Chi instead. The three other players finally understood the practical effect of the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique. Their

thoughts had originally existed within roughly the same range. They could outthink one another in specific moments, but nobody possessed enough distance from the others to simply dominate the entire struggle. Chen Yang's cognitive activity operated at a higher level. He could process and arrange information from a wider conceptual range, allowing him to prepare counters to plans that the others had only just begun constructing. Even if the three joined forces, they might still be unable to catch him.

The next scene moved into the past. Ling Chi was sitting beside an already-cleared instance, attempting to comprehend the Ghost Path Soldier at a deeper level. Yet he suddenly sensed something that did not fit. He had already cut off his Ego, so spontaneous intuition should have been nearly impossible for him. Nevertheless, he had now experienced the same strange sensation twice. When he checked his Liar Killer panel, there was no obvious indication that a skill had attacked him. He therefore considered the possibility that something had actually happened and then been corrected by the rules of time before the consequence could remain in the present.

The story then rewound to twenty seconds before the Secret Chamber. During the first ten seconds, Ling Chi opened his eyes and found Chen Yang standing nearby, smoking calmly against the wall. Chen Yang asked him why he did not use Heavenly Punishment and Earthly Destruction. Ling Chi was startled because he had not known Chen Yang was there, yet when he checked his panel he found that he had somehow acquired Empathy. Before he could act, the Whisperer of Space-Time Reincarnation and the Wheel of Time and Space rang through both their minds. The second ten-second segment unfolded differently. Ling Chi looked toward an empty wall and somehow sensed that somebody was about to appear there. A moment later Zhang Fan materialized. He immediately recognized the danger, but before he could react he was pulled into another space and the same Whisperer announced the correction. Ling Chi had witnessed two events that should never have existed in his history, and then the timeline erased them.

The truth was that Chen Yang and Zhang Fan had arrived in the past independently for the same purpose. Each wanted to use Empathy to seize the Ghost Path Soldier from the moment when Ling Chi first comprehended it. Neither knew that the other had conceived the same plan. Chen Yang, however, had one decisive advantage: because he had already Imprinted Zhang Fan's skills, he could predict that Zhang Fan would use Infinite Replication to send copies of himself into the same point in time. Zhang Fan had made his move without knowing that Chen Yang could follow him there. Chen Yang had therefore arrived second in terms of his own decision-making but first at the destination. Every one of Zhang Fan's replicas found itself blocked by another Chen Yang, with the corresponding skills sealed before the replicas could reach Ling Chi. Chen Yang described this as striking later but arriving first.

There was another purpose behind Chen Yang's intervention. He knew that Chen Ran was the player associated with the true timeline, and the presence of Empathy in the future meant that the past could not have genuinely contained a successful destruction of the skill. Chen Yang therefore intentionally warned Ling Chi about Empathy, hoping that Ling Chi would destroy it. If Empathy were destroyed in the past while continuing to exist in the future, the contradiction

would force the Ninth True Self Player to correct the timeline. That correction would erase the evidence that Chen Yang and Zhang Fan had visited the past. Zhang Fan's memory of Chen Yang possessing the Ghost Path Soldier would then disappear as well.

The Ghost Path Soldier itself could remain because it had become part of the result of the internal struggle. The correction was not supposed to decide the winner. The distinction could be understood through the example of a worker repairing wet concrete. If two children stepped into freshly laid concrete and the worker simply smoothed over the footprints, he was only restoring the floor within the scope of his job. He had not chosen which child should win the competition. If he repaired the floor and then dragged the children away to punish them for competing, he had entered the competition himself and changed its result. The Ninth True Self Player's intervention worked the same way. She could smooth away the temporal footprints left by Chen Yang and Zhang Fan, but erasing the Ghost Path Soldier that Chen Yang had obtained through their struggle would amount to deciding the outcome herself.

Once the temporal contradiction had been corrected, Chen Yang's Soldier returned to the present with an advantage the other three had not yet properly understood. He could prepare moves before Ling Chi had even decided how to respond. Ling Chi had treated his own pre-arranged trap as an advantage, but Chen Yang had already anticipated that approach. The problem was therefore not simply that Ling Chi had failed to predict one counterattack. His entire reasoning remained confined to the amount of information available in the present. He had learned one rule and naturally assumed that any later possibility outside that rule must be wrong. Chen Yang explicitly identified this as the flaw in his thinking: cognition itself was restricting what he was capable of considering.

Zhang Fan's problem was even clearer because his system should have given him the ability to think on a much larger scale. Chen Yang could not understand how someone with an ability close to Lesser Omnipotence could still remain tied so tightly to the present. During his own exploration of the Eighteenth Floor, Chen Yang had searched across the entire range of time and space and had never found an earlier version of Zhang Fan using the Dao Heart Demonic Seed to secure the true timeline. The implication was that Zhang Fan had not even attempted the strategy because he was afraid of being sealed by the True Self Players in advance. His fear had become a cognitive limitation. He was still thinking from the perspective of someone trapped inside the current situation instead of the perspective of someone who could manipulate the past and future as parts of the same board.

Chen Yang then turned his attention to Chen Ran, and his criticism was different again. Chen Ran knew the future version of himself was abnormal, but instead of treating Future Chen Ran as an opponent who might need to be confronted, he was allowing that future existence to become a restraint on his current actions. Chen Yang told him that the future version of Chen Ran could not simply be treated as an inevitable superior self. If the two were genuinely competing over the same position on the timeline, then the current Chen Ran had to be willing to make the future version his enemy. Hiding his danger level would also be counterproductive. The more obvious the possibility of Chen Ran causing a catastrophic result became, the more seriously other people would be forced to treat him. A weapon that everyone knew could

explode was harder to approach than one whose existence remained uncertain. Chen Yang therefore urged Chen Ran to make the danger attached to his identity visible rather than attempting to hide it.

After targeting all three weaknesses, Chen Yang finally stated the reason for revealing so much information. He could have killed them, but the internal struggle was taking place under time pressure, and continuing to fight each other only benefited the players who were already controlling the larger situation. From Chen Yang's perspective, the Ninth True Self Player was the more dangerous enemy than the Omniscient and Omnipotent. The latter wanted to kill them but was still constrained by the rules and by the surrounding True Self Players. The Ninth True Self Player was different because she controlled the Fate Layer and therefore controlled the structure of the destiny they were all trapped inside. If the four of them continued killing one another, they would simply become the pieces that fulfilled someone else's predetermined arrangement. Chen Yang's conclusion was that the internal struggle had already served its useful purpose. They had all exposed enough of their systems to understand the relative strengths involved, and continuing to fight inside the Secret Chamber was no longer necessary.

The suggestion immediately created three different reactions. Zhang Fan suspected that Chen Yang was still trying to obtain the Dao Heart Demonic Seed. Ling Chi noticed that Chen Yang's Spirit had secretly recovered by more than half despite the massive expenditure of the previous attack. Chen Ran, meanwhile, focused on the claim that great scholars would naturally debate his existence if his danger coefficient became high enough. Yet beneath those personal doubts, all three recognized that Chen Yang's basic argument was sound. If the four continued attacking one another, three of them would probably die while the fourth would still have to face the True Self Players afterward. Joining forces against the external threat was therefore the more rational choice even though none of the three trusted Chen Yang.

Time arrives at a certain point in the future, and the Eighteenth Floor appears completely different from the place everyone has known. There are no players walking through the streets, no Death Row Inmates, no buildings, and no ordinary signs of life. Everything has become an endless white expanse, yet if the perspective pulls farther away, the structure of the place becomes visible again. In the middle of that white world sits a throne, and upon the throne is a young man who has been left there alone. The description of him as eternity and loneliness is not only atmospheric. His entire existence has effectively become an endless continuation without meaningful change. He sits there, raises the Liar Killer, says a command, fires, and repeats the same process. He has already given birth to an inner demon because he remains at Nine-Star and has not yet reached Ten-Star or the True Self, meaning that he cannot escape the erosion produced by the inner demon. As time continues to pass, that inner demon becomes stronger and increasingly distorts his personality. He knows that he is approaching destruction and can only continue living by consuming Spirit, but the problem is no longer whether he can physically survive. The inner demon has begun attacking the meaning of survival itself. He wants to prove that he is still alive precisely because he no longer understands why he should keep living.

The fact that he repeatedly reviews his own past gives the scene another layer. He does not conclude that everything he did was wrong. His conclusion is much more specific: the result was right, but the process was wrong, and because the process was wrong, the final outcome was also wrong. This is the kind of distinction that matters enormously to someone trapped inside a temporal structure. If the final result alone were incorrect, he would only need to change the final decision. But if the process itself contained the fundamental mistake, then repeating the same decision through the same chain of events would inevitably reproduce the same ending. The inner demon therefore becomes more than an enemy consuming his Spirit. It becomes the mechanism that gives him an opportunity to revisit the entire chain. He understands the principle of “two negatives make a positive” and deliberately waits for the inner demon to reach the point where it can seize his Reason. That may sound self-destructive, but he has already calculated that allowing the inner demon to completely overwhelm him is the condition that permits another choice. He is therefore intentionally allowing himself to approach the point of collapse.

Eventually, the opportunity arrives. A woman appears and asks him whether he regrets what happened. His immediate reaction is hostility because his current state makes him view an unexpected visitor as a threat. He uses his Spirit to seize her and pulls her in front of the throne. The woman is visibly shocked by the amount of power he possesses despite only being Nine-Star. He explains that the people who trapped him here believed that he could do nothing except wait for death, but during the years of his imprisonment he has cultivated the Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm to the Eighth-Turn. That is enough to explain why an ordinary Nine-Star Player would be so dangerous, but the more important point is that the woman notices how heavily the inner demon has already eroded him. His current power cannot be separated from his mental state. Had he not been this deeply consumed, he probably would not have allowed her to enter this layer in the first place or given her enough room to negotiate with him.

She tells him that this layer is called [Future], and that she can give him another opportunity to choose. The young man immediately asks whether the choice is between himself and the other version of himself, and her response—that they are the same person—goes straight to the heart of the temporal problem. Another time traveler then appears, and the person standing before him looks exactly like the young man himself. This creates an obvious opportunity for Possession. The person across from him possesses a human body while the woman who brought him here is only a spiritual body that can be discarded, so from a purely practical perspective the young man would naturally prefer to seize the human version of himself. But his own condition prevents him from doing so. The other version is controlled by someone else, and the more important problem is his inner demon. He already knows exactly how severe it has become, estimating it at roughly eight times that of an ordinary Half-Step True Self Player. If he took that condition outside, he would not simply gain a body and continue his plan. The Eighteenth Floor would turn into a bloodbath, and the resulting situation could trap him inside the [Samsara Layer]. The distinction matters because he is not refusing Possession out of morality or hesitation. He is refusing because he has enough self-knowledge to recognize that his own current state is an uncontrollable weapon.

The conversation then turns toward the timing of the second choice. He asks when the re-selection will happen, and she answers, “The node.” That immediately causes him to examine the Liar Killer in his hand. There is only one. If the node produces a new choice, then his current Liar Killer should disappear. The implication is enormous because the weapon itself becomes evidence of the temporal structure. There are not two independently generated Eternal Kingdom Liar Killers. The object has a single existence that moves through different points in time. The young man across from him understands the same thing, which is why he does not object when the weapon is thrown toward him. Normally, a Liar Killer can only be touched by its owner and would reject anyone else. Yet this version of himself catches it and places it at his waist without being repelled. The only reason this can happen is because the two versions are connected through the same weapon and the temporal arrangement permits the transfer.

The two instructions they exchange are therefore extremely precise. One tells the other to remember to return it, while the other is told to remember to borrow it. Nothing more complicated is required. The existence of the weapon at one point in time establishes the reason it exists at the other point. The woman understands what has just been created and remarks that nobody in Hell understands time loops better than she does. But the young man on the throne suddenly begins to lose control again. His expression changes, his body is consumed by pain, and he forces out the command for them to leave. The two visitors immediately flee. Remaining in front of someone whose inner demon has reached this state would be equivalent to waiting for the entire Future Layer to be destroyed.

After they disappear, the young man finally releases the pressure he has been suppressing. His Spirit tears through the Eighteenth Floor and he begins laughing because he knows that he has obtained another opportunity. He repeatedly reminds himself to be more careful this time. He wants to fight slowly, avoid repeating his earlier mistakes, and deceive everyone before they can plot against him again. The important part is the way he connects his survival to the Liar Killer. He shouts toward Chen Ran and asks whether Chen Ran has noticed the clue his future self has left behind. That clue is the only Liar Killer in Hell. Its importance is not that it is inherently unique as a weapon type, but that its existence at the present point proves something happened in the future that should have been impossible if the original certain-death outcome had remained unchanged. The future version has effectively left physical evidence in the present that another result is possible.

The young man understands the danger of dying before that clue can function. If he dies in the Future Layer, the chain that produces the clue can collapse with him. That is why he desperately repeats that he cannot die yet. His earlier failure was being plotted against before reaching the True Self, but someone has now abused space-time and given him another chance to correct the process. His response is to deliberately slow down. He no longer wants to reveal everything immediately. He wants to watch the other participants fight, learn from their behavior, and use the additional information to construct a more careful route toward the result he wants.

The two people who escaped the Future Layer eventually return to their own timelines, still shaken by the Eighth-Turn Ghost God mental state they have witnessed. One of them asks for

the cultivation method of the Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm. The young man who now possesses the Liar Killer refuses to respond and begins leaving. When the woman threatens to change his fate, he simply raises the Liar Killer toward the sky and asks whether she no longer wants her own timeline. The threat works because it contains no need for explanation. If he possesses knowledge of how a timeline can be changed, then threatening to alter hers turns the entire concept of fate against her. She can interfere with his fate, but he can also potentially make her own timeline the object of retaliation. His indifference is precisely what makes the threat effective.

Back inside the Internal Strife Secret Chamber, Chen Ran, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi begin examining Chen Yang's proposed escape route. Their first obstacle is identifying the true-timeline player. Once that person is determined, the remaining three can use the Dao Heart Demonic Seed to remain on the true timeline rather than being sent back into the timelines controlled by the Ninth True Self Player. Obtaining the cultivation method is not considered especially difficult because Zhang Fan would have an obvious reason to cooperate. If giving up the Mind Cultivation Method for the Dao Heart Demonic Seed gives him a chance to remain permanently outside Ninth's control, refusing would be difficult to justify. The difficult part is what happens after the method is obtained.

