

Niu Youdao - Plan in the Heavenly Realm

Setting:

In the current world, there are 7 states: Yan, Chu, Jin, Song, Han, Qi, and Wei. Each state has many small sects, along with 3 major sects supporting each state to maintain the balance of power.

- Besides the 7 states, there are people outside the borders known as the Overseas.

- Piao Miao Pavilion: An organization established by the Nine Supreme Beings—the strongest cultivators in the world—to govern forces everywhere.

Currently, while intense war was breaking out everywhere, the time came for the opening of the Holy Realm, the land ruled by the Nine Supreme Beings. The states were forced to cease war for one year.

After inspecting the number of participants, Piao Miao Pavilion revised the list to include rogue cultivators. They saw that there were too many rogue cultivators in the Jianghu, so sending them in to cull their numbers would consolidate Piao Miao Pavilion's power.

Specifically, 10,000 rogue cultivators would participate, including those from the Overseas.

Niu Youdao, the protagonist of the story, was originally a rogue cultivator, but the career he built in Yan State was immense, bringing along many enemies as well as those who wanted to cooperate with him for profit.

- After hearing the news that he was unexpectedly put on the Holy Realm list, he went to meet the head of an assassin organization named Xiao Yue Pavilion for help. He was given spies embedded within the forces of the 7 states to use as protective talismans; how to use them was up to him.

(Niu Youdao's key interest relationships to note, as they relate to his upcoming plan):

Wu Zhaohang, Yun Huan, and Yun Ji: 3 teammates trusted by him because Niu Youdao provided them with benefits that only he could offer. For simplicity, regarding the three major sects of Yan State, only the key figures in this arc will be mentioned:

- Chu Fengping: This old man plans to cooperate with Niu Youdao to gain benefits from him in Yan State.

- Shan Hai: This old man is fairly neutral and also wants to cooperate with Niu Youdao to gain benefits for his sect.

- Yan Li: An elder of the Zijin Cave—the sect inviting Niu Youdao to join. However, due to the Holy Realm, this matter is put aside for now. Yan Li has been tasked with protecting Niu Youdao inside the Holy Realm to ensure his safe return.

All 3 Yan State sects want to invite Niu Youdao and are willing to help, but if they cannot protect him, they plan to leave him to fend for himself and find other ways to gain benefits. Thus, cooperation among the 3 sects is very fragile.

Beginning of the Holy Realm: Participants must gather as many "Spirit Seeds" as possible and will receive rewards for ranking first.

Initial Developments:

Upon first entering the gate of the Holy Realm, Niu Youdao was blocked and provoked by the 3 sects of Zhao State due to a prior grudge. He understood that if he didn't deal with this matter right now, he might be bullied while inside the Holy Realm. Immediately, he drew his sword and wiped out 80% of the Zhao State people. Because the commotion was too great, it alarmed Piao Miao Pavilion. After a bout of arguing and reasoning, Niu Youdao was given the punishment of having to take 1st place this time, or else he would be executed.

Main Developments:

Right from the very first day entering the Holy Realm, when the search for Spirit Seeds had not even officially begun, Niu Youdao secretly approached the area of Piao Miao Pavilion's disciples. Taking advantage of a moment when no one was paying attention while they were

bathing, he stole a set of uniforms, then released a wild boar to serve as a distraction and the "culprit." This was the preparation step for a long-term plan later on.

The following day, because Chu Fengping failed to recruit Niu Youdao to join him, he turned hostile and used his influence to pressure the other two sects into not offering him support. Both Yan Li and Shan Hai wanted to mediate, but they couldn't, as confronting Chu Fengping at that time risked triggering a civil war. Facing this situation, Niu Youdao took the initiative to separate from the three sects, deciding to find his own path to survival. Knowing it would be very difficult to compete for 1st place, he had already prepared an alternative plan, in which stealing the uniform was a key link in the scheme.
First, he wanted to target the Overseas cultivators, but before going to seek out this crowd, he needed to lay the groundwork for a successful persuasion.

The next day, together with his 3 teammates—Wu Zhaohang, Yun Huan, and Yun Ji—he went looking for disciples of various sects everywhere and encountered 3 disciples from a sect of another state, the Tianhang Sect. He approached them, sent a probing signal, and confirmed that Xu Fuhua was his spy. He then ordered him to eliminate the other 2 members and report back that they were attacked by the Overseas forces.

Furthermore, spreading this news meant Tianhang Sect would search for the Overseas forces on his behalf so he wouldn't need to look for them himself, and they would report back if the Four Seas group was spotted.
10 days later, he met up with that spy again according to the signal and told him to end the operation to avoid detection.

=> planning, strategy.

Next, just like before, Niu Youdao continued to search for his spies across other states and arrived at a group of disciples from Wei State. Niu Youdao proactively went up to ask about their leading elder, Yu Xianding. The disciples of Wei State were extremely on guard. Everyone knew Niu Youdao was being targeted by Piao Miao Pavilion; if pushed to a corner, robbing resources and killing people could very well happen.

However, Niu Youdao reassured them that he wasn't stupid enough to mess with a team backed by an elder. Seeing this, the disciples pointed out the direction. Niu Youdao immediately led his group away. His real purpose was to use the Wei State force to find more of his spies.
According to his reasoning, inside the Holy Realm, all forces chose to scatter and search for Spirit Seeds. Since the range was too vast, gathering everyone in one place was impossible; running back and forth would be an extreme waste of time.

Therefore, the elders of each state usually only specified an approximate direction for the next rally point, and after meeting up, they would disperse once again.

The Wei State disciples didn't know exactly where Yu Xianding was, but the place they pointed to was definitely the next gathering location for the Wei State force.
By evening, Niu Youdao indeed met the three elders of Wei State. He said he only wanted to stay overnight for fear of being assassinated on the road. The three elders saw nothing

suspicious about this, so they agreed. That night, under the pretext of gathering firewood, he secretly made contact with the spy Xia Xinruo.

At noon the next day, following the secret signs left behind, he sought them out, killed four Wei State disciples, and had Xia Xinruo return to report that the entire team was ambushed by Overseas cultivators.
Not long after, while leaving together with Xia Xinruo, Niu Youdao encountered a group of Zhao State cultivators. This time, he put on the Piao Miao Pavilion uniform he had stolen earlier, posing as someone from Piao Miao Pavilion to deceive the Zhao State cultivators. He demanded that they bring Chen Ziphei to meet him. After Chen Ziphei appeared, everything proceeded as before. A total wipeout.

However, this time Niu Youdao did not tell Chen Ziphei to frame the Overseas group. He asked about the current situation of the three Zhao State sects.

Chen Ziphei replied that after losing their elder at the Holy Realm entrance, although the three Zhao State sects still cooperated to handle common affairs, they no longer had anyone with enough prestige to make major decisions.

They had considered joining other forces, but feared being taken advantage of. Upon hearing this, Niu Youdao immediately changed his mind. He began to secretly track the Zhao State cultivators' movements through the code marks left by Chen Ziphei. Sometime later, he finally traced the whereabouts of the Overseas cultivators. But Niu Youdao was in no rush to show himself. He knew it was not yet time.

Three months later, Niu Youdao's group of four had quietly searched through almost all the forces once.
This time, the target was his spy Li Yude, a disciple of the Qi Yun Sect from Jin State. At first, everything went just like the previous times: eliminate everyone traveling with him, then shift the blame onto the Overseas crowd. However, variables began to emerge.

According to Li Yude, the Jin State faction was extremely overbearing; after their disciples were killed, they would definitely return to investigate to the very end. Even he began to fear getting exposed. Not long after, Niu Youdao realized he had lost track of one side of his spy lines.
The chain plan, which had been going smoothly, was suddenly cut short. Going back to find Li Yude was impossible, and using the old method to contact other spies wouldn't work either.

Every single time, the rogue cultivator survived unharmed while everyone else was completely wiped out. It was far too contrary to common sense. Continuing like this would easily make others realize someone was deliberately orchestrating a scheme behind the scenes.

A few days later, Niu Youdao began using smoke signals to intentionally draw people closer, but failed repeatedly. Until one day, while observing from atop a tree, he spotted a group of Overseas cultivators being hunted by the disciples of the seven states to the point of running

like stray dogs. With just one look, Niu Youdao knew his frame-up plan had succeeded. He immediately took the initiative to meet their leader.

That person was named Hong Gaitian, one of the four major leaders of the Overseas forces this time. Niu Youdao directly proposed a cooperation. He said he could help the Overseas crowd escape their current predicament. Hong Gaitian asked why the seven states had suddenly targeted the Overseas forces.

Niu Youdao merely smiled and analyzed: because this time, the opening of the Holy Realm happened at the wrong moment. The war among the seven states was forcibly halted by Piao Miao Pavilion. Afterward, Piao Miao Pavilion even modified the rules, dragging a large number of rogue cultivators into the Holy Realm. According to Piao Miao Pavilion's intent, a good portion of these rogue cultivators had to die off.

However, upon entering, most of the rogue cultivators were recruited by the seven states to gain an advantage in competing for the 1st place reward. If too many rogue cultivators died, the strength of the states would suffer losses. Therefore, they needed a scapegoat.
The Overseas cultivators were the best choice. As long as enough Overseas people were killed, the rogue cultivators under the seven states wouldn't need to die anymore. If this task wasn't fulfilled, upon exiting the Holy Realm, Piao Miao Pavilion wouldn't make things easy for the seven states.

Now that the seven states had secretly allied to hunt down the Overseas forces, if they didn't cooperate, the Overseas crowd would sooner or later be driven to their deaths in the Holy Realm. Hong Gaitian was half-believing and half-doubting, but didn't drive him away; he only said to wait until tomorrow to gather with the other 3 Overseas factions to verify whether it was true or not.

→ Now Niu Youdao's plan had its foundation established.
→ On one side were the seven states. On the other were the Overseas cultivators. He ordered his spies within the sects to kill their traveling companions, then pinned all the blame on the Overseas crowd, causing news of "Overseas cultivators ambushing and killing people" to continuously spread.

→ Initially, it was just a few small groups hunting them down. But as time went on, the scale grew larger. Gradually, all the forces of the seven states began viewing the Overseas crowd as a target that needed to be purged. Only when the Overseas forces were truly backed into a corner did Niu Youdao make his appearance.

=> deception, planning, mind reading, negotiation, info control.

The next day, Hong Gaitian led Niu Youdao's group to meet the remaining three Overseas factions. The four

Overseas forces this time consisted of:

West Sea Fu Hua
North Sea Wu Chang

South Sea Hong Gaitian
East Sea Lang Jingkong

After a round of persuasion—arguing that even if the Overseas crowd managed to survive the hunt and leave on their own, they would still be pursued everywhere by the seven states, whereas Niu Youdao possessed enough power outside to calm the states, making cooperation with him their best choice.
Furthermore, if they helped him secure 1st place, the rewards would go to them; he only needed to escape execution.

Fu Hua asked what would happen if, after helping him take 1st place, he turned his back on them once they got outside. Niu Youdao answered very swiftly: after the Holy Realm concluded, the states would still have to resume their wars, so there was no need to invite extra trouble over the Four Seas. If they still didn't trust him, they could add some binding ties. Saying so, he directly proposed becoming sworn brothers with the four Overseas leaders.
Niu Youdao knew this sworn brotherhood was purely superficial, but he still needed it to maintain the alliance.

First, Niu Youdao's objective was to target other states to rob Spirit Seeds. Meanwhile, Jin State was currently the strongest faction; after suffering losses, they would certainly spawn the intention to rob the remaining states. Niu Youdao wanted to exploit this point.

Using Jin State as a fuse to provoke hostilities with the six other states would cause both sides to wear each other down. To achieve that, he had to start with the weaker states first, such as Zhao State.

Niu Youdao understood his current situation very well: if he showed his face alone in front of the people from the seven states, he would almost certainly be hunted to death. But the crucial point was that currently, no one knew he had joined forces with the Overseas faction. Thus, the moment they saw Niu Youdao, everyone's immediate reaction would definitely be to hunt him down, never suspecting that an ambush was waiting behind him.

At this time, Fu Hua secretly mentioned to the other three that Niu Youdao, after all, was a Yan State native and couldn't possibly not care about his foundation outside; what if he was a double agent? Hearing this, the three also began to harbor suspicions toward Niu Youdao. After some time, Hong Gaitian reported having spotted the whereabouts of people from the seven states. Upon inspecting closely, Niu Youdao immediately recognized them as Yan State people. He instantly understood that this group of "superficial sworn brothers" was deliberately testing him.

Niu Youdao knew full well that if this state of suspicion continued, his subsequent plan would surely fail. Therefore, he directly stated that he would give them an answer. Afterwards, he left his three teammates behind as hostages and went alone to find the group of Zijin Cave disciples led by Yan Li.

Upon meeting, Niu Youdao merely told the disciples coldly to go back and inform Elder Yan that someone wished to see him, adding that small fries like them had no right to know what it was about, and that it was best not to let the other two sects find out.

Half a day later, Yan Li arrived alone at the mountaintop to meet him. Only after confirming that no one was following around did Niu Youdao reveal himself. Upon meeting, Yan Li also let out a sigh of relief. After all, he had long been helpless; he wanted to help Niu Youdao but was restrained by the other two sects, and in the end, could only turn a blind eye.

Niu Youdao told Yan Li directly that his goal was to take 1st place in the Holy Realm, so he needed secret support from Zijin Cave. The plan was very simple: he had pulled a group of people to work behind the scenes; the slaughtering and plundering could be left to them to handle, while Yan Li's side only needed to quietly step aside and reveal the locations of the other two sects. In addition, if his total number of Spirit Seeds fell short of competing for 1st place at the end, the Yan State side would have to help make up the difference.

Hearing this, Yan Li frowned, because if their side ranked too low, it would be very difficult to explain to the disciples below. But Niu Youdao calmly replied that it was merely an absolute worst-case scenario.

Returning that evening, Niu Youdao told the four Overseas leaders that he had gone to find an insider. Whether they believed it or not was their business; he didn't bother explaining further. Afterwards, he immediately told them to arrange someone specifically tasked with receiving messages, while Yan Li's side would quietly leave markers and positions of the other factions.

After determining the whereabouts of Chu Fengping's disciples, Niu Youdao used a large quantity of Spirit Seeds as bait, intentionally heading to an easily noticeable spot to light a fire and grill fish. He even deliberately placed a huge bag of Spirit Seeds right beside him, with the mouth of the bag half open.
Unsurprisingly, a nearby group of disciples noticed the column of smoke and quietly crept over. Upon seeing the bag of Spirit Seeds, greed instantly flared up within the entire group. They quickly split up: one person returned to report the news, while several others continued to stalk Niu Youdao.

As for Chu Fengping, after hearing the news that Niu Youdao was still alive, he was also extremely surprised. But upon learning that the opponent was carrying a massive amount of Spirit Seeds, greed immediately surged. He then consulted with another small sect master, Si Tu Yao, wanting to quietly swallow all these Spirit Seeds whole without letting the other two sects find out.

Si Tu Yao actually did not want to oppose Niu Youdao, but he also understood that if he didn't listen to Chu Fengping, their entire group would be in trouble.
Guided by the reporting disciple, a large group quickly gave chase to a mountain cave. At this moment, Niu Youdao deliberately poked his head out to observe, then immediately ducked back inside as if trying to flee. A moment later, he stepped out to face the group.

At that instant, the Overseas group immediately charged out from the shadows in an ambush. Chu Fengping's disciples had no time to react at all and were slaughtered on the spot, with only Si Tu Yao being ordered by Niu Youdao to be spared.

Niu Youdao spared Si Tu Yao because he wanted to turn him into an ally. Moreover, their group had now witnessed Chu Fengping's disciples being killed with their own eyes while standing by without saving them, so even if they returned, they would no longer have any way to explain themselves.

Following the first victory, Niu Youdao continued to use the same tactic to lure other sects. However, during the operation, he unexpectedly discovered Yan Baoru secretly tailing them. Realizing his movements had been exposed, he immediately wanted to strike to silence her. After heavily injuring and interrogating her, he learned that Yan Baoru was sent by Tong Mai, the chief eunuch beside the Yan State Emperor, to assassinate him.

Even so, Niu Youdao did not kill her, choosing instead to subdue and release her. He understood that Yan Baoru would not feel grateful for having her life spared, and might even seek ways to take revenge. But that was precisely what he wanted; he kept her alive as a pawn for a grander layout later on.