One possibility is for the three alternate-timeline players to plant a Black Lotus into the consciousness of the true-timeline player. The true-timeline player would then carry the three Dao Heart Demonic Seeds while clearing the Secret Chamber and the instance. Once the process reaches the true timeline, those three Black Lotuses could be used to possess players there. The flaw is that the three people who planted the Black Lotuses must die in order for the true-timeline player to complete the instance. That creates a trust problem that cannot be solved by simply promising not to betray them. Once the three are dead, the survivor has complete control over whether their Black Lotuses remain. If that person changes his mind and destroys the three Black Lotuses afterward, then the sacrifice becomes meaningless. The entire plan depends on one person voluntarily preserving the means by which the other three can escape after they no longer possess the ability to force him to cooperate.

The second possibility is to remove Future Chen Ran's prohibition from the Secret Chamber. The problem immediately extends beyond the four people inside. Future Chen Ran might be willing to remove the seal, but the other True Self Players watching the battle would not permit him to do so freely. Once he attempted to retract the Eternal Kingdom's prohibition, the spectators would have to divide themselves into opposing factions. Chen Ran, Ling Chi, Zhang Fan, and Chen Yang have an obvious reason to cooperate because all four are trapped by the same system. Chen Yang is the person who proposed the plan, and the Chen Yang belonging to the true timeline should naturally support an operation that allows his current version to escape. The other six True Self Players have different interests and therefore become the opposing faction, resulting in the 4v6 division that Chen Yang has already begun to manipulate simply through his Spirit Vision.

The fact that a few sentences from a Five-Star Chen Yang can potentially initiate a conflict among Ten-Star Half-Step True Self Players is itself evidence of how much his Spirit Vision has

changed the scale at which he thinks. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi are forced to consider that a battle may already have begun on the River of Time. If such a battle has broken out, then the four-person faction must possess some method of eventually realizing its plan. The chance that matters is the chance for the three alternate-timeline players to remain on the true timeline. Once they cross onto that timeline, the Ninth True Self Player can no longer alter the past to manipulate them in the same way, because on the true timeline the past cannot be changed.

But escaping the created timelines does not mean escaping the True Self Players. Future Chen Ran must lift the prohibition, and the opposing six will obviously monitor him. Even Ultimate Sublimation of Eternal Kingdom does not solve the problem by itself because its abilities are overwhelmingly strong in terms of prohibition but do not give Future Chen Ran the ability to travel through space-time. If the opposing True Self Players teleport him somewhere else, he cannot simply follow them by using Causality Teleportation because he does not possess that effect. He would need to prohibit the entire River of Time or accept that he can no longer meaningfully participate in the conflict.

The problem becomes even worse once Chen Ran's identity as the true-timeline player is considered. If Chen Ran is the true version, then Future Chen Ran exists on the timeline created by Ninth. Ninth controls that timeline and can alter its past. Therefore Future Chen Ran does not possess the same freedom as an independent True Self Player. During an external battle, especially one where Ninth herself belongs to the opposing side, he must be extremely careful about what he does. If he uses a skill that produces an unfavorable result, Ninth can simply alter the history of the timeline around him and change the person who eventually becomes Future Chen Ran. His own existence becomes one of the things she can manipulate.

This is why the possibility of using the Andersen Fairy Tale Squad becomes so important. Once the three alternate-timeline players successfully remain on the true timeline, they will still have to survive the pursuit of the other True Self Players. Their best solution is to possess members of the Andersen Fairy Tale Squad and use An Sheng's Absolute Defense. The problem is that these members are all Nine-Star Superego Players. Possession is not automatically successful. Their Spirit first has to be exhausted to the point where the invading consciousness can take control without being killed in return. That requirement is manageable because Zhang Fan, Chen Yang, and Ling Chi each possess systems capable of producing enormous amounts of pressure. Zhang Fan and Chen Yang have complicated combinations of abilities, while Ling Chi's Jie Mie can directly nullify the skills of the Andersen Squad. Any three of the four should therefore be capable of exhausting an individual member sufficiently.

The entire escape plan seems to converge on the question of Eternal Kingdom. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi realize that Chen Yang has been pointing toward something even more basic: can one Eternal Kingdom prohibit another Eternal Kingdom? Chen Ran's current Eternal Kingdom has not undergone Ultimate Sublimation, meaning that using it would impose its effects across a large region rather than simply functioning as a precise countermeasure. If the Secret Chamber itself was created by a skill and is adjacent to the Eighteenth Floor, then activating Eternal Kingdom could potentially affect the surrounding Eighteenth Floor as well. Therefore even if

Chen Ran had the theoretical ability to remove Future Chen Ran's prohibition, he could not freely use that option without risking damage to the larger structure.

That is why Chen Yang turns their attention toward time itself. Chen Ran's Eternal Kingdom is the “One” among the ten True Self Skills. There should only be one. The weapon at Chen Ran's waist is that Eternal Kingdom, and it exists on the true timeline. Yet Future Chen Ran also has an Eternal Kingdom. Chen Ran has already tried to think through this contradiction himself and failed. The fact that his Extreme Realm cannot solve it is meaningful. There is an Internal Conflict Factor involved because the subjective perceptions of the people participating in the temporal structure are inconsistent with objective reality. Chen Ran can construct deductions from the information available to him, but if several observers each possess a different relationship to the same object in time, their perspectives can produce conclusions that contradict one another even while every individual statement remains internally coherent.

The Young Man on the Throne has effectively left this problem for Chen Ran to discover. The existence of the second Eternal Kingdom is the clue. Chen Yang, however, has already seen the same contradiction and solved it from the perspective of a broader temporal structure. His reasoning begins with the fact that the Chen Ran created by Ninth does not have Eternal Kingdom. The second axiom is that Eternal Kingdom is unique. There is only one. The weapon at Chen Ran's waist is therefore the only Eternal Kingdom that can genuinely exist on the true timeline. Yet Future Chen Ran possesses one. If both facts are correct, then the simplest explanation is also the only one that does not require a second copy to exist: the Eternal Kingdom carried by Future Chen Ran is the same Liar Killer currently carried by Chen Ran.

The temporal exchange seen in the Future Layer provides the missing precedent. The young man sitting on the throne had already realized that there was only one Liar Killer. When the node arrived, the weapon in his possession would disappear if a new choice replaced his current state. He therefore handed the Liar Killer to another version of himself and explicitly established the relationship as borrowing and returning. The same principle applies here. Future Chen Ran does not possess another Eternal Kingdom created from scratch. The future Chen Ran on the true timeline eventually lends the Liar Killer to the Future Chen Ran belonging to the timeline created by Ninth. Ninth and Future Chen Ran therefore travel into the future, encounter the later version of Chen Ran, and borrow his Liar Killer.

This immediately creates the connection to the certain-death future. For the future version of Chen Ran to lend Eternal Kingdom to Future Chen Ran, there must be a reason. The most obvious reason is that the future Chen Ran of the true timeline has already reached a state in which the ending prepared for him by the Omniscient and Omnipotent is effectively certain death. Chen Yang connects this to Mo Xi's line. If the Omniscient and Omnipotent possess a trump card capable of producing Chen Ran's certain death, then using that trump card immediately would normally make sense if they wanted to secure the result. The only reason it would become expendable is if evidence from the future shows that the supposedly certain ending can eventually be deciphered.

That is exactly what the borrowed Eternal Kingdom provides. The existence of the Liar Killer in the present proves that the future version of Chen Ran must eventually have lent it to Future Chen Ran. The weapon becomes the physical clue that a different future is possible. Once that clue exists on the true timeline, the Omniscient and Omnipotent can infer that their certain-death arrangement will eventually be broken. Mo Xi therefore loses much of its value as a trump card. Instead of being an unavoidable final move, it becomes something they can afford to expend in the current instance because the future already contains the evidence that it will not remain decisive forever.

Three parties consequently benefit from the same temporal exchange. The future Chen Ran belonging to the true timeline receives another opportunity to escape his certain-death ending. Future Chen Ran receives Eternal Kingdom and can use it to construct the Absolute Defense on the River of Time. Ninth retains control over Future Chen Ran because the future version still exists on her created timeline. None of these benefits require two independent Eternal Kingdoms. One weapon is simply being used by different versions at different points along its temporal path.

The contradiction appears when Chen Ran asks what happens after that future has been changed. If the certain-death future is successfully avoided, then the future Chen Ran who was supposed to die in that future should cease to exist in the original form. If he no longer exists, then there should be nobody there to lend the Liar Killer to Future Chen Ran. If nobody lends the weapon, then Future Chen Ran cannot possess Eternal Kingdom, meaning the future cannot be corrected in the way that allowed the Liar Killer to be lent in the first place. The cause seems to disappear as soon as the effect occurs.

The answer is the closed loop itself. The future Chen Ran will lend the Liar Killer precisely because he is the future Chen Ran. The existence of the later event is already part of the history that leads to the present weapon. When the true timeline progresses forward, Chen Ran eventually reaches the future. At that future point, the Liar Killer at his waist is the same weapon that existed in the present. He lends it to the Future Chen Ran who traveled there, and that Future Chen Ran then carries the weapon back to an earlier point. From the perspective of the present, the weapon simply appears to coexist with another version of itself, but from the perspective of the River of Time there is only one continuous object.

That also answers the question of why the past cannot be changed. Future Chen Ran confirms the present by carrying the weapon backward from the future. Once the weapon has reached the past, its existence is already part of the history through which the future eventually occurs. Chen Ran does not need to create a second Eternal Kingdom. His future self is already the person who will eventually lend the same weapon. The temporal loop sustains itself because the present is already part of the future's history.

Chen Ran then raises the only apparent escape route: what if his future self refuses to lend it? Chen Yang points out that Ninth does not actually need to force him directly. Her timeline was created from the true timeline, and Future Chen Ran's existence depends upon that relationship. If Chen Ran becomes strong and deliberately ignores Future Chen Ran, then the

Future Chen Ran created by Ninth risks disappearing because the history that produced him has diverged. Ninth would therefore have to alter Future Chen Ran's past to make his development correspond to Chen Ran's path again. This changes the relationship between the two sides. When Chen Ran is weak, he is the passive party while Ninth is the active party who determines how the timeline is arranged. When Chen Ran becomes strong enough, he becomes the active party because his choices force Ninth to react in order to preserve the Future Chen Ran she relies upon.

The question of whether to lend Eternal Kingdom therefore becomes secondary. Regardless of which choice Chen Ran makes, the future must eventually find a way to rationalize itself around that choice. If he refuses to lend Eternal Kingdom, Future Chen Ran loses the Absolute Defense. Ninth and Chen Yang might then have to construct another Absolute Defense using different True Self Players, or they might abandon the construction and hide instead. Without the protection of that Absolute Defense, however, the future Chen Ran's survival becomes far less secure. The pressure of that future ensures that Chen Ran will eventually lend the weapon. There is no independent future in which the future version simply refuses and then continues normally, because the refusal itself would create a future in which the necessary Absolute Defense never appears and Chen Ran eventually dies.

This is why the true node is not the meeting with Future Chen Ran and not the decision to lend Eternal Kingdom. Those events are already structurally locked into the temporal loop. The variable that actually matters is how long Chen Ran allows his Eternal Kingdom to remain in the hands of Future Chen Ran. The moment he recalls the weapon is the moment the Absolute Defense protecting the three people on the River of Time collapses. That is the point where Chen Ran actually possesses freedom to influence the structure instead of merely being one of the pieces required to make it function.

The absurdity of Chen Ran's situation becomes apparent even to Zhang Fan and Ling Chi. The Omniscient and Omnipotent have prepared a certain-death instance specifically around him. Ninth has manipulated his future and eventually takes his Liar Killer into another point in time. Unity of Heaven and Man has blocked his route toward the Eternal Land. Yet these are only the problems that have already been successfully deduced. Chen Ran himself gives no indication that he intends to complain about any of this. He lights another cigarette, takes a long drag, and shows Chen Yang a smile as though he is simply asking what the next problem is.

Chen Yang then returns to the Secret Chamber itself. If he had never proposed joining forces, he asks, what would the four people have done? The answer is that they would have remained trapped. Nobody currently dares to speak, and without another method of changing the situation, the four would simply consume their resources until all of them died. The rules look simple because one death is theoretically enough to determine the winner, but the presence of Ling Chi's Soldier destroys the normal progression of the game. Once the Soldier becomes involved, the safest choice for everyone is to stop speaking. As long as the four remain locked in that state, the game cannot reach the final judgment. The four eventually exhaust themselves instead of producing a winner.

Chen Ran realizes that this is the real death trap. The game has a fatal factor built into the process of the infighting just as human beings have a fixed limitation in the form of lifespan. Players can struggle against one another, but if the struggle inevitably activates a mechanism that forces all four into a state of mutual stagnation, then fighting itself becomes the cause of death. That mechanism is Ling Chi's Soldier. Chen Ran's Extreme Realm makes him particularly vulnerable to this kind of design because his normal method is to start by reconstructing the rules. He grants Spirit Vision to the other three, they understand the structure more deeply, and Ling Chi eventually reveals the Soldier. Once the Soldier appears, the result of the earlier deductions naturally leads to nobody daring to speak.

This means their earlier struggle was already part of the calculation made by the Omniscient and Omnipotent. Their attempts to fight over momentum and luck, the efforts to determine who belonged to the true timeline, the pressure placed upon Future Chen Ran, Chen Ran's Extreme Realm, and Ling Chi's decision to externalize the Soldier all fit into a single chain. None of them had realized that the very strengths they were using to escape the situation were also being used to drive them deeper into the trap.

There is one exception, being Chen Yang.

The three stare at him because the obvious question is why he was not calculated in exactly the same way. His Soldier raises two fingers in a peace sign and explains the reason: the Omniscient and Omnipotent cannot spy on his past, cannot spy on his future, and cannot change him. Even after he created the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique, they still cannot properly know what he is thinking, reflect his thoughts, or predict his actions. This is why Ninth sent him into the Secret Chamber. She could not simply construct his future in the same way she had constructed the others.

Chen Yang's next deduction follows directly from that immunity. He has already spoken about a large number of secrets and is still sitting here alive. If Ninth possessed complete control over the situation, the act of revealing those secrets should itself have allowed her to erase him or correct the timeline around him. She has not done so. Therefore, the Secret Chamber in which all four are now standing must be located on the true timeline. On the true timeline, the past cannot be changed in the same manner as the alternate timelines created by Ninth. Chen Yang calls this Causality and Rule Spirit Vision because the important distinction is not merely that he can see farther. He can identify how the causal rules governing the different timelines restrict the actions of the people within them.