Upon returning, Niu Youdao handed all the Spirit Seeds back to the Overseas faction, stating that he had only suffered minor injuries and would take a day off to rest. The next morning, he continued executing the plan, and the next target was one of the three major sects of Han State.

The result was just like before: blinded by the Spirit Seeds, that faction chose to conceal the news without informing the other two sects, wanting to swallow all the profits for themselves. In the end, the entire group fell into an ambush and was completely wiped out, with Niu Youdao's side seizing a large quantity of Spirit Seeds.
After that battle, the four Overseas leaders immediately grew greedy, wanting to ride the momentum to rob the remaining two major sects of Han State. But Niu Youdao directly rejected it. He said that their side had also suffered considerable losses this time, and continuously targeting a single state was unnecessary. The most important thing was not to wipe out any single faction, but to cause the forces to begin suspecting and guarding against one another.

According to the reasoning of the states, if one major sect was wiped out while the other two knew nothing about it, they had very likely been backstabbed by another faction. As long as the seed of suspicion was planted, the states would automatically guard against each other.

He continued analyzing: as long as the forces of each state gradually weakened, they would sooner or later clash with Jin State. And the Jin State people were notoriously arrogant; seeing weakness, they would definitely rush in to plunder. This was precisely what he wanted to see—letting Jin State consume the other states, while the other states conversely consumed Jin State.

As long as the seven states could not fully unite, his plan would continue to function. This was also the reason why Niu Youdao had barely touched Jin State directly from the very beginning.

=> Thinking, Planning, strategy, tactics, adaptability.

Afterward, he continued using the same method to lure the enemy into the trap, but began adapting flexibly according to each state.

For instance, the Zhao State faction—having been ambushed multiple times—became extremely timid. The moment they spotted Niu Youdao's whereabouts, they immediately called the other three sects to join the pursuit. Seeing the situation going unfavorably, he instantly abandoned the plan and retreated immediately.
Next, he shifted his target to the remaining individual major sects of Song State, Qi State, and Wei State, continuing to use Spirit Seeds as bait to lure the opponents' greed, then coordinating with the Overseas forces to launch ambushes.

As for the possibility of being discovered by all seven states one day as the mastermind behind everything, Niu Youdao didn't care at all. According to him, the various factions had already harbored far too deep a mutual suspicion; truly cooperating had become nearly impossible. Furthermore, outside the Holy Realm, he had his own separate arrangements, so he wasn't overly concerned about future consequences.

By this point, he realized he could not continue hunting small groups forever. The Overseas forces were down to around one thousand men; if they continued to be depleted, they would no longer have enough strength to contend with the major sects outside after leaving the Holy Realm.

Moreover, the Overseas crowd only obeyed him because of continuous victories; if their losses were too heavy, this alliance would quickly collapse. Therefore, Niu Youdao decided to change tactics: instead of using Spirit Seeds as bait, he would use himself as the bait for war. As long as news of his appearance was leaked, the various factions would naturally flock over to compete, clash, and slaughter each other. By letting them wear each other down early on, his side would gain many more options to adapt later.

To execute the plan, he secretly handed Si Tu Yao a list of spies within the seven states, instructing him to use Yan State people to contact them and then immediately pull back, without making further appearances.
This was precisely the reason why he had spared Si Tu Yao's life from the very beginning: a pawn reserved for this exact stage.

=> Planning.

However, Niu Youdao did not intend to reveal this strategy to the four Overseas leaders. He understood very well that those "superficial sworn brothers" were currently standing on his side purely out of self-interest; if they knew he intended to drag all seven states into a chaotic free-for-all, they might not let him retain the initiative.

In addition, there was another matter that baffled the four Overseas leaders: from the beginning until now, Niu Youdao had barely touched Wan Shu Sect, Ling Sect, and Tianhang Sect. These three sects maintained a nearly neutral stance, not fully taking any side.

In truth, Niu Youdao intentionally spared them for a deeper layout further down the line, because forces that had not been dragged into the vortex of chaos would still hold immense value for the next chain of stratagems.
But the four Overseas leaders did not know this; on the contrary, they began to suspect why Niu Youdao kept refraining from moving against these three sects. He merely replied nonchalantly that those three sects were not easy targets to swallow, so there was no need to waste military force uselessly.

To reassure his four "superficial sworn brothers," Niu Youdao took the initiative to propose that the next target would be Yan State, adding that Yan Li's side would coordinate the action. Once the plan was settled, the entire group began reorganizing their formation and rested to await the next step.

Back on the Yan State side, Yan Li very quickly received a secret letter from Niu Youdao. In the letter, he requested Yan Li to quietly arrange for Si Tu Yao's group of disciples to depart from the Yan State ranks as naturally as possible.

Following Niu Youdao's instructions, when that group left, they intentionally left behind word that Sect Master Si Tu Yao had gone missing, and they were going out to search for him.

As soon as the news spread, the other forces immediately felt something was off. Recently, the number of missing people had been steadily increasing, and the common denominator was that they all vanished after acting independently or deliberately concealing some information.

Everyone quickly realized that inside the Holy Realm, there was very likely a secret force quietly committing deadly acts in the shadows.

From then on, the sects became far more guarded, no longer daring to scatter their teams to search for Spirit Seeds over a wide area, choosing instead to cluster together for mutual self-defense.

This was what he needed. Once the forces no longer dared to scatter and search, the speed of gathering Spirit Seeds would drop sharply. The longer it dragged on, the more deficient each faction's Spirit Seeds became, until eventually, the only way left was to rob others.

By now, all seven states had begun suspecting one another, especially Jin State. Originally notorious for being aggressive and overbearing, their current presence made the other states even more wary.

Not long after, Li Wohua took the initiative to approach the Wei State side under the pretext of searching for the whereabouts of Sect Master Si Tu Yao. Upon hearing this, the Wei State people immediately asked back whether many people had also gone missing on the Yan State side.

Li Wohua feigned ignorance, replying that he himself was unsure, but currently even Yan Li and Shan Hai were interrogating Chu Fengping, as it seemed he knew something.

Hearing this, the Wei State group immediately marched off to question Chu Fengping. As for Chu Fengping himself, he was actually completely in the dark at this moment; while utterly bewildered, he was already surrounded and questioned by a crowd.
Right as both sides were at a standoff, Yan Li secretly signaled a disciple to step forward and report that in another location, Niu Youdao had just been spotted together with the Overseas group.

Upon hearing Niu Youdao's name, Chu Fengping instantly understood everything. He knew he had been framed and pinned with the blame by Niu Youdao.
The rest of the crowd quickly reacted as well. Those who went missing earlier were very likely coveting Spirit Seeds and thus intentionally hid the news, wanting to swallow them privately, only to be completely wiped out by Niu Youdao in the end.

After stringing everything together, everyone realized that the quantity of Spirit Seeds currently in Niu Youdao's hands was bound to be extremely colossal.

Because of this, the forces of Qi State, Wei State, and Yan State immediately decided to temporarily form an alliance to launch a counter-attack pursuit against Niu Youdao. When asked about the target's whereabouts, the disciple arranged in advance replied immediately that Niu Youdao was fleeing toward the northeast.

The moment the entire group led their teams in pursuit was the exact moment they officially stepped into the trap Niu Youdao had prepared in advance.

This was the most complete stage in Niu Youdao's entire scheme. He created an environment where greed, suspicion, fear of losing resources, and the desire to monopolize benefits naturally drove the factions to act according to his wishes. From using Spirit Seeds as bait, ambushing small groups, sowing doubt among the states, keeping Jin State as a constant pressure, causing factions to cluster together out of fear to search for Spirit Seeds, to turning himself into bait to ignite a chaotic war—every step was tightly linked. As a result, the seven states consumed one another, the speed of gathering Spirit Seeds dropped drastically, no faction retained enough trust to form a genuine alliance, while Niu Youdao held both the advantage in Spirit Seeds and preserved the Overseas forces to prepare for an even deeper layout ahead.

As for Jin State, upon hearing the news that Niu Youdao was likely holding a massive amount of Spirit Seeds, Tai Shu Shanyue immediately grew greedy. To Jin State at this moment, the most important thing was no longer grudges, but the Spirit Seeds. As long as they seized these Spirit Seeds, Jin State would almost directly claim an absolute advantage in the Holy Realm.

On their way tracking Niu Youdao's whereabouts, the Jin State crowd "coincidentally" encountered Li Wohua. But this was naturally no coincidence, as Li Wohua was deliberately sent by Niu Youdao to drag Zhao State into the fold as well. Currently, Zhao State had been

frightened out of their wits following the series of prior ambushes. Therefore, when encountering Jin State, the Zhao State people barely dared to resist and were directly forced to merge teams with the Jin State side.
Standing from afar and seeing everything unfold according to plan, Li Wohua quietly departed. In truth, right from the moment he instructed Si Tu Yao's people to withdraw from the Yan State team under the guise of searching for their missing sect master, Niu Youdao had already set into motion the next step of his serial stratagem.

On the way, these people would intentionally "coincidentally" run into other forces, then use Niu Youdao's secret communication channels to link up with the embedded spies within the seven states to continue passing along messages and subsequent plans. This was why a series of seemingly coincidental events occurred.

Han State and Song State learned about the movements of Yan, Wei, and Qi, knowing these three states wanted to rob Niu Youdao's Spirit Seeds. Jin State happened to receive news that the Overseas forces held many Spirit Seeds and grew greedy.

Zhao State was lured by Niu Youdao's title of "slayer of Zhao State disciples" and rushed over to find him, accidentally joining teams with Jin State, only to be forced by Jin State into merging together.
All of this was the result of an intelligence network led and directed by him. Even Yan Li had become a link in the plan. While every force believed they were proactively taking control of the situation, in reality, everyone had been pulled into the exact same trajectory outlined in advance by Niu Youdao.

After a period of rest, the Overseas forces began executing the plan to ambush Yan State in accordance with the agreement with Niu Youdao. Before taking action, he secretly had Si Tu Yao and his people withdraw in order to conceal their identity as insiders. At the same time, the Overseas reconnaissance squads were only tasked with leaving behind signal markers without knowing the actual rally point of the main army, so when danger appeared, they were unable to warn them in time.

As a result, as soon as the main Overseas army struck, they discovered the allied forces of Yan, Qi, and Wei waiting ahead. At the same time, Jin State and Zhao State, followed by Han State and Song State, also entered the fight one after another, forming a two-sided encirclement. The Overseas forces were utterly routed.
This was Niu Youdao's true strategic objective. From beginning to end, the Overseas forces were merely a pawn. He intentionally hid the fact that he had joined forces with Yan Li, only stating that "someone on the Yan State side will coordinate," thus leading the entire Overseas faction straight into the trap he himself had set, turning this battle into the transition toward the final phase of the plan.

→ Sacrificing the Overseas forces was the result of a very early calculation. Niu Youdao understood that this alliance existed purely out of self-interest. Once the Spirit Seeds were divided into smaller portions, internal conflicts would inevitably arise, and the major sects of the seven states would relentlessly pursue them. Even if he could keep the Overseas forces intact, it would be difficult to continue controlling them later on.

→ Therefore, rather than letting the alliance collapse out of control, he proactively turned the entire Overseas faction into a sacrifice in exchange for driving the righteous sects into a massive chaotic battle to wear down each other's strength. Only after the situation had descended into complete chaos could he step into the final phase with more options and greater initiative.
This grand battle served as the crucial turning point for the plan to enter its final phase. Amidst the chaos of the battlefield, two pillars of fire suddenly appeared on the mountain—one large and one small.

Xia Xinruo, Niu Youdao's spy, immediately ran toward the smaller pillar of fire upon seeing the signal. Not just him, but other spies from Xiao Yue Pavilion embedded within the various forces also quietly began to act.

After making a round, Xia Xinruo ran back toward Wei State to report that the Overseas crowd was merely bait. The real purpose was for Niu Youdao to escape with all the Spirit Seeds. Hearing this, Yan Li immediately cooperated in putting on an act. He said that currently the Overseas forces were entangled with other forces; rushing in to compete at this moment could easily drag everyone into an even larger brawl. But letting Niu Youdao escape with the Spirit Seeds would be the absolute greatest loss.

The entire focus of the battlefield was instantly shifted. The allied forces of Yan, Wei, and Qi directly changed their target to pursue Niu Youdao. Not long after, the crowd indeed spotted his whereabouts. At this moment, Niu Youdao was carrying various large and small bags, flying frantically as if fleeing with all the Spirit Seeds. In an instant, everyone's eyes turned red with greed.

According to the script, Niu Youdao appeared with a series of large and small bags on his person, feigning frantic flight as if carrying all the Spirit Seeds. That scene made everyone's eyes turn red instantly. No one wanted to let the opponent snatch the opportunity to seize that colossal amount of Spirit Seeds, so all seven states surged forward in pursuit simultaneously.

When driven to a dead end, Niu Youdao jumped down a gorge with a rapid current. The various forces immediately split up to seal off the upper and lower streams, diving down to search. Everything seemed to have turned into a fatal trap.
However, this was precisely the situation he had prepared for since his very first day entering the Holy Realm.

The Piao Miao Pavilion uniform he had stolen right at the beginning finally played its role. After secretly changing clothes, he "deliberately stood still on a tree" waiting for disciples of various sects to see him, then brazenly walked away. Even if someone suspected him, no one dared to recklessly touch a member of Piao Miao Pavilion. Just like that, he vanished right before the eyes of everyone pursuing him.

Up to this point, the "first layer" of the serial stratagem was complete.

→ From his first day in the Holy Realm, he understood that sooner or later he would have to face off against Chu Fengping, so he stole the uniform early on and subsequently created the current situation.

→ His objective was to make the entire crowd—instead of searching for Spirit Seeds—compete among themselves to get a bigger share, because this was the only and fastest way, and if they didn't compete, others would benefit, while they themselves also stood a chance if they caught Niu Youdao.

→ Niu Youdao created the most favorable path for the whole crowd; all they had to do was dive in and bite.
All of this was in preparation for the "Second Layer" about to begin.

=> planning, leadership, manipulation, strategy, mind reading, deception, foresight, EU, EM, EP, EE, Psychology, tactics.

On the Jin State side, the plan continued. Li Yude, his spy within the Qi Yun Sect, suddenly spoke up, suggesting that the Overseas crowd was very likely just bait, and that all the real Spirit Seeds had actually been transferred to Niu Youdao beforehand.

He also deliberately claimed that he saw Niu Youdao fleeing with several large bags with his own eyes, after which he was pursued by Yan, Qi, and Wei. Yet to this day, those three states had not returned, which made it very likely that they had confirmed the real Spirit Seeds were indeed in Niu Youdao's hands.

Li Yude continued feigning a sudden realization, stating that on the road he also encountered people from Han State and Song State, so perhaps they knew about this as well. At the same time, he intentionally led their thinking by implying that the reason Yan State so easily let Jin State hunt down the Overseas forces was that they wanted to seize the opportunity to swallow all the Spirit Seeds for themselves.

Upon hearing this, Tai Shu Shanyue's face instantly changed, and he directly ordered an immediate halt to the pursuit of the Overseas forces. To Jin State at this moment, wiping out the Overseas crowd was no longer important; the most valuable thing left was the massive quantity of Spirit Seeds in Niu Youdao's hands.
As for the Overseas side, after realizing no one was pursuing them anymore, they gradually understood that Niu Youdao's plan had succeeded. In their eyes, Niu Youdao was currently in a dire situation where survival was unlikely, as all the pursuit and suspicion were now focused entirely on him.

What they didn't know, however, was that Niu Youdao had long since successfully escaped and was secretly preparing for the next layer of his plan.

On another front, the Yan, Wei, and Qi group was still frantically searching for Niu Youdao's whereabouts, but could find nothing. Right at this moment, according to prior instructions, Yan Li suddenly spoke up, stating that the current situation was extremely dangerous. If they ultimately failed to find Niu Youdao, the other forces would surely think that their three states

had found him and secretly hidden the Spirit Seeds for themselves. The moment these words were spoken, the entire atmosphere shifted immediately.

The Yan, Wei, and Qi group also noticed that the looks from other states were becoming increasingly suspicious. In the end, the three states could only quietly retreat, and they had to do so as stealthily as possible to avoid making a commotion that might cause further misunderstanding. Yet this very act of "stealthily retreating" made the situation even worse. In the eyes of Jin State, Yan, Qi, and Wei were clearly acting guilty, and that guilt made it seem even more like they had
genuinely seized a massive quantity of Spirit Seeds.