He then turns the observation into the deeper principle behind the entire Secret Chamber. The most important conclusion is not that Future Chen Ran can potentially release the prohibition or that one Eternal Kingdom can interact with another. The important fact is that whenever these four people appear inside this particular Secret Chamber, the natural outcome is that all four are worn down to death. Their talents are precisely what make that outcome inevitable. The better Chen Ran understands the rules, the more effectively he exposes the Soldier. The more effectively Ling Chi uses the Soldier, the less willing everyone becomes to speak. Zhang Fan's complicated system makes him capable of using enormous numbers of skills, but when the

game reaches the speaking deadlock, those skills cannot be freely deployed. Chen Yang's existence is the only major variable the original arrangement cannot properly calculate.

He then introduces the theory that a king does not meet another king.

The principle is straightforward. A king can meet a marquis, an earl, or a viscount because there is a clear difference in authority. One side possesses enough superiority that the confrontation does not necessarily result in mutual destruction. But if two kings of equal level meet directly, neither can simply overwhelm the other. If both are genuinely capable of carrying out their respective plans, then the confrontation itself creates a situation in which both can die. The theory is therefore not merely saying that powerful people avoid one another. It is describing a structural consequence of equal authority.

That becomes important when applied to the River of Time. If there is already a battle between two groups of True Self Players, then the existence of the battle itself indicates that one of the two sides believes its plan can be realized. Otherwise there would be no reason for equally powerful existences to expose themselves to mutual destruction. If one side has the confidence to execute its plan, then the four people inside the Secret Chamber can regard themselves as the passive party. They do not necessarily need to force an opening themselves. They can wait for the active side to make the move that changes the conditions around them.

There is an immediate practical problem. Nobody dares to speak, which means the only person among the four who can currently activate skills without saying anything is Zhang Fan. His passive ability [Mind Follows Will] allows him to operate his skills directly through thought. If the prohibition on the Secret Chamber is eventually removed and Zhang Fan is therefore the only one capable of acting immediately, he could potentially escape while the other three remain trapped. The other three obviously cannot accept such a result. The issue is not even that Zhang Fan is stronger. It is that he would possess an asymmetrical ability to take advantage of the exact opening they are all waiting for.

Chen Yang therefore turns this structural inequality against him. His Soldier asks whether they should kill Zhang Fan now, or kill Zhang Fan now. The wording is deliberately shameless because Zhang Fan has very few options. Chen Yang wants the cultivation method for the Dao Heart Demonic Seed. If Zhang Fan refuses, he can be killed inside the Secret Chamber. If he agrees, he has a way to preserve his consciousness through the Black Lotus arrangement and potentially escape Ninth's control. Zhang Fan therefore receives an offer that is technically a choice but functionally an extortion.

His situation is even worse because Chen Ran had already damaged his Spirit and Zhang Fan has not fully mastered the Ghost Path Soldier. He cannot use No-Distance, cannot use his own Soldier as a mouthpiece, and therefore cannot even freely explain what he intends to do. The result is an intentionally ridiculous image of Zhang Fan looking around anxiously while the other three pretend not to notice because everyone knows exactly what he wants to say. Eventually he can only make a helpless gesture, effectively surrendering to Chen Yang's demand.

The pressure then shifts to Ling Chi. Chen Yang openly tells him what would happen if Zhang Fan escaped without him. Zhang Fan could allow Chen Yang to Imprint his skills, and Chen Yang could then use those abilities to send Ling Chi directly in front of several Superego Players from the Underworld. Ling Chi would be subjected to mental attacks and would likely die. Chen Yang strengthens the threat by revealing that he previously encountered Yanluo while conquering the Eighteenth Floor, and Yanluo addressed him as “Lord.” The obvious implication is that the members of the Underworld listen to Chen Yang. This makes the threat much more than a generic statement that Chen Yang knows powerful people. He is telling Ling Chi that there is an entire structure outside the Secret Chamber that he can use to eliminate him.

The threat is especially strange because Chen Yang has already acquired the Ghost Path Soldier. Ling Chi's greatest unique advantage has therefore been reduced. Chen Ran was the only one of the four who originally lacked that system, while Chen Yang has now obtained it through his temporal manipulation. That should mean that Ling Chi's value to Chen Yang has sharply decreased. From a purely strategic perspective, there is no obvious reason for Chen Yang to announce that he intends to preserve Ling Chi. In fact, if Chen Yang were simply trying to maximize his own odds, allowing Zhang Fan to escape and then eliminating Ling Chi would be a perfectly reasonable route.

Chen Yang has already shown that his stated objective can be a decoy. He spent the earlier conflict behaving as though obtaining the Dao Heart Demonic Seed and remaining on the true timeline were the central purpose of his actions, while the actual objective turned out to be the Ghost Path Soldier. Now he openly demands Zhang Fan's cultivation method and threatens Ling Chi with the Underworld, yet he simultaneously argues that the four should cooperate. His actions are not contradictory because all three things can serve a larger plan, but the other players still lack enough information to determine what that larger plan is.

Chen Ran, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi therefore had found themselves in the strange position of having to depend upon a person who has repeatedly demonstrated that he is willing to manipulate them while also being the only person who has remained outside the predictive structure imposed by the Omniscient, Omnipotent, and Ninth. Every attempt to fight him directly risks falling into another one of his preparations, while refusing to cooperate leaves them trapped inside a Secret Chamber whose rules naturally grind all four of them toward death.

Zhang Fan considered the situation and concluded that handing over the cultivation method for the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] might actually be the safest choice available to him. If Chen Yang was telling the truth about the possibility of escaping the Secret Chamber, then cooperating would allow Zhang Fan to preserve his position until the restrictions were lifted, while refusing would only encourage the other two to eliminate him before he could escape. Even if Chen Yang was lying and the blockade could not be lifted, the four of them would eventually exhaust their Spirits and die inside the Secret Chamber anyway, meaning that withholding the cultivation method would accomplish nothing. Zhang Fan therefore extended his consciousness toward the other three, allowing strands of mental energy resembling fine hairs to spread from his body and enter their consciousnesses. Chen Yang and Ling Chi accepted the connection, and the strands immediately transformed into Zhang Fan's likenesses within their

minds, transmitting the cultivation method of the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] directly to them. When the same strands reached Chen Ran, however, they were instantly annihilated before they could invade his consciousness, indicating that Chen Ran had deliberately rejected the transmission rather than simply failing to receive it.

The three looked toward Chen Ran, who continued smoking with his chin raised at an exaggerated angle, showing no intention of explaining himself. Chen Yang was particularly confused because learning the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] should have provided Chen Ran with several methods of protecting himself against the Ninth True Self Player. Since Ninth had created numerous alternate timelines, Chen Ran could potentially use the technique to possess players existing on those timelines and establish a presence within the very structure that Ninth controlled. With Future Chen Ran already operating on one of those timelines, he would also have a powerful ally who could help him exploit the connection between the alternate timelines and the true timeline. Even if Chen Ran encountered a life-or-death crisis in the future, possession would provide him with another means of preserving his existence by transferring his consciousness into someone else's body. From Chen Yang's perspective, refusing such a versatile technique made little sense, especially when Chen Ran had already been placed in a position where his survival depended upon understanding the same rules that governed the other True Self Players.

Chen Ran eventually raised one finger, reminding the others of his status as [One], and the three immediately understood the distinction that had prevented him from accepting the technique. The [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] could allow Chen Ran to possess another person, but the body he occupied would not automatically possess the Liar Killer known as Eternal Kingdom. His identity as [One] was inseparable from that weapon, so learning the technique too early could force him into a situation where preserving his consciousness came at the cost of losing control over the ability that defined his place among the True Self Players. The danger extended beyond the immediate loss of Eternal Kingdom because Ninth would have a reason to manipulate Chen Ran's possession from the beginning. If Chen Ran learned the technique, Ninth could force him to possess another player and then trap his Main Body on one of the layers of the Eighteenth Floor, ensuring that the Liar Killer held by his Main Body remained available for Future Chen Ran to borrow. Through that arrangement, Ninth could effectively maintain control over two True Self-level Liar Killers rather than allowing Chen Ran to use Eternal Kingdom independently against her.

The reasoning resembled Liu Bei borrowing Jingzhou, because an arrangement that initially appeared to provide an advantage could eventually become the means through which the other party controlled the situation. Chen Ran might gain the ability to invade Ninth's alternate timelines and survive through possession, but those benefits would also give Ninth an opportunity to determine where his Main Body remained and who could access Eternal Kingdom. The same principle could be seen in the comparison with Wu Zetian, whose decision to declare herself emperor caused the forces that had supported her to collapse, leaving her dependent upon another arrangement to rebuild her external political influence. In both cases, a seemingly small decision changed the relationships on which a person's existing power depended, and the resulting consequences could not simply be reversed after the decision had

been made. Chen Ran therefore could not evaluate the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] solely according to its immediate benefits, because learning it too early could make Ninth his direct enemy and force him into a situation where he lost the very advantage that made him difficult to control. His refusal was consequently a calculated decision to preserve the existing structure of his power rather than an unwillingness to acquire another system.

Chen Yang and Ling Chi quickly entered a state of sudden enlightenment as they began cultivating the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed], and approximately ten minutes later, both had completed the initial process despite the complexity of the technique. Their rapid progress was consistent with their status as True Self Players, whose cultivation and understanding had already reached a level where the basic principles of another system could be absorbed far more quickly than they could by ordinary players. Ling Chi then looked toward Chen Ran and raised the question of whether he intended to cultivate the [Ghost Path Soldier], since all three of them now possessed knowledge of that system. Chen Ran shook his head again, leaving the others unable to understand why he would reject another technique that could potentially improve his chances of survival. His refusal to learn the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] could at least be explained by the relationship between [One] and Eternal Kingdom, but declining the [Ghost Path Soldier] created a different problem because the immediate disadvantage was much harder to identify. Chen Ran nevertheless offered no explanation, and the Secret Chamber returned to silence while the other three continued calculating their positions.

Ling Chi eventually recognized that Chen Ran's behavior reflected his position as the central figure in the struggle between the True Self Players. Chen Ran had more reason than anyone else to be cautious about acquiring another system, because even a small change to his abilities could alter the way Ninth manipulated his future or the way the other True Self Players attempted to control him. However, Ling Chi did not extend the same interpretation to Chen Yang, whom he considered much more dangerous precisely because his motives were not confined to the survival of his current self. Chen Yang had already demonstrated that he could manipulate the other players into helping him achieve an objective different from the one they believed he was pursuing, and Ling Chi was certain that if the three of them managed to escape the Secret Chamber, Chen Yang would attempt to eliminate both him and Zhang Fan. The possibility that all three could return to the true timeline did not mean that they would benefit from allowing one another to survive, because the best outcome for each of them was for their own existence on another timeline to escape while the other two died.

Their temporary cooperation therefore did not eliminate the fundamental conflict between them. Every additional user of the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] represented another opponent capable of possessing someone, devouring a consciousness, and expanding their influence across different timelines, so none of the three could regard the others as permanent allies. Chen Yang had reasons to kill Zhang Fan and Ling Chi, but Zhang Fan and Ling Chi had equally strong reasons to eliminate Chen Yang and one another before their competitors could become more powerful. The difficulty was that each player possessed a different method of escaping the Secret Chamber, meaning that they could not simply attack simultaneously without considering what would happen if one of them survived the confrontation. Ling Chi could not teleport himself out, while Chen Yang needed to use Imprint before he could reproduce another player's skill

and apply it to the escape. Zhang Fan, by contrast, possessed the greatest immediate advantage because [Mind Follows Will] allowed him to activate skills directly through thought, making him the person most likely to escape first once the restrictions disappeared.

Ling Chi consequently began considering how he could avoid being abandoned after Zhang Fan escaped, especially because Chen Yang's earlier threat to send him into the Underworld had already exposed the danger of remaining behind without a means of defending himself. He had intended to plant a [Black Lotus] inside Zhang Fan's consciousness together with Chen Yang, thereby ensuring that Zhang Fan could not escape the conflict simply by teleporting to another time or space. However, the plan had to account for the possibility that Chen Yang would cripple Zhang Fan's consciousness first and then abandon Ling Chi once Zhang Fan could no longer resist. If that happened, Ling Chi would be left alone with Chen Ran, who was already established on the true timeline and would not need to escape with anyone else. The rules of the Secret Chamber would eventually reduce the remaining participants to two, at which point the speaking order would become decisive: Ling Chi would be required to judge Chen Ran before Chen Ran judged him, but Chen Ran had not told a Lie throughout the confrontation, making Ling Chi's judgment certain to fail and leaving him with no means of surviving the final stage.

Ling Chi therefore needed the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique] as protection against being abandoned. If he possessed the technique alongside the [Ghost Path Soldier], he could weaken Chen Ran through mental attacks and then use the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] to possess him, giving Ling Chi another way to preserve himself even if Chen Yang refused to take him along during the escape. This possibility changed the calculation entirely because Chen Ran's Eternal Kingdom meant that abandoning Ling Chi would also carry the risk of losing the entire Secret Chamber. If Ling Chi could force Chen Ran into a situation where he would certainly die, Chen Ran would have every reason to activate Eternal Kingdom rather than accept the result, and Chen Yang could not safely assume that his own escape would remain unaffected. The [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique] would thus give Ling Chi the leverage required to make Chen Yang take him seriously as a necessary participant rather than treating him as an expendable ally whose usefulness ended once Zhang Fan had been disabled.

At that moment, Chen Yang turned toward Zhang Fan, and his [Soldier] appeared as he prepared to attack, evidently intending to cripple Zhang Fan's consciousness before the restrictions could be lifted. The purpose was straightforward: if Chen Yang and Ling Chi could first overwhelm Zhang Fan through their [Soldier]s, they could then plant the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] inside him while his Spirit was too exhausted to destroy the Black Lotuses. Once Zhang Fan had been weakened sufficiently, the two could use possession, cooperation, or the threat of possession to prevent him from escaping and preserve their advantage after the blockade disappeared. Chen Yang expected Ling Chi to participate because the two had a shared interest in preventing Zhang Fan from escaping with his extensive collection of skills, but as he prepared to act, he suddenly noticed Ling Chi's [Soldier] watching him and immediately understood that Ling Chi was prepared to ambush him if he proceeded without meeting his demand.

Chen Yang stopped and asked what Ling Chi intended to do, and Ling Chi's [Soldier] answered that he wanted the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique]. The demand was not an attempt to improve Ling Chi's cultivation for its own sake, because he had recognized that Chen Yang's plan depended upon Ling Chi cooperating in the attack against Zhang Fan while receiving no guarantee that Chen Yang would protect him afterward. If Zhang Fan's consciousness were crippled, he might lose the ability to launch mental attacks, allowing Chen Yang to cooperate with Chen Ran to eliminate Ling Chi once Zhang Fan was no longer a threat. By demanding the technique before participating, Ling Chi forced Chen Yang to provide him with an independent means of recovering his Spirit and defending himself against the possibility of being abandoned. The exchange would leave Ling Chi less dependent upon Chen Yang's goodwill and would make it far more dangerous for Chen Yang to attempt to eliminate him after escaping the Secret Chamber.