→ This was the true layout Niu Youdao wanted to create.
→ He used Yan Li to push the mutual suspicion among

the forces to the absolute limit, completely shattering the conventional method of searching for Spirit Seeds. He understood full well that no matter how hard one searched, it could never compare to robbing the fruits of others' labor. Once a rumor spread that someone held a massive quantity of Spirit Seeds, the entire rules of the Holy Realm changed. From that point on, there was only one path left to compete for 1st place: Plunder.

Now, regarding this suspicious retreat scheme, Yan Li had only been instructed by Niu Youdao beforehand; he hadn't even confirmed whether Niu Youdao was still alive or not, but the three sects searched everywhere without finding a trace. He still followed the instructions when the timing was right, because he maintained faith that Niu Youdao was alive.

This opportune timing was orchestrated by Niu Youdao, aiming to make Jin suspect Yan, Qi, and Wei.
At this point, Jin State was forced to take action. In their eyes, even if they continued to search for Spirit Seeds on their own, it could never match the speed of taking the vast quantity of Spirit Seeds that Yan, Qi, and Wei were likely holding.

However, no matter how strong Jin State was, they could not truly rob all the other states clean without paying a price. If their losses were too heavy, then upon exiting the Holy Realm, even Jin State wouldn't be able to bear it. Therefore, before everyone became completely weakened, they had to step up to compete and snatch.

=> leadership, manipulation, planning, strategy, psychology

Next, the situation inside the Holy Realm changed entirely. The more a faction desired Top 1, the more dangerous they became. What made all the forces' eyes turn red with greed was no longer searching for Spirit Seeds on their own, but guarding against and plundering one another.

For safety reasons, Han State and Song State began taking the initiative to ally with Zhao State. Meanwhile, Zhao State was already dissatisfied with having been forcibly dragged into this situation by Jin State earlier, so now having backing, they directly separated from Jin

State. From this, a new situation took shape:

Yan, Wei, and Qi alliance.
Han, Song, and Zhao alliance.

Jin State was completely isolated. Tai Shu Shanyue gnashed his teeth in rage, but facing three allied states, he could only temporarily endure and hold back.
Yet this outcome was beyond Niu Youdao's expectations. His original goal was to make the states suspect and slaughter one another, not to have them stabilize into a large alliance. Especially the Han, Song, and Zhao alliance—if these three states truly coordinated stably, the subsequent plan would become very troublesome.
In the meantime, the Overseas side was in an extremely miserable state. After the previous ambush, their numbers were down to roughly seven hundred men, suffering immense losses. But the funny thing was that even now, the four Overseas leaders still had no idea that all of this was actually orchestrated by their "superficial sworn brother," Niu Youdao.

As for Niu Youdao, after thirteen days of continuous travel, he finally met up with Si Tu Yao's group, then led the whole team back to meet the four Overseas factions.
Upon meeting, Niu Youdao immediately analyzed the situation. He said that currently the seven states appeared to be cooperating on the surface, but in reality, everyone had their own agenda.

Especially Jin State. Currently, Jin State was both the most deficient in Spirit Seeds and the most eager for 1st place. Such a faction could absolutely never truly live in peace with the other states.

Therefore, according to Niu Youdao, further conflicts breaking out among the various factions was only a matter of time. He continued telling the Overseas crowd that they didn't need to do anything for now—just sit tight and wait for the states to tear each other apart, then leave when the Holy Realm gate opened.
He also mentioned that Yan State still had his insiders, and if any shifts occurred later on, they would continue to adapt accordingly.

Note: At this moment, Niu Youdao did not yet know about the Han, Jin, and Song alliance.

On another front, after being isolated, Tai Shu Shanyue began taking the initiative to court Han State and Song State. He proposed that the three sides ally to divide 1st, 2nd, and 3rd places among themselves.

The Han State and Song State factions wavered slightly, but were not overly trusting either. After all, at this point, everyone could only try their best to scramble for their own interests.

Afterward, the states continued their search for the Yan, Wei, and Qi alliance.

Meanwhile, the Yan, Wei, and Qi group was sitting together discussing the previous events. Someone expressed regret, saying that if they hadn't fled back then, perhaps they wouldn't have been misunderstood to this degree.

Yan Li immediately refuted this. He said that back then, NOT retreating would have been the truly dangerous move; once surrounded from all sides, the other forces would surely search

their persons or directly interrogate them by force. At that point, not only would they lose face, but they might even be jointly slaughtered. Thus, according to Yan Li, retreating swiftly was the correct choice. Hearing this, the crowd found it very reasonable.
Right at this moment, Chu Fengping suddenly asked with suspicion: "Could Niu Youdao have disguised himself as someone from Piao Miao Pavilion to escape?"
Hearing this, Yan Li immediately denied it, stating that such a thing was nearly impossible. Piao Miao Pavilion members patrolling was a completely normal sight. Furthermore, before entering the Holy Realm, everyone had their identities thoroughly checked and searched; no one could possibly bring a fake uniform inside.

Particularly, Niu Youdao had even caused trouble right at the entrance by killing Zhao State members at Tiangu and was taken away for interrogation, making it even more impossible for him to hide anything suspicious on his person.

Upon hearing this, everyone's mood gradually settled down. Thinking carefully, it was indeed logical; everyone felt Niu Youdao couldn't possibly accomplish this, and even Yan Li's own logical deduction felt sound.
Chu Fengping remained suspicious and continued to ask whether Niu Youdao could have accomplished it AFTER entering the Holy Realm.

Yan Li immediately barked back that Piao Miao Pavilion's gear was custom-made and recognizable at a glance. Where would Niu Youdao get the ability to forge it?
He added that if Niu Youdao had actually robbed a Piao Miao Pavilion member for their gear, he would have been hunted to death long ago. Even if investigation was difficult inside the Holy Realm, Piao Miao Pavilion would definitely discover the issue upon exiting.

Saying up to this point, Yan Li lowered his voice to warn everyone not to make wild guesses before matters were properly investigated. Once Piao Miao Pavilion was truly alarmed into launching an investigation, no one would leave the Holy Realm safely.

He also mentioned that currently only a few disciples claimed to have seen Piao Miao Pavilion members patrolling, while he himself hadn't seen it with his own eyes. Without evidence, it was best not to draw hasty conclusions.

If in the end Niu Youdao was truly backed into a corner and claimed that Chu Fengping used personal grudges to frame him—or even if Niu Youdao produced evidence of his escape—wouldn't that be equivalent to pushing themselves into danger?

At this point, Yan Li's stance was crystal clear: if Chu Fengping continued digging into this matter, he would immediately wash his hands clean of it. Seeing this, the other elders chose to stand with Yan Li; no one wanted to pursue it any further. And all of this was actually within Niu Youdao's calculations from the very start.

→ Right from the moment he snuck into the Holy Realm, he had prepared a way out for extreme pursuit situations. The Piao Miao Pavilion uniform was not just a tool for disguise, but a psychological pawn. Niu Youdao understood that after his disappearance, someone would inevitably suspect he disguised himself as Piao Miao Pavilion. But he also knew full

well that the more logical a theory sounded, the easier it was to be rejected by common sense itself.

→ Therefore, he deliberately let a few people see a "Piao Miao Pavilion disciple" appear and leave, creating just enough of a trail to guide everyone's thinking. Exactly as expected, Chu Fengping raised the possibility of identity forgery, while Yan Li proactively debunked it through a series of logical arguments: everyone was strictly checked before entering, Piao Miao Pavilion gear could not be forged, and it certainly couldn't be stolen without being detected.

→ This was precisely what Niu Youdao wanted—making his own ally step forward to deny the possibility closest to the truth. Once Yan Li publicly affirmed that impersonating Piao Miao Pavilion was "impossible," the rest would lean toward that conclusion, as no one wanted to risk dragging Piao Miao Pavilion into an investigation.

→ Niu Youdao concealed the truth using people's own logic and fear. He exploited their fear of Piao Miao Pavilion alongside their habit of believing in "what cannot happen" to make the truth reject itself. Thanks to this, even when someone got extremely close to the answer, they would actively turn their back on it.

→ Even when Yan Li deduced that "it couldn't possibly happen," he became more confident in defending that position, helping Niu Youdao's plan minimize all variables to the absolute maximum.

=> Tactics, EP, EE, EP, EU, mind reading, planning, manipulation, deception, strategy, leadership.

After a long time without finding the Yan, Qi, and Wei alliance, the remaining four states gradually lost their patience. They decided to stop hunting for them directly and instead returned to the vicinity of the Holy Realm's exit gate to intercept them, as ultimately, everyone had to leave this place.

The first unlucky victim was Zhao State. Being the weakest in strength and having just separated from Jin State, they were instantly ambushed and crushed by the combined forces of Han, Song, and Jin. Most of their disciples were wiped out, and their Spirit Seeds were divided among the three states.

Afterward, as the three states marched toward the gate of the Holy Realm, they discovered that the three neutral factions—the Wan Shou Sect, Ling Sect, and Tian Xing Sect—had already gathered there beforehand.

These three factions originally paid little attention to rankings and only wanted to preserve their strength, so they had always stayed clear of the whirlpool of conflict. Many surviving rogue cultivators also proactively came to seek refuge with them in order to leave the Holy Realm safely.

Yet no one knew that among those rogue cultivators was a pawn Niu Youdao had prepared long ago: Nyan Baoru.

Back then, Niu Youdao hadn't deliberately spared her life out of soft-heartedness, but because he knew that someone like Nyan Baoru would certainly not feel grateful; on the contrary, she would want to kill him even more. And what Niu Youdao needed was precisely that hatred. At present, Nyan Baoru had successfully infiltrated the ranks of the Wan Shou Sect, becoming a key pawn for the final stage of his plan.

Niu Youdao's true goal at this moment was not merely to escape, but to:
Kill members of Han, Song, and Jin, plunder additional Spirit Seeds, and simultaneously guarantee his own safety to secure 1st place and leave the Holy Realm alive.

More importantly, the three neutral factions would also be dragged onto his chessboard by him. From beginning to end, Niu Youdao had never touched the Wan Shou Sect, Ling Sect, and Tian Xing Sect not because he didn't dare, but because he wanted to save them for the final step.
This was because he knew that if utilized correctly, these three neutral factions would become his ultimate insurance policy to break free from this fatal trap when exiting the Holy Realm.

Niu Youdao's plan was already reaching its climax, but right at this moment, an unexpected variable surfaced.
As mentioned, he was still unaware that the three states of Han, Song, and Jin had secretly allied with one another. As previously stated, his original intention was to let these factions slaughter each other so he could exploit his Spirit Seed advantage to break out.

During this time, Nyan Baoru recalled being forced by Niu Youdao to consume poison from the Xiao Yue Pavilion, as well as his warning for her to refrain from playing tricks and instead cooperate with him to find a way to survive, promising to give her the antidote once they exited the Holy Realm.

However, given the current situation, she didn't understand how he could possibly guarantee that. If they failed to gather enough Spirit Seeds, they couldn't leave; and even if they gathered enough, carrying the Spirit Seeds outside would inevitably turn them into a target to be plundered by all factions. Not to mention, failing to bring out enough Spirit Seeds meant facing Piao Miao Pavilion once outside—how would he even have the chance to deliver the antidote?

In response, Niu Youdao merely revealed that he had already secured a path to search for and bring the Spirit Seeds out, while also mentioning that he was cooperating with the three neutral factions. According to him, amidst a situation where all factions restrained and guarded against one another, only the three neutral factions possessed the capability to bring the Spirit Seeds out without becoming targets of a siege by every force.

In this way, he prepared a secondary path in case his original plan failed to work. Nyan Baoru would come to believe this was the sole method Niu Youdao had to bring the Spirit Seeds out.

Niu Youdao wanted to present her with two choices:

If Nyan Baoru was smart enough, she would realize that following him was her only path to survival, obtaining the antidote upon exiting the Holy Realm, and maximizing her own interests; thus, choosing to stand on his side and cooperate would save much trouble.

On the other hand, Nyan Baoru was someone who liked to consider herself clever, unwilling to remain a mere pawn, and constantly seeking to sabotage and kill him. If this occurred, he also possessed alternative ways to exploit her actions.

Precisely because he saw through her inner nature, Niu Youdao deliberately released her, allowing her to become a free-roaming pawn that would push his entire plan deeper along its intended trajectory.
All of the above was orchestrated by Niu Youdao at the moment he released her.

=> Tactics, planning.

Returning to the present situation, how could Nyan Baoru willingly accept being controlled like this? That night, she secretly approached the camp of Han, Song, and Jin, tossing inside a piece of cloth containing secret intelligence. A Han State disciple picked it up and immediately brought it to report.

At this moment, the three elders of Han State, Song State, and Jin State were sitting together to discuss their counterstrategy.

The Song State elder spoke first. He believed that if the situation truly turned unrecoverable, it would be better to concentrate all Spirit Seeds into the hands of a single state to carry out of the Holy Realm. As long as those Spirit Seeds were kept safe, the three states could divide the benefits equally after exiting. That way, at the very least, the final fruits of their efforts would be preserved.
Upon hearing this, the Han State representative wavered slightly. Considering the current predicament, this was indeed a proposal worth contemplating. However, Tai Shu Shanyue of Jin State immediately shook his head in opposition. He was in no hurry to dismiss the suggestion, but instead calmly analyzed the overall distribution of Spirit Seeds across the board.

Current Distribution of Spirit Seeds:

Total Spirit Seeds remaining on the battlefield: 23 units
Han – Song – Jin Alliance

Initially: 9 units

Stolen by Overseas forces: -2 units

Plundered from Zhao State: +3 units

Current estimate: ~10 units

Yan – Qi – Wei Alliance

Initially: 9 units

Stolen by Overseas forces: -2 units

Possibility of Niu Youdao holding the Spirit Seeds handed over by Overseas forces: +4 to +6 units

Current estimate: ~11 to 13 units

As for the Three Neutral Factions, they did not participate in the struggle. Their quantity of Spirit Seeds remained unchanged.

If Yan, Qi, and Wei truly cooperated as one, then the quantity of Spirit Seeds in their hands indeed exceeded this side. But the most terrifying aspect did not lie in numbers, but in the fact that no one knew where the Spirit Seeds carried away by Niu Youdao were currently located.

In his view, precisely because no one knew the whereabouts of those Spirit Seeds, mutual suspicion would inevitably exist among Yan, Qi, and Wei. As long as they did not trust each other absolutely, that alliance would be unable to unleash its full strength.

In other words, Han, Song, and Jin still had a chance to contend for the number one spot. Nevertheless, Tai Shu Shanyue still adamantly opposed handing all Spirit Seeds to a single state for safekeeping.

He saw through the minds of his two allies very clearly. Once the decisive moment arrived, if Jin State had to sacrifice too much or make overly large concessions to protect the common interest, Han State and Song State might very well alter their stance immediately. By then, they wouldn't necessarily be willing to risk their lives to help Jin State continue vying for the top ranking.

In the end, the party suffering the heaviest damage would still only be Jin State. That was an outcome Tai Shu Shanyue absolutely could not accept.

Right at this moment, the disciple brought forward the piece of cloth thrown in by Nyan Baoru for the three elders to inspect.

Written on the cloth was merely a single sentence: "Niu Youdao has cooperated with the three neutral factions. To avoid being robbed upon exiting, he has handed all the Spirit Seeds over to the three neutral factions to carry out of the Holy Realm."
The Song State side immediately grew suspicious, believing this was very likely just a divisive scheme. After all, the three neutral factions had stayed out of the conflict from beginning to end, with no reason to help Niu Youdao.

However, Tai Shu Shanyue thought differently. He brought up the fact that from the start, no one thought Niu Youdao would cooperate with the Overseas forces either. Now that the exit

gate was sealed off, if one wanted to preserve Spirit Seeds, handing them over to the three neutral factions to carry out was indeed the safest method.

Furthermore, if they searched the Overseas crowd upon exiting and found nothing, would all those Spirit Seeds truly vanish in vain? The more Tai Shu Shanyue thought about it, the more he felt the likelihood of this possibility was immense.

He analyzed further: If the Spirit Seeds were truly in the hands of the three neutral factions, then it also explained logically why Yan, Wei, and Qi had still not shown themselves until now.

Because those three states certainly wouldn't dare recklessly search the three neutral factions. Once pushed too far, the three neutral factions could directly join the war among the states.