Chen Yang's earlier threat to use Imprint and send Ling Chi into the Underworld had also been designed to create suspicion between Ling Chi and Zhang Fan. If Zhang Fan chose to ignore Ling Chi and escape independently, Chen Yang could obtain Zhang Fan's skills through Imprint and use them to send Ling Chi to the Underworld, where several Superego Players could attack him mentally until he died. The threat made Ling Chi appear to be a burden whose survival depended entirely upon Zhang Fan's willingness to cooperate, encouraging Zhang Fan to prioritize his own escape rather than protect a competitor. Yet the same threat also revealed why Ling Chi needed to secure the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique] before helping Chen Yang attack Zhang Fan, because otherwise he would be left with no way to prevent Chen Yang from using the exact arrangement he had described. Ling Chi was therefore forcing Chen Yang to choose between granting him the means to survive independently and accepting the possibility that Zhang Fan would escape before they could cripple his consciousness.

Chen Yang now faced two viable but costly choices. He could concentrate on eliminating Ling Chi and allow Zhang Fan to escape, preserving the immediate opportunity to remove one opponent while sacrificing the possibility of catching Zhang Fan again, since Zhang Fan's diverse collection of devoured skills would make tracking and restraining him across different times and spaces extraordinarily difficult. Alternatively, Chen Yang could give Ling Chi the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique], allowing the two of them to attack Zhang Fan together, cripple his consciousness, and plant their [Black Lotuses] before the escape conditions changed. With Zhang Fan's Spirit sufficiently depleted, he would have much greater difficulty destroying the two Black Lotuses, and even if he later escaped or concealed himself in another time or space, the two users of the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] would still have a means of tracking him through the connection established by the technique. The second choice would secure the immediate escape of all three players, but it would also preserve the rivalry between them and force Chen Yang to deal with Zhang Fan later rather than allowing him to eliminate both competitors immediately. His decision therefore depended upon which danger he considered more urgent: losing Zhang Fan permanently by allowing him to escape now, or strengthening Ling Chi through the cultivation method and accepting another round of internal strife after the three had left the Secret Chamber.

Chen Yang did not hesitate to act once Zhang Fan's position had been determined. He immediately used his consciousness to transmit the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique] to Ling Chi, giving him the same means of absorbing Points that Chen Yang possessed. This was not simply an exchange of cultivation methods between two temporary allies. Ling Chi needed to recover his Spirit before the seal of the Secret Chamber was lifted, because the coming struggle would leave no time for him to recover naturally, while Chen Yang needed Ling Chi to possess enough strength to help suppress Zhang Fan. The moment Ling Chi received the technique, he began cultivating it and absorbed Points until his mental state returned to its peak. Zhang Fan immediately understood what the exchange meant for him. If he allowed the other two to escape together, they would first cripple his consciousness and then use the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] to plant Black Lotuses inside him. By the time the actual struggle began, he would have neither the mental strength to resist them nor the opportunity to eliminate them separately.

Chen Yang and Ling Chi therefore did not immediately proceed to the next stage. They first used their [Soldier]s to launch mental attacks against Zhang Fan, concentrating their attacks on his consciousness until he was left barely capable of keeping himself awake. Once his resistance had been sufficiently weakened, the two used the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed] to invade his consciousness and plant a Black Lotus within his No-Distance. The distinction between this and their earlier mental probing was important. Previously, Zhang Fan had been able to remove their influence by destroying the Black Lotus before it could establish itself, but his current condition made that response much more difficult. If he attempted to eliminate both Black Lotuses while his Spirit was already close to exhaustion, he would have to expose himself to the subsequent attacks from Chen Yang and Ling Chi. If he did not eliminate them, the two could gradually consume his consciousness and eventually take possession of him. Either way, Zhang Fan had been placed under pressure before the actual struggle had even resumed.

Nevertheless, Chen Yang and Ling Chi could not assume that Zhang Fan had already lost. They remembered that his system included a substitute-death ability, and the timing of its possible activation made it particularly dangerous. Once the restrictions on skills were lifted, Zhang Fan might be able to use that ability to substitute another object for himself or otherwise escape the consequences of his current condition. If the effect restored his mental state to its peak, the damage inflicted by Chen Yang and Ling Chi would no longer be enough to keep him under control. They therefore had to watch carefully for any attempt by Zhang Fan to commit suicide or activate his substitute-death mechanism, because allowing him to recover at the critical moment could immediately reverse the advantage they had worked to establish. Their preparation was consequently not complete merely because Zhang Fan had been weakened and infected with two Black Lotuses; they still had to survive until the restrictions disappeared and then prevent him from using whatever remained of his system to escape their control.

The three continued waiting for the outcome of the conflict on the River of Time, where the theory that a king does not meet another king was supposed to determine whether anyone could escape the existing arrangement. None of them could yet know whether the larger structure would permit them to leave the Ninth Timeline or whether the conflict would end with them trapped inside the Secret Chamber. What they could establish was that the person who

appeared to be losing did not necessarily have the weakest position. Zhang Fan had performed poorly during the confrontation, repeatedly finding himself on the defensive and allowing Chen Yang and Ling Chi to dictate the immediate course of events. However, he remained the only person among the four who could activate skills through thought alone without speaking a skill command. As soon as the restrictions were lifted, this would give him an advantage that Chen Yang and Ling Chi could not automatically overcome. The difference between possessing a powerful skill and being able to activate it at the necessary moment was becoming more important than the difference between their apparent levels of strength.

Chen Ran understood this distinction even though his own position was also unfavorable. He possessed [Eternal Kingdom], but the restrictions surrounding the Secret Chamber meant that using it recklessly could kill everyone rather than secure his victory. He could not simply attack Zhang Fan while the other two were preparing to escape, because any immediate escalation might force him to use Eternal Kingdom without knowing whether the consequences would favor him. From the perspective of the other three, Chen Ran had become almost irrelevant to the immediate struggle. He had not taken control of the preparations, nor had he directly helped Chen Yang or Ling Chi cripple Zhang Fan. The only thing preventing the others from treating him as an ordinary spectator was the possibility that he might activate Eternal Kingdom if he were pushed too far. They therefore had little incentive to involve him in their decisions, but they also could not safely ignore him. Chen Ran's apparent passivity concealed a more complicated position: he could not determine the outcome through ordinary means, yet his decision could still destroy the framework in which everyone else's plans depended upon succeeding.

Chen Ran suddenly began laughing, eventually laughing so hard that he had to hold his stomach before returning to his chair and apologetically lowering his head. The reaction made little sense to the others, who believed that his situation was worse than Zhang Fan's because he possessed only Eternal Kingdom while the other three had demonstrated more varied systems. They interpreted his laughter as an expression of helplessness or mockery directed at his own predicament, assuming that he was simply acknowledging that he had become an insignificant participant in a struggle whose result would be determined by the other True Self Players. However, the reaction would later acquire a different significance when Zhang Fan reconstructed the connection between Chen Yang's theories and Chen Ran's decision to use Eternal Kingdom. Chen Ran had already heard that the active party was the person willing to act without fear, while the passive party was the one who allowed the opponent's possible actions to determine his own choices. His laughter occurred before the seal was lifted and before Zhang Fan attempted to force his hand. It therefore marked a point at which Chen Ran had begun considering whether his apparent lack of options was itself the product of his own hesitation.

The timing of the next event made Zhang Fan's response decisive. In a dilapidated temple in the western part of a city, a young beggar had once shared half of a piece of moldy cornbread with an old beggar who was close to starving. The young beggar had learned from another beggar, Scarhead, that extreme hunger could drive people toward wickedness, but Scarhead had ultimately been beaten to death after trying to seize food from others. The young beggar consequently developed his own interpretation of what it meant to oppose wickedness. If

depravity came from hunger, then benevolence should lead toward being able to eat one's fill. Yet sharing half of his food with the old beggar had not solved his own hunger, so he asked when people like them would finally have enough to eat and what meaning their lives possessed if they remained trapped in the same condition. The old beggar answered that as long as they remained alive, there would still be hope and the possibility that they would eventually eat their fill.

This memory was important because it established the principle Zhang Fan used to justify continuing the struggle even when his immediate prospects looked hopeless. His past as a beggar had taught him to regard survival not as evidence that victory was guaranteed, but as the minimum condition required for another opportunity to appear. The fact that he had reached the level of a True Self Player despite that background also explained why the others could not safely assume that his current disadvantage would determine the final outcome. Zhang Fan was accustomed to surviving situations in which the available resources were insufficient, and his system allowed him to exploit opportunities that the other players could not use in the same way. When the restrictions on the Liar Killer panels disappeared, he immediately reached for his weapon and returned to the contest. The memory of the old beggar's words became the basis of his decision: even if he was now facing three opponents, remaining alive was enough to preserve the possibility of turning the situation around.

The disappearance of the restrictions was itself the result of the development on the River of Time. Future Chen Ran had returned the Liar Killer that had been lent to him, removing the condition that had kept the Secret Chamber sealed and the four players' skills prohibited. Zhang Fan immediately recognized that this was the opportunity he had been waiting for. Rather than attempting to escape through a slow exchange of attacks, he used [Mind Follows Will] to launch a lethal attack against Chen Ran at the moment the restrictions were released. His immediate objective was to force Chen Ran into activating Eternal Kingdom. The arrangement of the battlefield made this far more dangerous than an ordinary direct attack, because a trap had been established beneath Chen Ran's chair through a Whisperer Secret Chamber. The moment the trap was triggered, arrows, evil spirits, and blades rushed toward Chen Ran from every direction. The interval between activation and impact was so short that even the other True Self Players had almost no time to react, and the attack was designed to leave Chen Ran with no practical alternative if he wanted to survive.

Chen Ran nevertheless responded immediately. His Extreme Realm gave him the reaction speed needed to act before the trap could kill him, and he drew his Liar Killer and activated [Whisperer: Eternal Kingdom] without hesitation. The arrows, evil spirits, and blades disappeared before reaching him, and the structure of the Secret Chamber began to dissolve into darkness. Ling Chi was horrified by the speed of Chen Ran's response because he understood that Zhang Fan had not simply attempted to kill Chen Ran. He had deliberately created a situation in which Chen Ran would be compelled to use his ultimate skill, regardless of whether Chen Ran believed that doing so was the correct strategic decision. The trap exploited the difference between knowing that a skill was dangerous and being willing to accept that danger when the alternative was immediate death. Zhang Fan expected Chen Ran to hesitate because Eternal Kingdom might destroy the Eighteenth Floor and kill the people caught

within it. Instead, Chen Ran acted as though he had already accepted that possibility, which was precisely the response that made Zhang Fan's plan possible while also introducing the risk that Zhang Fan himself had failed to account for.

Zhang Fan's intended escape depended on the assumption that the Secret Chamber occupied a wild space adjacent to the Eighteenth Floor rather than an ordinary instance space. Under that interpretation, activating Eternal Kingdom would collapse the Eighteenth Floor while leaving the second Secret Chamber of the instance outside the skill's effective range. Chen Ran, Chen Yang, and Ling Chi would then be trapped within the area affected by Eternal Kingdom, leaving them vulnerable to the subsequent attacks of the Omniscient and Omnipotent once their skills were prohibited. Zhang Fan, however, would already have teleported himself into the second Secret Chamber and would not suffer the same consequences. His plan therefore transformed Chen Ran's strongest skill into a means of separating the four players and eliminating three of them simultaneously. It was not enough for Zhang Fan merely to escape the original Secret Chamber; he needed to place himself in a location where the destructive effect would not reach him while allowing the other three to remain exposed.

The second part of his plan depended on the Black Lotus already planted inside Han Fei's consciousness by the Zhang Fan from the true timeline. Zhang Fan believed that once the Eternal Kingdom eliminated Chen Ran and the others, the Zhang Fan who had escaped to the second Secret Chamber could use the existing Black Lotus as a route through which the Zhang Fan sealed in the Eternal Land could escape by taking possession of another body. The latter possessed the more powerful version of the [Dao Heart Demonic Seed], so the Black Lotus he had established would not be comparable to the two weaker Black Lotuses that Chen Yang and Ling Chi had planted in Zhang Fan's own consciousness. Even if the two of them attempted to take possession of him after the transfer, their Black Lotuses would be unable to withstand the overwhelming difference in strength. Once the Zhang Fan from the true timeline obtained a suitable host, he could use [Dust Ruins Spirit Transformation] to escape the restrictions that had kept him sealed, while the resulting possession could also eliminate other players within the instance. His intended victory was therefore not simply a one-against-three confrontation. It was an attempt to use the four-way struggle to provide the Zhang Fan sealed in the Eternal Land with another route back into the world.

The scale of that plan explains why Zhang Fan was willing to sacrifice his immediate safety and why the other three had underestimated the danger of allowing him to reach the second Secret Chamber. His current condition was disastrous, but the Black Lotus inside Han Fei represented an independent resource established by a much stronger version of himself. If the transfer succeeded, the exhaustion inflicted by Chen Yang and Ling Chi would cease to be decisive because the consciousness taking over the new host would not depend entirely on the weakened Zhang Fan in the Secret Chamber. He had also accounted for the causal connection between Jiang Zhe and his Main Body, reasoning that he could use the skills gained through possession to escape and kill the Main Body, leaving the other players without the means to leave the instance. The plan appeared to create a situation in which every possible response from Chen Ran benefited him: if Chen Ran used Eternal Kingdom, the Eighteenth Floor would collapse; if Chen Ran refused to act, Chen Yang could provide a resurrection effect that would

keep them alive temporarily, giving Zhang Fan enough time to execute the possession. Either result was supposed to eliminate the three opponents while opening an alternative route for the Zhang Fan trapped in the Eternal Land.

The struggle on the River of Time developed alongside this attempted escape. Future Chen Ran no longer possessed the Liar Killer at his waist, confirming that the restriction responsible for the Secret Chamber's seal had been removed. When Zhang Fan withdrew from the River of Time and disappeared, the other True Self Players did not simply restore the previous arrangement and drag him back into the conflict. They understood that the conditions governing the larger confrontation were different from the conditions of the immediate struggle inside the Secret Chamber. If one player from the Ninth Timeline escaped, that would already satisfy the objective of the corresponding group on the River of Time, regardless of which person managed to get out. Consequently, the others accepted Zhang Fan's departure and concentrated their attacks on the First True Self Player, buying time for him to reach the second Secret Chamber. Their intervention demonstrated that the struggle inside the Secret Chamber was connected to a larger contest whose participants could evaluate victory according to different conditions. The escape of one person could satisfy one side's immediate objective even though that person's continued existence might create another problem for the players who controlled the true timeline.