Ultimately, despite their reluctance, Han, Song, and Jin decided to take the piece of cloth to probe the three neutral factions. But the inquiry yielded nothing.
On the contrary, the three neutral factions even began suspecting Han, Song, and Jin of deliberately spreading rumors to divide them and drag them into the muddy water.

During this time, Niu Youdao's side also began taking action. He had someone set fire to a mountain as a assembly signal, though ultimately only six people arrived at the location.

Through them, Niu Youdao immediately learned that the entire situation had veered off his original plan:
Han, Song, and Jin did not fight each other, but had instead allied. Zhao State was ganged up on to the point of near total annihilation. The news of his "cooperation with the three neutral factions" had also been leaked outside.

Upon hearing this, Niu Youdao knew right away that Nyan Baoru had refused to listen to him. However, he didn't care in the slightest; even with new variables surfacing, the overall situation had not escaped his ability to control.

Because in truth, there was never any cooperation with the three neutral factions to begin with.
At this point, Niu Youdao quickly realized his original plan was no longer suitable for the current situation and immediately altered his layout.

He ordered his six subordinates to covertly split up and return to the three factions of Han, Song, and Jin, leveraging their identity as embedded spies to secretly spread rumors. The message was simple: the other two factions had already begun guarding against each other and were quietly preparing to turn hostile at the decisive moment.

Niu Youdao gathered his people, analyzed the situation, and affirmed that the old plan had to be changed. According to him, if Han, Song, and Jin continued to hold their ground at the Holy Realm exit, other factions wouldn't dare appear, the situation would freeze into a stalemate, and no one would have the opportunity to act.

To accelerate this process, he continued having people light fires on more mountains as signaling markers, while instructing Yan Li to keep coordinating the act according to the set script.

Everything thereafter unfolded precisely as Niu Youdao needed.

The Han State and Song State sides gradually grew suspicious of Yan, Qi, and Wei's continued absence. A question began emerging in their hearts: if they kept waiting like this, would Jin State seize the opportunity to turn hostile and monopolize all the Spirit Seeds? That suspicion grew larger and larger. Quite a few people brought up the reputation of Jin State's Qi Yun Sect, believing it was never a force worthy of complete trust. They began speculating that Jin State's constant monitoring of surrounding movements might not be for defense against enemies, but rather waiting for the right moment to scramble for the number one spot.

Conversely, Jin State also gradually birthed suspicions regarding its two allies.

They noticed that previously Han State and Song State had adamantly opposed concentrating Spirit Seeds, yet now they were repeatedly urging everyone to act quickly. When requested to continue probing the three neutral factions, both found ways to make excuses and shirk the duty.

Such behaviors forced the Jin State people to ponder deeply. They worried that if at the moment of decisive battle, Yan, Qi, and Wei suddenly appeared while Han State and Song State seized the chance to retreat or switch sides, Jin State would become the first target left behind.

Niu Youdao's people had been planted throughout the alliance.

The spies did not directly incite conflict, but merely guided it covertly. Some intentionally let slip ambiguous actions for other factions to see; others feigned innocence while bringing up suspicious details to arouse alertness. As long as an opportunity presented itself, they would immediately plant another seed of doubt in the opponent's heart.

Just like that, the mutual suspicion among the three factions accumulated day by day. The alliance between Han, Song, and Jin—which had only been maintained through self-interest—began developing cracks. Over time, those cracks widened, step by step driving this alliance to the brink of collapse.

After meeting up with Yan Li again, Niu Youdao immediately laid out his final layout.

He informed him that his people had secretly infiltrated the ranks of Han State, Song State, and Jin State. Thanks to the continuous sowing of suspicion, the three factions had begun losing trust in one another. According to his judgment, Jin State would most likely be the first to strike, whereas Han State and Song State wouldn't actively start a war unless pushed to a dead end.
Niu Youdao stated that once civil war broke out among Han, Song, and Jin, Yan State, Qi State, and Wei State had to join the battle immediately. He didn't intend to convince the other

two states, but only needed Yan State to secretly depart first. When Qi State and Wei State noticed, they would surely grow suspicious and automatically follow along. Upon arriving, simply using the pretext of helping Han State and Song State eliminate Jin State—while promising to divide Jin State's Spirit Seeds after victory—would leave Han State and Song State with no reason to refuse under such desperate circumstances.

Yan Li assumed the objective of the plan was to steal Jin State's Spirit Seeds, but Niu Youdao denied it. According to him, that was merely an excuse to drag all five states into a true chaotic battle.
Only then did he speak of the crucial core of the entire layout: at the decisive moment, a path to survival MUST be left open for Jin State.

Seeing Yan Li's confusion, Niu Youdao explained that to win first place, no single faction could be allowed to concentrate all the Spirit Seeds. Currently, all forces had grouped into alliances; he could not openly strike to plunder, nor could Yan Li blatantly assist him. Therefore, the best method was to let the factions fight each other to mutual destruction, leaving no one with enough strength to swallow the entire situation whole.

Yan Li worried further that if five states gathered in one place, it would be easy for a single faction to seize the opportunity to snatch the number one spot.
Niu Youdao remarked that this was precisely the reason why Jin State had to be allowed to flee.

In Jin State's hands was nearly forty percent of all Spirit Seeds. As long as they were beaten to severe injury without being completely annihilated, Jin State would be forced to flee with that massive quantity of Spirit Seeds. When that happened, all attention would shift toward Jin State, while he only needed to set a ambush behind them to reap the greatest harvest.

Afterward, Yan Li asked how he intended to escape if the plan succeeded and all five states pursued him.
Niu Youdao answered that he had already prepared a way out. The prerequisite condition was that the 700 Overseas cultivators had to leave the Holy Realm smoothly.

According to his plan, after the battle concluded, Yan Li would immediately occupy the area near the exit to create conditions for the 700 Overseas cultivators carrying Spirit Seeds to escape outside. Meanwhile, he himself would depart beforehand, absolutely avoiding contact with Zijin Cave to prevent others from suspecting anything.

The most crucial aspect was that he would lead all factions to believe that the true Spirit Seeds were in the hands of the Wan Shou Sect and the three neutral factions, rather than on the persons of the Overseas cultivators. As long as everyone believed that, no one would think to search these 700 cultivators, and Zijin Cave would have no reason to continue blocking them from leaving the Holy Realm.

Finally, Niu Youdao revealed his true goal.

He wanted not only Jin State's Spirit Seeds, but also the Spirit Seeds held by Zijin Cave itself. Because he could not rule out the possibility that someone might secretly ally to

compete for first place, in the event he couldn't eliminate all factions, he had to hold at least half of the total Spirit Seeds to guarantee a winning chance.
Only when the entire truth was completely hidden could Yan Li secretly hand over the Spirit Seeds to him without causing anyone to suspect.

At this point, Niu Youdao's final layout was truly complete.

The real war broke out. The three states of Han, Song, and Jin—already suspicious of each other—finally saw Jin State strike first. The signal was transmitted, and everything proceeded completely according to Niu Youdao's plan. Yan, Qi, and Wei joined the battle immediately. Han and Song, being driven to desperation, agreed the moment they heard the proposal to divide Jin State's Spirit Seeds. Five factions joined hands to push Jin State into absolute desperation.

In the end, Jin State was utterly crushed and forced to flee. Right at that moment, Yan Li immediately occupied the area near the exit as planned, while Niu Youdao led his men in an ambush behind them. The moment Jin State broke free from the encirclement, they were struck by a second ambush, resulting in their total annihilation.
Not long after, all the Spirit Seeds on the Jin State members were completely gathered. Niu Youdao looked at the quantity before him and began analyzing the situation. Excluding the three neutral factions, each of the seven nations had three major sects, meaning the overall Spirit Seeds could be divided into twenty-one parts. Zhao State was destroyed, and Jin State was now no more.
After recalculating the entire board, Niu Youdao finally let out a smile.

Through the numbers before his eyes, he confirmed that he currently held 10 parts of the Spirit Seeds in his hands, accounting for nearly half of all remaining Spirit Seeds in the Holy Realm. That also meant that to surpass him, at least four nations would have to genuinely ally. Relying on one, two, or even three factions would not provide enough strength to exceed the quantity of Spirit Seeds he held. Yet in the current situation, every force harbored their own hidden agendas and mutual suspicions, making four states joining hands to scramble for first place virtually impossible to happen.