Zhang Fan arrived in the second Secret Chamber and immediately found Han Fei lying on the ground. He believed that the most difficult part of his plan had succeeded because the Black Lotus established in Han Fei's consciousness was still present and appeared ready to emerge. The Black Lotuses planted by Chen Yang and Ling Chi had already begun consuming his Spirit, but he did not regard their attacks as decisive because the Black Lotus belonging to the Zhang Fan from the true timeline was vastly stronger. He expected the stronger Black Lotus to overwhelm the two weaker ones and allow the possession to proceed. As long as the Zhang Fan from the true timeline could take over the appropriate host, the damage suffered by the version who had escaped from the Secret Chamber would cease to matter. He therefore reached toward the Black Lotus, convinced that he was about to secure a victory that would allow the Zhang Fan sealed in the Eternal Land to escape and remove Chen Ran, his most dangerous opponent, from the equation.

The skill command that interrupted him completely overturned that expectation. When the light returned, Zhang Fan found Chen Ran, Chen Yang, and Ling Chi standing in front of him, despite having believed that Eternal Kingdom would leave them trapped within the collapsing Eighteenth Floor. He immediately attempted to use [Mind Follows Will], but the skill did not respond. The Black Lotus began emerging from Han Fei's body, and Zhang Fan reached toward it, believing that the three opponents were unable to intervene in time. Chen Ran's reaction speed should have allowed him to move, but Chen Ran remained still, while Chen Yang and Ling Chi also appeared unable to stop the possession directly. Zhang Fan interpreted their stillness as confirmation that he had finally obtained the necessary opening. Before he could complete the transfer, however, eleven Worlds of the Heart descended and immobilized everyone in the Secret Chamber. Eleven enormous hands reached through the connection to the River of Time and crushed the Black Lotus that had emerged from Han Fei. The intervention

did not merely interrupt Zhang Fan's possession; it destroyed the object on which his entire escape plan depended, leaving no remaining route through which the Zhang Fan sealed in the Eternal Land could take over the host.

Zhang Fan collapsed because his mental state had already been pushed to its limit and the destruction of the Black Lotus invalidated the outcome he had spent the entire confrontation trying to secure. The contradiction finally became clear to him. If Chen Ran's Eternal Kingdom had truly affected a wild space adjacent to the Eighteenth Floor, then Chen Ran, Chen Yang, and Ling Chi should have been subjected to the collapse of the Eighteenth Floor rather than appearing together in the second Secret Chamber. Eternal Kingdom possessed Dispel and prohibition effects, but it could not reset the positions of players or items or simply erase the boundary separating one instance from another. The fact that the three had survived and that Zhang Fan's skills were now prohibited demonstrated that the Secret Chamber had not been located in the wild space he had assumed. Chen Yang had transferred the internal-strife Secret Chamber into the second Secret Chamber of the instance while clearing the Eighteenth Floor, meaning that Eternal Kingdom had only affected the instance itself. The three had never been exposed to the collapse of the Eighteenth Floor, and Zhang Fan's attempt to place himself outside the skill's range had been based on a false understanding of the battlefield.

The failure was not merely the result of Zhang Fan overlooking a technical restriction. His plan depended on Chen Ran choosing the response that Zhang Fan considered psychologically and strategically unlikely, yet Chen Ran had used Eternal Kingdom without hesitation. Zhang Fan had calculated that Chen Ran would be more likely to refrain from acting because he feared destroying the Eighteenth Floor and dying together with the others. If Chen Ran refused to activate Eternal Kingdom, Chen Yang could provide a temporary resurrection effect, allowing the three to survive the trap long enough for Zhang Fan to use the time difference created by the Whisperer Secret Chamber. Meanwhile, the Zhang Fan from the true timeline would possess Han Fei and Jiang Zhe, then use the causal relationship between Jiang Zhe and his Main Body to eliminate the Main Body as well. Once this was accomplished, Chen Yang would be the only person among the three who could potentially use Jiang Zhe's skills to escape, leaving Chen Ran and Ling Chi trapped and eventually exhausted. Zhang Fan therefore treated Chen Ran's reluctance to use Eternal Kingdom as the central assumption supporting his victory.

Instead, Chen Ran selected the response that Zhang Fan had considered to have a probability of less than twenty percent. The reason was connected directly to the theories Chen Yang had explained earlier. The principle that a king does not meet another king meant that a confrontation between equally powerful people should not be interpreted as a situation in which both sides could act freely without exposing themselves to mutual destruction. If one side had already initiated such a confrontation, it suggested that the side initiating the conflict believed its objective could be achieved. Chen Yang's theory of active and passive behavior added the necessary decision rule: a player who allowed fear of the opponent to determine his actions became passive, while a player willing to act according to his own judgment could seize the initiative. Chen Ran had previously appeared to be laughing at his own predicament, but Zhang Fan now realized that the laughter might have marked the moment when Chen Ran connected the two principles and understood what Chen Yang was communicating. Chen Yang had not

needed to tell his brother explicitly to activate Eternal Kingdom, because the argument itself supplied the reason for doing so. Chen Ran had chosen the dangerous option precisely because he no longer regarded the danger as a sufficient reason to remain passive.

The intervention of the eleven Worlds of the Heart added another layer to the result. The players on the River of Time did not merely prevent the four people in the Secret Chamber from moving; they deliberately destroyed the Black Lotus that would have allowed the Zhang Fan sealed in the Eternal Land to escape through possession. Zhang Fan had treated the Black Lotus as a resource that would inevitably favor him because of the difference between his Nine-Star version and the weaker Black Lotuses planted by Chen Yang and Ling Chi. However, he had not accounted for the interests of the True Self Players who could interfere with the process. The same group that had permitted him to escape the River of Time did not necessarily intend to allow the possession to succeed or the Zhang Fan sealed in the Eternal Land to return to the true timeline. The distinction between allowing someone to escape from one conflict and allowing that person to obtain the outcome he desired from another was decisive. Zhang Fan had mistaken the assistance given to one stage of his plan for permission to complete the entire plan, even though the players controlling the larger structure had their own reasons to intervene once the Black Lotus began to threaten their preferred arrangement.

As Zhang Fan's consciousness weakened, he reconstructed the connection between Chen Yang's earlier reasoning and the outcome. The theory of kings not meeting had implied that Chen Ran could act without allowing the apparent danger to control his response, while the distinction between active and passive behavior had explained why Chen Yang was willing to leave the decision to him. The two theories had not been unrelated observations about the behavior of powerful people. Together, they meant that the only way to escape the position Zhang Fan had constructed for Chen Ran was to reject the assumption that Chen Ran would prioritize avoiding danger over taking action. Chen Ran had understood that the Secret Chamber's restrictions and the larger conflict on the River of Time prevented Zhang Fan from controlling every part of the result. If he used Eternal Kingdom, the actual consequences would depend on the boundaries of the instance and the actions of the True Self Players, rather than on Zhang Fan's preferred interpretation of the situation. Zhang Fan could not force Chen Ran to accept his own understanding of the battlefield simply because that understanding appeared reasonable.

Zhang Fan also recognized that Chen Yang had been the reason Chen Ran could act with such confidence. Chen Yang had deliberately allowed Zhang Fan to believe that his plan could succeed, while the ideas he presented earlier had given Chen Ran a basis for identifying the intended response. The apparent choice between using Eternal Kingdom and doing nothing had been designed to trap Chen Ran, but the trap depended on Chen Ran treating the two options as Zhang Fan had framed them. Once Chen Ran understood the active and passive principle, he no longer had to choose between the consequences Zhang Fan expected. He could act first and allow the other participants to determine how the larger system would respond. Zhang Fan had therefore lost not because he lacked a sufficiently complicated plan, but because his plan had been built around a prediction of another True Self Player's behavior that did not account for the possibility that the player had already reconstructed the underlying reasoning.

Chen Yang then turned toward Ling Chi and asked whether he intended to continue resisting. Ling Chi understood that the position had changed beyond the point where he could reasonably expect to reverse the result. Zhang Fan was unconscious, his own skills were prohibited by Eternal Kingdom, and Chen Ran and Chen Yang were both in a position to prevent him from taking possession of Zhang Fan. If Ling Chi continued attacking them with mental techniques, the two brothers could simply wear him down. Chen Yang would eventually obtain Zhang Fan's remaining skills through Imprinting, while Ling Chi would be sent into an independent space in the Underworld and subjected to mental attacks from several Superego Players. The combination of these disadvantages left Ling Chi without a practical method of escaping the arrangement. He could continue fighting, but doing so would not change the fundamental conditions that had already determined his position. He therefore concluded that remaining alive would only prolong a struggle in which he had lost the means to protect his own interests.

Ling Chi nevertheless had another reason to reject Chen Ran's possible attempt to cooperate with him against Chen Yang. Once Chen Ran activated Eternal Kingdom and the two of them did not disappear, Ling Chi could infer that he would not be allowed to remain on the true timeline. The same skill that had removed the trap also represented a direct threat to his system, because Eternal Kingdom could prohibit the skills of a selected target while leaving other participants able to use theirs. Ling Chi's system depended on his ability to apply different mental states and combat techniques, so the complete prohibition of his skills would leave him at an extreme disadvantage. Chen Yang, meanwhile, possessed both the Ghost Path Soldier and the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique, giving him enough strength and flexibility to defeat Ling Chi in a direct mental confrontation. Ling Chi therefore understood that even if he avoided dying immediately, he would still face a situation in which Chen Ran and Chen Yang could eventually eliminate him. His suicide was not simply an admission that his current plan had failed; it also denied Chen Ran the opportunity to use him as an ally against Chen Yang.

Chen Ran attempted to stop Ling Chi before he pulled the trigger, but Ling Chi deliberately ended the exchange by declaring that he had lied. Chen Ran recognized the statement and responded that Ling Chi had lied, yet Ling Chi immediately shot himself in the temple. The action left Chen Ran without the ally he had hoped to use against his brother, forcing him to confront Chen Yang alone. The suicide also served Ling Chi's own calculation: if he could not remain on the true timeline, then removing himself from the struggle was preferable to allowing Chen Yang to dictate the terms of his defeat. His final decision made the relationship between the three players even more unequal. Zhang Fan had been rendered unconscious, Ling Chi was dead, and Chen Ran now faced the only remaining opponent capable of exploiting the destruction of the original arrangement. Chen Yang, who had repeatedly manipulated the other players while concealing his true priorities, could now redirect the struggle toward the conflict he had intended to establish between the two brothers.

Chen Yang did not immediately attack Chen Ran. Instead, he asked whether Chen Ran understood why Zhang Fan, Ling Chi, and himself had not disappeared after Eternal Kingdom was activated. The first part of the answer concerned the skill's actual function. Eternal Kingdom could Dispel and prohibit, but it did not reset the positions of players or items. The second part

concerned the intervention of the True Self Players on the River of Time. Apart from Zhang Fan and Ling Chi on the true timeline, the other ten Half-Step True Self Mind Cultivation Players did not want either of those two to remain on the true timeline. Zhang Fan's ability to devour skills and continue expanding his system made him a threat that could not safely be allowed to develop without restraint, while Ling Chi's ability to extinguish skills would undermine the mechanisms through which the powerful players controlled and observed the larger structure. If Zhang Fan remained free to absorb more systems, the danger would continue increasing; if Ling Chi remained on the true timeline, the others would have to consider whether their own skills could be neutralized before they could be used.

This was why Chen Yang had described the role of a great scholar who would defend the scriptures for him. He had arranged the immediate situation so that the True Self Players could obtain an outcome that already served their interests, allowing their own preferences to determine the action they would take. Once Zhang Fan's Black Lotus began to threaten the possibility that the Zhang Fan sealed in the Eternal Land could escape, the ten players had reason to intervene, and their combined action destroyed it. The same intervention prevented Eternal Kingdom from producing the result Zhang Fan expected, because the players on the River of Time were not obligated to allow the disappearance of Chen Ran, Chen Yang, and Ling Chi merely because that outcome was part of Zhang Fan's plan. The skill's actual range and the interests of the True Self Players together determined the result. Chen Yang had therefore relied on a combination of technical understanding and political calculation, ensuring that the players who possessed the power to alter the outcome would act according to priorities he had already anticipated.

The larger arrangement was a transaction between two factions. The players associated with the River of Time accepted the possibility that Chen Ran might die inside the instance, while the Omniscient and Omnipotent accepted the possibility that Chen Yang might remain on the true timeline. Neither side could dictate every part of the result without exposing itself to the other's interference, and the creation of the instance reflected that mutual limitation. Chen Yang, however, occupied a different position from the True Self Players who had already established their own systems and interests. He was a product of the Ninth True Self Player's creation of other timelines, and he did not possess the same attachment to the existing arrangement or the same need to preserve a particular position within it. If he lost, he would lose a life that the larger structure already treated as expendable. The other True Self Players, by contrast, had much more to lose if their systems, established positions, or control over the River of Time were compromised. Their greater power therefore came with constraints that Chen Yang could exploit. He could take risks that they could not accept, then use the outcomes of those risks to influence their actions.

Chen Yang's method was closely connected to his cultivation of [Unity of Heaven and Man Mind Cultivation]. In Hell, the concept of Heaven had effectively become the True Self Players who controlled the fundamental structure of the world. Their interests determined which arrangements could persist and which threats would be removed. Acting in accordance with Heaven therefore meant acting in accordance with the interests of those players, while the principle that justice was legitimacy described the way their preferred outcomes became the

effective rules of the system. Chen Yang did not need to force the True Self Players to obey him directly. He needed to construct a situation in which their own understanding of what must be protected led them to make the decisions he wanted. Zhang Fan was precisely the sort of individual they would not willingly allow to grow without limit, because his ability to devour skills could eventually undermine their systems. Ling Chi posed the opposite but equally serious threat, because his ability to destroy skills could prevent the Omniscient from using skills to observe the timeline, the Omnipotent from applying their abilities without restraint, and the Unity of Heaven and Man from maintaining the blockade of the Eighteenth Floor. Chen Yang used these established interests to make the True Self Players act as the Heaven that justified the outcome he had prepared.

He then explained why Ling Chi had preferred to die rather than cooperate with Chen Ran. After seeing that the three of them remained in the instance, Ling Chi understood that the larger arrangement did not permit him to remain on the true timeline. He also knew that Chen Yang's combination of Ghost Path Soldier and the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique made him particularly difficult to defeat through mental attacks. If Ling Chi remained alive and tried to fight Chen Yang directly, he would eventually be forced into a confrontation in which his skills had already been restricted and the other side possessed the advantage. More importantly, Chen Ran's Eternal Kingdom represented the principle of One, and after its ultimate sublimation it could prohibit a selected person or item. If Chen Ran chose to prohibit Ling Chi's skills while leaving Chen Yang's skills unaffected, Ling Chi would be unable to employ the combat techniques on which his system depended. He lacked the kinds of time, space, or resurrection abilities that might allow him to bypass the prohibition. For Ling Chi, allowing Chen Ran to survive would therefore preserve a threat that he could not reliably counter, even if Chen Yang also remained dangerous. His suicide was intended to remove the possibility of joining Chen Ran against Chen Yang, thereby increasing the likelihood that the brothers would eliminate one another.

Chen Yang finally returned to the question he had raised after Ling Chi's death. He told Chen Ran that he was different from the other participants because he was his brother, then asked whether Chen Ran believed he would kill him. Chen Ran had already seen Chen Yang manipulate the other True Self Players, misdirect Zhang Fan, exploit Ling Chi's circumstances, and arrange the confrontation so that the larger forces would respond according to their own interests. He therefore could not simply assume that brotherhood would prevent Chen Yang from attacking him, especially after Chen Yang had deliberately removed both of their remaining opponents and left the two of them alone. Chen Yang reinforced the pressure by recalling the advice Chen Ran had received from Di Wu Zhi Yi through Qiu Yinong's memories: in a dog-eat-dog environment such as Hell, a player should not trust others or develop an emotional identification with them. By invoking that principle while demanding an answer about their relationship, Chen Yang forced Chen Ran to evaluate whether the bond between them was strong enough to override everything he had learned about survival and deception. Chen Ran retreated as Chen Yang advanced, unable to settle the contradiction between the possibility that his brother genuinely cared about him and the evidence that Chen Yang had arranged the entire confrontation to leave him with no safe alternative. Chen Yang stopped only after determining

that Chen Ran still had no answer, then stated that he would provide the answer himself as his [Soldier] appeared before them.

Chen Yang's Soldier did not turn its weapon toward Chen Ran. Instead, it aimed at Zhang Fan, who was still lying on the ground, and fired [Radiant Three-Kills · Heaven and Earth One Sword]. The attack immediately produced two screams from within Zhang Fan's body, one belonging to Zhang Fan himself and the other to Ling Chi, before Zhang Fan slowly stood up and mocked the two of them for attempting to deceive him through a trick of hiding in plain sight. This revealed that Chen Yang had already successfully subjected Zhang Fan to Possession through the Black Lotus planted in his consciousness. Zhang Fan and Ling Chi had apparently attempted to exploit the confusion surrounding the possession to recover their mental strength and reverse the situation, but Chen Yang had anticipated their attempt and used his Soldier to attack Zhang Fan before they could complete their plan. The two had been depending on the possibility of destroying Chen Yang's Black Lotus and using the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique] to restore their depleted Spirits, because doing so would have given them another opportunity to attack Chen Yang or help Chen Ran escape his control. By acting first, Chen Yang eliminated that possibility and ensured that Zhang Fan could no longer independently resist the possession, leaving Chen Ran with neither the skills nor the mental entities necessary to counter him inside the Secret Chamber.

Chen Yang then explained why he had deliberately arranged the situation this way. Eternal Kingdom had already sealed the entire Secret Chamber, and although Chen Ran could still use its underlying authority, the restrictions prevented the other players from freely deploying their skills to escape or reverse the outcome. If Zhang Fan and Ling Chi had been allowed to destroy the Black Lotus and restore their mental strength, Chen Ran might have had a chance to use them as allies and turn the situation around. Chen Yang therefore intended to eliminate every source of assistance before proceeding to possess Chen Ran himself. Zhang Fan had already lost control of his own consciousness, while Ling Chi had been reduced to a voice inside the same body, meaning that neither could provide the independent resistance necessary to prevent Chen Yang from completing his plan. The remaining objective was to seize Chen Ran's body and obtain Eternal Kingdom, a skill that could be carried into the true timeline without introducing another copy of [Dust Ruins Spirit Transformation]. Zhang Fan's skill was unsuitable for this purpose because one version of [Dust Ruins Spirit Transformation] already existed on the true timeline, and the other True Self Players would not permit a second version to remain there. Eternal Kingdom presented a different opportunity, since Chen Yang could obtain its authority through Possession and thereby gain a system that the other players might tolerate on the true timeline even though they would not accept Zhang Fan's ability to devour and accumulate skills indefinitely.

Chen Yang consequently ordered Chen Ran to answer whether he believed his older brother would kill him, advancing while Chen Ran retreated. He then invoked the three states Chen Ran had cultivated, identifying them as the Half-Step Superego State of Mind, the Ghost Path Soldier technique associated with Supreme Goodness is Like Water, and the Ego Extreme Realm. Chen Yang's [Radiant Three-Kills] possessed three corresponding attacks, allowing him to target the foundations of Chen Ran's existing systems rather than relying on a single

overwhelming mental assault. As Chen Yang's Soldier raised its sniper rifle, Chen Ran noticed that its mental energy was recovering at an abnormal rate even after the first attack, making it clear that Chen Yang could continue launching attacks without suffering the depletion that should have followed such powerful techniques. The first sword, [Heaven and Earth One Sword], represented Only Self, meaning the cultivation of one's own strength. Its bullet entered Chen Ran's body and appeared within No-Distance, where the corresponding Chen Ran summoned [Wait a Moment] and fired repeatedly, attempting to stop the attack before it reached him. The shots were nevertheless chopped apart by the incoming sword, and the Chen Ran inside No-Distance was subsequently hacked into pieces, demonstrating that the first attack could overwhelm even the defensive mechanisms Chen Ran had cultivated for his own survival.

The second sword, [Heavenly Emperor One Sword], represented Only Emperor, meaning the acquisition of status and the power that came from standing at the very top. Within Chen Ran's No-Distance, the attack manifested as a towering figure standing upon a mountain peak, with countless particles converging into a precious sword at his command. Each particle represented a player using a different Mental Attack, and their combined power formed a single sword light that struck Chen Ran's consciousness. The Chen Ran inside No-Distance appeared in a Shamate-style youth's appearance, humming casually until he perceived the immense difference between his own combat strength and the sword approaching him. He estimated that his own strength amounted to roughly one thousand points, whereas the sword's strength reached at least one million, and immediately attempted to solicit support from the viewers of his livestream by asking them to send gifts that would increase his combat power. The absurdity of this behavior did not lessen the significance of the attack, because even Chen Ran's attempt to acquire additional strength through an external source was useless when the sword light could destroy him before the assistance arrived. The sword's approach dismembered the Shamate-style Chen Ran and eventually reduced even his remaining mouth to fragments, showing that a sufficiently overwhelming difference in power could render an opponent's defensive tricks and attempts at obtaining assistance completely meaningless.

The third sword, [Heaven's Will One Sword], represented Only Multitude, meaning that Heaven's Will and the principle of justice as legitimacy had become the decisive source of authority. Unlike the previous two manifestations, the Chen Ran inside No-Distance was filled with mental energy and had advanced close to the Superego State of Mind, allowing him to transform into a giant thousands of feet tall and attempt to crush the enemy with an enormous stomp. The figure holding the Heavenly Emperor Sword nevertheless remained expressionless and simply slashed once, causing the gigantic Chen Ran to collapse as though he had been made of paper. The three swords therefore represented more than three unrelated offensive abilities, because together they described the structure of Chen Yang's own life: grassroots experience and personal cultivation developed his abilities, advancement through the official system granted him increasingly powerful positions, and those abilities and positions ultimately allowed him to pursue his ambitions by aligning himself with the authority that determined legitimacy. This also explained why his [Unity of Heaven and Man] attainment was so unusually high. His cultivation was not restricted to increasing his own strength through individual effort, because he had understood how personal ability, institutional power, and the interests of those controlling the wider system could reinforce one another. Through the three swords, he could

turn these different forms of authority into direct mental attacks, and the resulting combination destroyed Chen Ran's three states almost simultaneously.

Chen Ran's mental energy immediately withered after the three attacks, leaving him pale, vomiting bile, and struggling to remain upright. Before he could recover, he noticed that Chen Yang's mental energy had begun spreading toward him like thin vines, entering his consciousness and forming a Black Lotus. The situation made the danger of Possession unmistakable, because Chen Yang was no longer merely attacking Chen Ran's mental states from the outside; he was establishing a foothold inside Chen Ran's consciousness and replacing his identity from within. Qiu Yinong, Lin Xuan, Jiang Zhe, Nan Sheng, and Chen Nuo recognized that Chen Ran was in immediate danger and prepared to launch Mental Attacks against Chen Yang, but Chen Yang's Soldier transformed into a towering demon and released a roar that shook everyone present. The force of the roar overwhelmed not only those who had intended to intervene but also the surrounding players who had not planned to participate, leaving them limp and unconscious before they could complete their attacks. This prevented Chen Ran from receiving outside assistance and demonstrated the difference between Chen Yang's present strength and the condition of the other players, whose mental energy had already been depleted by the struggle. With the other participants incapacitated, the Black Lotus continued transforming Chen Ran's consciousness into Chen Yang's likeness, allowing Chen Yang to seize his weakened opponent directly and demand an answer to the same question: whether he would kill his own younger brother.

Chen Ran could barely resist the hand holding him, yet he still raised his middle finger at Chen Yang instead of providing the answer he wanted. Chen Yang interpreted this reaction as another attempt to avoid confronting the contradiction in Chen Ran's own beliefs. If Chen Ran truly believed that nobody could be trusted and that no identification with another person was permissible, then relying on Chen Yang at the most dangerous moment should have been impossible, particularly when Chen Yang had already threatened to kill him and possessed the strength to carry out that threat. Nevertheless, Chen Ran had used Eternal Kingdom without hesitation after receiving Chen Yang's hint, accepting the possibility that his brother was helping him despite having repeatedly been taught by Hell that survival required absolute distrust. Chen Yang argued that Chen Ran's decision to refuse the [Ghost Path Soldier] and [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique] had likewise depended upon the assumption that Chen Yang would teach him those techniques later inside No-Distance. Chen Ran had apparently believed that his brother would continue to provide him with the means to survive, even while presenting himself to the other True Self Players as someone who refused to trust anyone. Chen Yang therefore accused him of maintaining a contradiction between his stated survival theory and his actual behavior, because the very decision that had saved him from Zhang Fan's trap demonstrated that he still possessed trust in another person.

Chen Yang then forced the contradiction into a direct question by pointing out that the two possible outcomes would each determine whether Chen Ran's belief had been correct. If Chen Yang killed him, then the belief that nobody could be trusted would be vindicated, but if Chen Yang spared him, then Chen Ran would have to acknowledge that his belief was not universally correct. The difficulty was that Chen Ran had acted on the possibility of being spared even while

claiming to believe that he would be killed, meaning that his actual choice had already contradicted the rigid principle he professed to follow. Chen Yang's accusation was not simply that Chen Ran had been foolish to trust his brother, because he was deliberately testing whether Chen Ran's understanding of human nature had become completely subordinated to Hell's survival logic. Chen Ran's willingness to activate Eternal Kingdom had exposed a remaining part of his original self that still believed his brother would not abandon him, and Chen Yang intended to force that part into the open. He tightened his grip as though he could crush Chen Ran's consciousness at any moment and demanded that Chen Ran decide whether his belief was correct or wrong, leaving him with no opportunity to hide behind another joke or evade the question through silence.

Chen Ran remained silent, refusing to provide the answer Chen Yang wanted, and the stalemate continued until Chen Yang finally released him and allowed him to fall onto the ground. Rather than immediately continuing the attack, Chen Yang produced a cigarette and a chair, sat down, and mocked Chen Ran for sitting on the floor as though he were a helpless child who belonged to nobody. When Chen Ran complained that he could not get up and demanded help, Chen Yang continued portraying himself as the older brother who had merely wanted to discipline his younger sibling. He described himself as the cherished legitimate eldest son of the family, the person entrusted with authority by their grandparents and relatives, and the gold-medal henchman who was expected to carry out their wishes. The exaggerated description was intended to reassert the ordinary relationship between the brothers after Chen Yang had just subjected Chen Ran to an overwhelming display of violence, suggesting that he regarded the confrontation as a form of discipline rather than an actual attempt to kill him. However, the sniper rifle still rested between Chen Yang's knees, making it impossible to interpret the exchange as a complete return to safety. When Chen Ran asked him to put the weapon away, Chen Yang admitted that he had originally intended to execute Chen Ran if he answered even one word incorrectly, but had simply forgotten to remove the rifle after changing his mind about continuing the questioning. The casual admission did not make his earlier threat harmless, because it confirmed that the possibility of killing Chen Ran had been genuine and that Chen Yang could still decide to resume the attack if his brother's response displeased him.

Chen Yang then criticized Chen Ran's habit of relying on the idea that deterrence fundamentally meant mutual destruction, explaining that an academic would express the same principle as the game-theoretical relationship in which a loss for both sides could be preferable to allowing one side to win at the expense of the other. Chen Ran objected to his brother's tendency to present ordinary observations as if they were profound academic discoveries, but Chen Yang dismissed the objection by comparing it to their childhood disagreements. When Chen Ran was young, Chen Yang would warn him about an approaching puddle and tell him not to step into it, only for Chen Ran to step into it anyway and later admit that the puddle had been there. Chen Yang claimed that his advice had repeatedly been correct, but that Chen Ran disliked acknowledging its value because he did not want to demonstrate obedience in front of his older brother. He further argued that Chen Ran simultaneously wanted recognition from him and wanted to prove himself by challenging him, creating the familiar contradiction of a younger sibling who needed his older brother's approval but resisted accepting the guidance through which that approval might be earned. Chen Ran considered this interpretation another example of Chen Yang

pretending to understand everything, yet he did not seriously disprove the underlying point. The exchange allowed Chen Yang to move the conversation away from the immediate threat of Possession and return to the question of whether Chen Ran had genuinely believed in Hell's survival logic or had merely adopted it as a defense against the possibility of trusting another person.

Chen Yang returned to the earlier events inside the Internal Strife Secret Chamber and argued that he had deliberately refrained from defeating the others immediately, despite possessing enough power to kill them at the beginning. He had pretended to be evenly matched with the other three because he wanted to observe their reactions and test whether their behavior remained consistent with their professed beliefs. Chen Ran's response had been particularly revealing because he used Eternal Kingdom without hesitation after Chen Yang supplied the necessary hint, showing that deep down he still believed his brother would help him rather than immediately exploit his vulnerability. Chen Yang therefore concluded that Chen Ran had not been completely consumed by the survival theory taught to him by Di Wu Zhi Yi, even if Hell's repeated lessons in distrust had made him believe that the principle was correct. His decision not to kill Chen Ran followed from that conclusion, because Chen Ran's behavior demonstrated that he still possessed the capacity to recognize another person and maintain a bond of trust despite the apparent logic of the environment. Chen Yang argued that Chen Ran still believed himself to be a good person beneath the accumulated effects of Hell, and he warned him that there was still time to return to the right path before he became like his future self. The single Liar Killer that Future Chen Ran had provided was therefore not only a clue intended to help Chen Ran escape the arrangement, but also a clue that Chen Yang could use to draw his younger brother back toward a decision that preserved his original nature.

The meaning of this test becomes clearer when viewed through the structure of the Reincarnation Layer. Chen Ran had previously interpreted the influence of the Superego as a source of distortion, assuming that the pressure it exerted on his thinking made him less capable of reaching an objective conclusion. Yet the events inside the Secret Chamber suggested that the problem was not simply the Superego's influence, because Mind Cultivation itself could be responsible for producing the rigid survival logic that prevented people from trusting one another. Mind Cultivation undeniably increased a player's strength, but its development also reinforced the belief that every person represented a potential threat and that cooperation was merely another opportunity for betrayal. Ling Chi's outcome on the true timeline illustrated the consequence of this principle: even a person who pursued peace could become trapped in a cycle of distrust and violence when his own cultivation prevented him from relying on others. If every player attempted to reach the desired outcome alone, then no one could escape the arrangement through trust, because each person would regard cooperation as a liability and eventually turn against those who might have helped them. Breaking this pattern therefore required a player to recognize that the survival theory was not an absolute truth, allowing the Superego to influence them toward finding like-minded companions rather than treating every relationship as a means of exploitation.

This was the purpose of the Reincarnation Layer, which had been constructed through Supreme Perfect Enlightenment's Mind Cultivation and existed within the player's own heart. The layer did

not need to imprison someone inside an ordinary physical space, because its function was to force the person to repeat the same fundamental mistake whenever they attempted to overcome their circumstances. No matter how many times such a player repeated their life, the result would remain failure if their underlying understanding of human relationships never changed. Chen Yang had therefore designed the apparent struggle inside the Secret Chamber as a test of Chen Ran's heart, deliberately allowing the other players to appear dangerous enough that Chen Ran would have to choose between preserving himself through absolute distrust and accepting that his brother might still be someone he could rely upon. The test was effective precisely because Chen Ran had accumulated so much evidence supporting Hell's survival theory that his decision could not be explained as simple ignorance. He knew that betrayal was possible, understood the danger of the other True Self Players, and had experienced the consequences of trusting people in a world where deception was fundamental to survival. Yet when the decisive moment arrived, he still acted according to his underlying identification with Chen Yang, showing that the survival theory had never completely replaced his original values.

The previous Chen Ran, who believed that Hell's survival theory was the only rational way to live, was consequently the person who lost the test, because his own rigid understanding of the world had prevented him from recognizing what his behavior actually revealed. The success of the test allowed the Reincarnation Layer inside his heart to be Deciphered, and what emerged was the true Chen Ran who had existed before death, a person still possessing flesh-and-blood emotions, a sense of righteousness, and the capacity to form meaningful relationships with others. The distinction between the two was not that the new Chen Ran had suddenly become unaware of danger or incapable of acting strategically, but that he no longer needed to subordinate every decision to the assumption that nobody could be trusted. The idealist had initially been a materialist in the sense that the facts of Hell had forced him to accept the survival theory as the only workable description of reality, yet the questioning of his heart reversed that process and compelled him to confront the values he had tried to suppress. His victory therefore depended on recognizing that the logic of survival could be useful in understanding threats without being sufficient to determine how every relationship should be treated. By refusing to answer Chen Yang's question with a simplistic declaration and allowing his actual behavior to expose the contradiction, Chen Ran reached the point where the Reincarnation Layer could no longer compel him to repeat the same cycle of distrust.

The change was immediately reflected in the River of Time, where the Liar Killer at Future Chen Ran's waist flashed. The eleven Half-Step True Self Mind-Cultivation Players watching the confrontation recognized the significance of the change, because the Liar Killer's disappearance and subsequent reappearance indicated that it no longer belonged to the previous Future Chen Ran but to a newly established version of his future. Since Chen Ran had already Deciphered the Reincarnation Layer, the previous arrangement had lost the condition that had justified continued interference, and the True Self Players had no reason to prolong the struggle. Supreme Goodness is Like Water nodded to the others before disappearing, while Jie Mie took one final look at the Liar Killer and realized that he had been deceived, responding with an inward sigh before withdrawing. The masked woman then remarked that the young man had walked out of the dream of the jianghu and began moving downstream along the River of Time.

Their departure showed that the change in Chen Ran's state had altered the larger timeline enough to make the immediate confrontation unnecessary, allowing the other True Self Players to stop fighting and accept the new outcome.

Chen Ran gradually recovered enough to open his eyes and found Chen Yang still present inside No-Distance, where the two brothers continued talking instead of immediately leaving the instance. Chen Yang snapped his fingers, causing his mental body to fade slightly while the Spirit overflowing from him helped Chen Ran's mental body recover. Chen Ran asked whether Chen Yang intended to remain there, then suggested that he might as well eliminate Yue Guanshan while leaving, but Chen Yang dismissed the suggestion as wishful thinking. The reason was not that Yue Guanshan could be ignored, but that the entire instance formed part of an agreement between the True Self Players, who had allowed the Secret Chamber to be created under an arrangement in which each faction accepted a different possible outcome. The Trio on the River of Time had accepted the possibility that Chen Ran might die inside the instance, while the Omniscient and Omnipotent had accepted the possibility that Chen Yang would remain on the true timeline. If Chen Yang immediately killed Yue Guanshan, he would overturn the Omniscient and Omnipotent's side of the arrangement by destroying the meaning of the instance, and they would respond by overturning the other side's arrangement as well. Under those circumstances, neither brother would escape, because the larger conflict would no longer be constrained by the transaction that had allowed the Secret Chamber to function in the first place. Chen Yang consequently warned Chen Ran that Yue Guanshan was a much more formidable opponent than he appeared, as his cultivation through Supreme Perfect Enlightenment had given him a solid foundation and he had survived an Ego Loss Tribulation that would have killed most people whose cultivation was interfered with during the process.

Chen Yang further explained that although Chen Ran and Chen Yang could rely on their systems to elevate their mental strength beyond Yue Guanshan's, this did not automatically make them superior in a battle of wits. Yue Guanshan was a Ghost Immortal who had survived the Ego Loss Tribulation and forcibly completed the Loss of Self, demonstrating that his accumulated foundation was exceptionally profound despite his apparent lack of luck. Chen Yang believed that Yue Guanshan would probably not lose to him in a contest of pure intelligence, and that defeating Chen Ran would be more than sufficient for someone with Yue Guanshan's capabilities. Chen Ran accepted the warning because the survival of a person through a heavily interfered Ego Loss Tribulation implied that their cultivation was not easily overturned through ordinary manipulation. The conversation then turned to Chen Ran's habit of expressing strategic principles through phrases such as the essence of deterrence being mutual destruction, which Chen Yang criticized as the sort of language that immediately revealed a lack of academic knowledge to anyone familiar with game theory. Chen Ran countered that the Academic School was excessively arrogant and that Folk Thought and Folk Philosophy had their own merits, especially because their concepts could be understood by teammates without requiring specialized terminology. Chen Yang responded that his earlier use of the principles that a king does not meet another king and that the active party differs from the passive party had also been expressed in ordinary language, yet Chen Ran had not necessarily understood their full implications. Chen Ran fell silent, because the events inside the Secret Chamber had

demonstrated that he had grasped the practical outcome of those principles without necessarily understanding the cultivation theory underlying them.

Chen Yang then returned to their childhood relationship and asked whether Chen Ran remembered the time he had lied to him, reminding him that he had once said he could forgive his younger brother for lying about many things but would never tolerate a second occurrence. The question created tension because Chen Yang was not asking about an ordinary childhood incident; he was testing whether Chen Ran understood that being accepted as his brother did not mean that every action could be disregarded simply because the final result appeared satisfactory. Chen Ran demanded to know what Chen Yang intended to ask, but the latter eventually smiled and explained that he was merely curious. As his younger brother, Chen Ran was theoretically someone whose final outcome should matter more than the precise route he had taken to reach it, and since he had now returned to the right path by Deciphering the Reincarnation Layer, Chen Yang should have been able to leave the matter alone. Nevertheless, he could not suppress his curiosity about the moment immediately before he had been about to crush Chen Ran: whether Chen Ran had possessed enough strength to kill him instantly or whether the person standing before him had actually been Chen Ran's Soldier rather than his true consciousness. This question followed directly from Chen Ran's behavior in the Secret Chamber, because his refusal to learn the two cultivation methods seemed inconsistent with how quickly he had understood the underlying principles of the struggle. Chen Ran nevertheless denied having any knowledge of the Ghost Path Soldier and mocked Chen Yang for assuming that he did.

Chen Yang then explained why the possibility remained plausible. The principle that a king does not meet another king had a specific term within the Academic School, the Law of Increasing Entropy, while the distinction between the active and passive parties referred to the principle that Double-Loss was Greater than Single-Win. Both theories formed core components of the Mind Cultivation Method for the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique]. Ordinarily, deducing that technique required an extremely high attainment in [Unity of Heaven and Man], because its underlying method depended on understanding how those different strategic principles operated within a person's consciousness. However, if someone could deduce the Law of Increasing Entropy and the Double-Loss principle from the seemingly ordinary statements Chen Yang had made during the Secret Chamber struggle, the barrier to reconstructing the cultivation method would be greatly reduced. Chen Ran had already demonstrated his ability to analyze the practical significance of those principles, and if he had independently reconstructed the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique] during the earlier confrontation, he could then have combined its mental activation effect with the insights gained from [Ghost Path Soldier: Supreme Goodness is Like Water, Joy] to deduce the Ghost Path Soldier cultivation method as well. With the Nine-Turn Ghost God Realm, the Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique, and Ghost Path Soldier all available, Chen Ran would have possessed three True Self systems, making it entirely plausible that he could have killed Chen Yang instantly during their confrontation.

Chen Ran interpreted the explanation as an elaborate attempt by Chen Yang to provide him with the two cultivation methods without openly admitting that he wanted to help him. The supposed

question about whether Chen Ran had already acquired the techniques therefore became another example of Chen Yang constructing a complicated academic explanation to preserve his image as a knowledgeable master, when he could simply have offered the techniques directly. Chen Yang admitted that maintaining that image mattered to him, then asked Chen Ran whether he wanted the Mind Cultivation Methods for the [Three Corpses God-Transformation Technique] and [Ghost Path Soldier] passed to him immediately, provided that Chen Ran would cultivate them before challenging him to another fight. Chen Ran asked why Chen Yang had not offered them in the Secret Chamber, explaining that all three participants knew he belonged to the true timeline and might have interfered with him if he had acquired the techniques openly. Chen Yang challenged him to accept the offer now, and Chen Ran eagerly agreed because he believed that once his Spirit had recovered, he could use the new systems to beat his brother. Chen Yang then deliberately displayed his sniper rifle and remarked that the bullets were big and round, immediately causing Chen Ran to retract his request and insist that he no longer wanted the techniques. Even when Chen Yang repeatedly offered to pass them over, Chen Ran refused and swore that he did not want them, showing that he understood the threat of being used as the target of Chen Yang's next experiment.

Before Chen Yang could leave, Chen Ran asked whether Zhang Fan and Ling Chi might have been actors whom Chen Yang had arranged to participate in the Secret Chamber. Chen Ran's suspicion originated from the transaction governing the entire instance. The Trio had allowed the Omniscient and Omnipotent to create an opportunity to kill Chen Ran, while the Omniscient and Omnipotent had accepted the possibility that Chen Yang would remain on the true timeline. The Secret Chamber had been created to make the outcome dependent on the abilities of the participants rather than allowing either faction to dictate it completely. If Chen Ran's survival depended on whether he could kill Yue Guanshan, then Chen Yang's ability to remain on the true timeline should likewise have depended on whether he could overcome his opponents, who were Zhang Fan, Ling Chi, and Chen Ran. Their starting strengths had appeared roughly equal when they entered the Internal Strife Secret Chamber, but Chen Yang had eventually gained an advantage by using Zhang Fan's skills to learn Ghost Path Soldier. This created a contradiction that Chen Ran could not ignore, because Zhang Fan possessed [Dust Ruins Spirit Transformation] and should theoretically have been capable of traveling to different points along the River of Time to steal the same systems before Chen Yang could acquire them. If Zhang Fan had genuinely wanted Ghost Path Soldier, waiting until the internal conflict was almost over would have been an irrational strategy when he had the temporal abilities necessary to obtain it in advance.

Chen Yang attempted to explain this discrepancy by pointing out that Ling Chi's enlightenment of Ghost Path Soldier was a fixed point in time. He had traveled directly to that point and left countless clones in the surrounding timeline, preventing Zhang Fan from stealing the system whenever he approached the moment of enlightenment. Furthermore, the Ninth Restoration Time could restore the relevant timeline and remove Zhang Fan's memory of repeatedly attempting to obtain the technique, meaning that Zhang Fan would be blocked infinitely without retaining the knowledge necessary to change his approach. Chen Ran nevertheless identified a flaw in this explanation: if Chen Yang could prevent Zhang Fan from stealing Ghost Path Soldier during and after Ling Chi's enlightenment, then Zhang Fan could simply travel to a point before

that enlightenment occurred and wait for the opportunity to acquire the system before Chen Yang established his interception. The existence of a fixed point did not explain why Zhang Fan could never reach a time outside the range of Chen Yang's preparations, nor did it explain why someone possessing such a powerful temporal ability would continue allowing his opponent to dictate the conditions under which the technique could be acquired. Chen Yang could only respond that Zhang Ran's failure to do so was something that would have to be explained by Zhang Fan himself, leaving the contradiction unresolved.

Chen Ran concluded that Zhang Fan must already have stolen Ghost Path Soldier and that Chen Yang should theoretically have been unable to obtain it independently, yet the result of the Secret Chamber was precisely the opposite. The simplest explanation was that Zhang Fan had acted throughout the confrontation, pretending not to possess the technique while allowing Chen Yang's schemes to proceed as though Chen Yang had gained a decisive advantage through his own preparations. Zhang Fan's apparent inability to respond would then have been part of a Plan B rather than evidence that he had truly been cornered. This plan would have required Zhang Fan and Chen Yang to know one another before entering the Secret Chamber and to exchange their respective cultivation systems in advance. Zhang Fan could plant a Black Lotus in Chen Yang's consciousness, while Chen Yang would arrange to bring that Black Lotus onto the true timeline through the outcome of the instance. Under such an arrangement, Zhang Fan would not need to defeat Chen Yang openly inside the chamber, because Chen Yang's successful escape would also provide a route through which Zhang Fan's influence could enter the true timeline. Zhang Fan could therefore permit Chen Yang to appear to possess the Ghost Path Soldier while retaining an alternative means of survival that did not depend on winning the immediate struggle. Chen Ran's accusation was that the supposed victory Chen Yang had achieved against Zhang Fan had been staged to conceal an agreement that already existed between them.

Chen Ran then applied the same reasoning to Ling Chi, whose behavior during the final moments of the Secret Chamber had been unusually difficult to explain. He acknowledged that he did not know Ling Chi's earlier history well enough to make claims about his motives, but he had observed the entirety of Ling Chi's actions during the confrontation and found the final decision inconsistent with the level of strategic understanding he had demonstrated beforehand. For most of the struggle, Ling Chi had acted carefully, making use of his system and recognizing the weaknesses of the other players, yet near the end he had allowed Zhang Fan to escape first and then chose suicide rather than continuing to pursue the most advantageous outcome. Chen Ran argued that the internal-strife Secret Chamber was a Wild Space created by players, meaning that its existence and rules directly affected Ling Chi. Once Future Chen Ran lifted the blockade, Ling Chi should have been capable of destroying the chamber with his own system. If Zhang Fan were eliminated first, Chen Yang's skills would no longer be able to determine the chamber's outcome, and Ling Chi would become the person whose ability was needed to destroy the remaining structure. This would place the initiative in Ling Chi's hands and allow him to demand that Black Lotuses be planted in Chen Ran's and Chen Yang's consciousnesses, leaving him with a method of threatening both opponents instead of relying on either one's goodwill.

Ling Chi therefore had no obvious reason to accept the plan that allowed Zhang Fan to escape before the final confrontation, because eliminating Zhang Fan first would have preserved Ling Chi's unique leverage and prevented the other two from coordinating their survival. His sudden decision to commit suicide was especially suspicious when considered alongside his knowledge that the chamber itself could be destroyed through his system. If he had genuinely wanted to survive independently, he could have used that advantage to seize control of the endgame rather than allowing the arrangement to collapse into a duel between the Chen brothers. Chen Ran consequently suspected that Ling Chi had also been acting according to a prior agreement with Chen Yang. The intended result would be that Chen Yang could carry both Zhang Fan's and Ling Chi's Black Lotuses onto the true timeline while presenting the events inside the Secret Chamber as though he had defeated two independent opponents. Chen Yang's apparent success would then conceal a larger operation in which he was not merely escaping the timeline controlled by the Ninth True Self Player, but also smuggling the two other True Self Players' influence into the true timeline under an arrangement that the remaining True Self Players might not recognize until it was too late.

Chen Yang responded with irritation, accusing Chen Ran of developing the habit of inventing crimes whenever he wanted to obtain benefits. Chen Ran replied that his deductions gave him a righteous cause to request compensation, because Chen Yang's apparent schemes had already provided enough evidence for him to suspect that the promised escape and the possession of the other players were connected to a larger agreement. Chen Yang eventually asked what Chen Ran actually wanted, allowing the discussion to move away from the accusation and toward the conditions under which the two brothers would cooperate after leaving the instance. Chen Ran first requested that Chen Yang resolve the Mental Seal imposed on Qiu Yinong by the Underworld, explaining that Qiu Yinong had been marked when she previously suffered from Loss of Self and that the seal could create problems later if Chen Yang began reorganizing the Underworld. Chen Yang agreed to help remove the problem after he had finished organizing the Underworld, confirming that he expected to possess a member of the Andersen Squad first and then use that position to carry out his plans. Chen Ran next requested detailed information about Shen Yuwei, Mei Zhixu, and Yu Xiangwan, including their lives before and after entering Hell and the complete details of their respective skills, and Chen Yang accepted this request without hesitation. Chen Ran then announced that he had one final question, prompting Chen Yang to glare at him suspiciously before Chen Ran asked who the person behind Lin Xuan was.

Chen Yang answered without hesitation that the person behind Lin Xuan was Lin Ou. Before Chen Ran could continue questioning him, Chen Yang sensed three extremely strong mental fluctuations and his expression changed from alarm to recognition, which meant that the immediate problem had shifted from the question of Lin Xuan's identity to the people approaching them. He told Chen Ran that the conversation had to end because their real opponents had arrived, then withdrew from Chen Ran's No-Distance. In the outside space, Chen Yang opened his eyes while occupying Zhang Fan's body, with Chu Yun still collapsed nearby, and immediately ordered both of them to get up because the group outside was no longer something they could ignore while continuing to discuss their plans. Zhang Fan lit a cigarette and walked over to Chen Yang, remarking that he had already warned him the plan was unreliable and that they had nevertheless been discovered. This reaction showed that

Zhang Fan had understood the possibility of interception in advance, even if he had accepted the plan because it offered a chance to escape the Ninth True Self Player's control. Chu Yun, after getting up and stretching the body he had just occupied, said that he had encountered no resistance when possessing this person and asked whether the host was one of Chen Yang's fanatical believers. Chen Yang rejected that explanation and said that the host was repaying a debt of gratitude, which distinguished deliberate cooperation from obedience produced by fanaticism. The three then stood together, smoking and looking toward one point in the distance, because each could sense three powerful spirits waiting outside the instance with the patience of predators waiting for their prey; Chen Yang's hope that An Sheng would not be among them also showed that he considered An Sheng a particularly dangerous possibility within the approaching group.

Their Liar Killer panels then showed that the time limit on Chen Ran's Eternal Kingdom ban had expired, and the three exchanged glances before immediately disappearing from the Secret Chamber and reappearing in an unnamed space. The timing mattered because they acted as soon as the displayed restriction ended rather than remaining in the chamber to test whether their freedom had been restored in practice. Three figures were already waiting for them. The first was a boy who looked about eleven or twelve years old, despite emitting mental fluctuations at the Superego level, and he announced that the Whisperer Alliance Leader had ordered the arrest of Chen Yang, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi as cross-realm smugglers, while offering to spare their lives if they surrendered. His voice made the three dizzy and gave them the sensation that they were about to fall into an illusion, showing that he was not merely a messenger delivering an order but a combatant whose speech itself exerted a mental effect. The second figure was a noble-looking youth in a long robe, carrying a folding fan and dressed in a manner associated with the Ming Dynasty; his sharp eyebrows, bright eyes, and imposing bearing were matched by another set of Superego-level mental fluctuations. He issued a parallel declaration on behalf of the Liar Killer Alliance Leader, saying that he had come to apprehend them and that resistance would be answered with lethal force.

The presence of one representative from each alliance established that the pursuit was coordinated at the highest level of both organizations rather than being a unilateral operation by one side. The third figure, standing between the two youths, then turned around and revealed a face identical to An Sheng's, while the mental pressure coming from him exceeded that of either person at his sides. This was a Nine-Star An Sheng. Zhang Fan's later complaint about a Five-Star Chen Yang facing three Superego Players does not contradict An Sheng's Nine-Star rank, because Star level and state-of-mind attainment describe different aspects of cultivation; the danger lay in having to face two Superego-level enforcers and an even stronger Nine-Star opponent at the same time. The lineup was therefore not merely a formal arrest party, but a force assembled to stop the three from using their skills to escape or establish themselves on the true timeline.

Zhang Fan responded by raising his middle finger, because the scale of the lineup exposed how little protection the arrangement had actually given them. The transaction had allowed Chen Yang a chance to remain on the true timeline, but it had not given Zhang Fan and Ling Chi permission to do the same, so the three of them had violated the agreed boundary by

attempting to stay together. The arrival of the two alliance representatives was therefore consistent with the punishment that should follow the breach, but a Nine-Star An Sheng was more than they had expected. His complaint about a Five-Star Chen Yang being made to face three Superego Players reflected that mismatch, while An Sheng's Nine-Star rank meant the most formidable of the three was not simply another opponent at the same tier. Chen Yang's chance to remain was consequently not a safe exemption from the conflict, because it still depended on surviving the opposition created by the plan itself. An Sheng appeared to understand the question raised by their expressions and explained that he had received a strong premonition that the three would try to possess his teammates, which was why he had come in person. Their usual method could have been to use their skills to take control of the available hosts while keeping An Sheng occupied, allowing them to exploit the gap between the person fighting them and the body they needed in order to establish themselves on the true timeline. That approach was no longer reliable, however, because the trio could sense that the skills possessed by the boy and the Ming-dynasty youth were probably selected specifically to counter their own abilities.

If the two accompanying figures could neutralize the possession or skill-based maneuvers on which Chen Yang, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi depended, then the trio could not simply concentrate on restraining An Sheng and assume that the rest of the plan would work. The fact that An Sheng had brought both figures was itself evidence that he had prepared for their likely response rather than relying on his own strength alone; otherwise, the three opponents would not have needed this particular combination of abilities to stop the trio. With all six people facing one another, An Sheng threw away his cigarette and declared that their path was closed, directly naming Ling Chi, Chen Yang, and Zhang Fan. He then released his World of the Heart, which descended over the entire group and enclosed everyone present within it. This action turned the confrontation from an arrest order and a standoff into an immediate contest over the battlefield itself: instead of attacking one person first or allowing the trio time to negotiate, An Sheng imposed his own world on all of them at once.

The scene does not establish the result of that clash, but it does establish that the trio's attempt to enter and remain on the true timeline had drawn a response from the two alliances and from An Sheng personally, and that their opponents had arranged their abilities to obstruct the very methods the trio would most naturally use to escape. After Chen Yang left Chen Ran's No-Distance, another person appeared there and asked why Chen Ran had not killed him. Chen Ran answered by explaining that the principle called 'Lose-Lose is greater than a Single-Win' could be reduced to a particular kind of resentment: when someone sees another person gaining more, he would rather lose as well than allow the other person to profit. The questioner was judging the decision through that mindset and therefore could not see any benefit in allowing Chen Yang, Zhang Fan, and Ling Chi to remain on the true timeline.

Chen Ran's response was not that their continued existence was harmless, but that a decision had to be assessed according to what it made possible as well as what it allowed an opponent to gain; refusing an outcome solely because another side might benefit could sacrifice a much larger opportunity. The opportunity depended on An Sheng's obsession with war. Because he wanted to break the blockade imposed by Unity of Heaven and Man, the three True Self Players

remaining on the true timeline could become important if that blockade were ever removed. Chen Ran reasoned that, once the restriction was broken, people with the potential of Chen Yang, Ling Chi, and Zhang Fan could advance to Half-Step True Self rather than remaining limited by their current positions. Their roles would also allow their systems and followers to develop in parallel: Chen Yang would organize the Underworld, Ling Chi would organize the Death Row Inmates, and Zhang Fan would plant the Dao Heart Demonic Seed. Adding an increasingly restless An Sheng to those three developments would create a situation in which the Eighteenth Floor could be destabilized and the conflict could expand into a war against the two Alliances. The significance of that war would not be limited to the survival of the Underworld, the Death Row Inmates, or Zhang Fan's influence; for the True Self Players, it could become a struggle over the momentum and destiny of the Ultimate Battle itself. The other person gradually understood the implication and articulated it as a question: once the four had developed enough strength, their conflict could disrupt the Eighteenth Floor and lead to war against the two Alliances, while the True Self Players would be using that war to compete over the direction of the Ultimate Battle. Chen Ran confirmed the deduction, but he also distinguished the motives of the different parties involved.

From Chen Yang's, Ling Chi's, and Zhang Fan's perspective, refusing to take a risk would leave them as pawns controlled by the Ninth True Self Player, so staying on the true timeline was a gamble against that control. The Trio on the River of Time also had a reason to allow the arrangement, because they needed forces capable of testing the foundations of the two Alliances. The Omniscient and Omnipotent, however, had a different incentive: the Underworld, the Death Row Inmates, and the Dao Heart Demonic Seed associated with Nine-Star Zhang Fan were all dangerous precisely because they could remain concealed in the shadows, protected by the stone-pillar rules or by common sense. From their perspective, it would be preferable for these threats to unite and reveal themselves voluntarily, allowing the two Alliances to eliminate them together rather than having to find and confront each one separately.

An Sheng remained the uncontrolled variable in this arrangement, so none of the parties could assume that the outcome would follow the structure they had predicted. Chen Ran gave the possibility of learning other systems and killing Chen Yang as an example: if he acquired enough power to kill his brother in a counterattack, then the plans built around Chen Yang's continued existence would collapse immediately. That possibility mattered because the competing sides were not operating from a complete view of the future; each was making decisions using the portion of the structure it could perceive, while the actions of the other participants could alter the conditions on which its calculations depended. The fact that several factions could temporarily benefit from the same arrangement did not mean that their interests were identical or that their predictions would remain correct.

Their incentives overlapped only while the relevant players, systems, and constraints remained in place, so any change to those variables could reverse the expected result. When the other person asked about his next plans, Chen Ran did not answer and instead exited No-Distance. The physical consequence of the earlier struggle became apparent at once: his legs gave way and he collapsed onto the floor, forcing him to switch states quickly. He attempted to change into the Half-Step Super-Self state, but his head struck the floor hard enough that he immediately

switched back to the Ego Extreme Realm. His mental strength had been crippled across all three states by Chen Yang, so the fact that he had survived the confrontation and continued reasoning about the larger conflict did not mean that he had recovered enough to move normally or use his systems without consequences. He then examined his teammates and finally focused on Han Fei, whose Black Lotus had been crushed by the True Self Players on the River of Time; Chen Ran therefore judged that Han Fei should now be free of Zhang Fan's influence, which removed a significant reason to avoid bringing him closer to the team. Chen Ran already had a good impression of Han Fei and considered inviting him to join the team after the instance ended, but he recognized that Han Fei's skills overlapped with Eternal Kingdom.

That overlap was not simply a reason to reject him, because Eternal Kingdom would become harder for Chen Ran to use freely once he reached Seven-Star: at that level it could break through the boundary of an instance, making its activation consequential beyond the immediate battlefield. Chen Ran would therefore have reason to avoid using the skill casually even when it would otherwise be useful. Han Fei's skills, combined with Jiang Zhe's, could produce a weaker version of Eternal Kingdom, giving the team another way to obtain a similar effect without requiring Chen Ran to activate his own ability every time. The timing made the recruitment particularly useful: just as Chen Ran expected his own skill to become too dangerous to employ without careful consideration, the combination of Han Fei's and Jiang Zhe's abilities offered a substitute that could preserve some of its function while reducing the need to expose Eternal Kingdom.