Therefore, Niu Youdao could almost certainly confirm that the opportunity to claim 1st place in this trip to the Holy Realm was firmly in his hands.

Current Spirit Seed Distribution:

Total Spirit Seeds held by Niu Youdao: 10 parts

Spirit Seeds held by the nations:

Yan State: 3 parts
Wei State: 2 parts
Qi State: 2 parts
Han State: 3 parts
Song State: 3 parts
Overseas Spirit Seeds:

Theoretically obtainable: 6 parts

However, they were never focused on collecting them from start to finish.
In reality, they only hold approximately: 2 parts

Spirit Seeds obtained by Niu Youdao:
Plundered previously: 4 parts
Plundered further from Jin State: 4 parts

→ Currently: + Overseas equals 10 parts of Spirit Seeds.
After confirming his absolute advantage in Spirit Seeds, Niu Youdao immediately shifted the core focus of his plan.

For him, the most crucial issue at this moment was no longer plundering more Spirit Seeds, but how to safely bring all the Spirit Seeds in his possession out of the Holy Realm.
Meanwhile, the situation on the outside also began to shift.

Following the grand battle with Jin State, both Han State and Song State suffered heavy losses. The two nations had no further intention to continue fighting, wishing only to retreat quickly to avoid being ambushed by other forces taking advantage of their plight.

On the opposing side, Wei State and Qi State proactively sought out Yan State, proposing that the three nations continue cooperating to scramble for first place.
According to their calculations, Jin State had previously held about four parts of Spirit Seeds, while Han State and Song State each held three parts. If the three nations did not join hands, whichever side won would find it extremely difficult to surpass the quantity of Spirit Seeds held by the other competitors.

However, Yan State had absolutely no intention to cooperate. On the surface, Zijin Cave maintained a calm facade as if indifferent to the proposal, while Xiaoyao Palace and Lingjian Mountain secretly sneered with contempt.

In their minds, they only needed to wait a little longer; after plundering the remaining Spirit Seeds from Jin State, Yan State's advantage would instantly eclipse all other factions. By that time, there would be fundamentally no need to share the spoils with Wei State or Qi State.
Earlier, Yan Li had deliberately told Shan Hai and Chu Fengping that after Jin State collapsed, they would go together to plunder that nation's Spirit Seeds. However, his true purpose was not to rob them, but to bind these two individuals, keeping their focus fixed on "the meat of Jin State," while ensuring they wouldn't grow suspicious of his actions and overlook Niu Youdao's existence.
Because they still harbored hopes of reaping further benefits, Yan State was entirely unenthusiastic about the alliance proposal from Wei and Qi. Furthermore, despite having lost over a hundred men due to Chu Fengping's mistake, Yan State remained the force that preserved its strength best within the Holy Realm, whereas Wei and Qi had both been secretly depleted by Niu Youdao earlier, rendering their combined strength incapable of forming an overwhelming advantage.

Conversely, Wei State and Qi State had both been covertly ambushed and depleted in manpower by Niu Youdao's layouts. Therefore, even when combined, their actual numbers and strength did not significantly surpass Yan State.

Because of this, in the eyes of Zijin Cave, Xiaoyao Palace, and Lingjian Mountain, the advantage of the overall board was step by step tilting heavily toward Yan State. They all believed that as long as they cleared out the remnants of Jin State, the number one spot was practically in their hands.

Yet they were completely unaware that the one holding the greatest profit from beginning to end was never Yan State, but Niu Youdao himself.

At this moment, outside the ancient forest, the remnants of the Overseas forces were still hiding. Jin State had just been shattered, while Han State and Song State were also hastily retreating for fear of being ambushed by other factions.

In such a situation, Wei State and Qi State absolutely did not dare to truly open fire against Yan State.
They understood full well that once both sides fought to heavy losses, the remaining forces would instantly become the third-party beneficiaries reaping the rewards. By then, whichever faction won would merely be building a bridal gown for someone else.

It was precisely this mutual restraint and suspicion that caused all factions to choose to stay put. No one dared to proactively launch the final battle.

And it was precisely this period of stalemate that created the most precious window of opportunity for Niu Youdao, allowing him to calmly deploy the final step in his entire layout: bringing all the Spirit Seeds in his possession out of the Holy Realm without anyone noticing.

This was Niu Youdao's "second strategic layer" within his Serial Trap: Controlling the Spirit Seeds.

At the same time, Nyan Baoru also began to act. She grew increasingly convinced that the Wan Shou Sect, Ling Sect, and Tian Xing Sect were indeed in league with Niu Youdao. Especially Xu Huo from the Wan Shou Sect, whose repeated probing made her feel even more uneasy.

In the end, right before the Holy Realm gate opened, Nyan Baoru covertly transmitted a message to Yan – Wei – Qi. Since Han, Song, and Jin were all unwilling to offend the three neutral factions, her final hope could only be placed upon those three states.

Initially, Yan – Wei – Qi did not want to mess with the three neutral factions either. After all, the Wan Shou Sect, Ling Sect, and Tian Xing Sect were all forces extremely difficult to provoke. However, under the incitement of Yan Li as instructed by Niu Youdao, the three houses ultimately took the piece of cloth to confront the three neutral factions.

The three sect leaders now grew genuinely enraged. Having identical reports surface twice in a row could not possibly be a coincidence. This implied that among them, there might truly be a traitor biting the hand that fed them.
The three factions immediately denied conspiring with Niu Youdao. Yet right at this moment, Nyan Baoru directly stepped forward to admit the letter was delivered by her, while simultaneously accusing Xu Huo of having ties to Niu Youdao.

Everyone's gazes instantly focused on Xu Huo. The leader of the Wan Shou Sect asked in a cold voice what had transpired. Xu Huo immediately refuted: "She once came to me begging for the protection of the three neutral factions to safely leave the Holy Realm—how has that now turned into me conspiring with Niu Youdao?"
Then he suddenly added: "Furthermore, she has a mole on her chest. If I had never been in close contact with her, how would I know?"

The moment these words came out, Nyan Baoru instantly understood she had been reverse-played by Niu Youdao. Back when she was heavily injured by him, her clothes had been torn to shreds, and Niu Youdao had pulled up her clothes to inspect her injuries. It was very likely that he had spotted this mole back then.

In other words, long ago, Niu Youdao had already predicted that she would betray him and accuse the three neutral factions, even preparing the way out beforehand to help Xu Huo clear his suspicion.

Nyan Baoru shook with rage, knowing that further explanation was useless, so she immediately turned and fled. The three neutral factions quickly dispatched people in pursuit, but in the end, she successfully escaped under the cover of night.

→ Yet at this point, Nyan Baoru's life or death was no longer important. This pawn of Niu Youdao had fulfilled its purpose right here. His true goal was to utilize her to make everyone believe even more strongly that the three neutral factions were indeed involved with the Spirit Seeds and Niu Youdao, thereby consolidating the final layer of his layout.

Not long after, news from Niu Youdao reached Yan Li: Jin State was destroyed, all Spirit Seeds had been recovered, and there was no need to use the portion of Spirit Seeds Yan Li had held back.

Yan Li immediately suffered a headache, not knowing how to explain where this suddenly appearing batch of Spirit Seeds came from. The messenger relayed Niu Youdao's words: simply state that during the time the Overseas crowd broke through the encirclement, the Yan State side seized the opportunity to obtain a portion of Spirit Seeds, which would be reasonable enough.

This was also Niu Youdao's hint to Yan Li: when the Overseas crowd broke out, kill off half of them to reduce suspicion that the Spirit Seeds were on the Overseas cultivators, while simultaneously making everyone believe even more firmly that the Spirit Seeds were truly in the hands of the three neutral factions. Understanding this intent, Yan Li finally felt at ease.

Shortly after, Niu Youdao transmitted another message: The Jin State Spirit Seed line had been severed. Chu Fengping and Shan Hai could try cooperating with other nations to scramble for rankings—just agree to it. However, he had to drag Wei State and Qi State onto the same side as Yan State.

Because currently Yan State held three parts of Spirit Seeds, while Wei State and Qi State combined held four parts. As long as the three houses joined forces, virtually all remaining factions would lose the capability to surpass the quantity of Spirit Seeds in Niu Youdao's hands.

That was his ultimate move. Not only did he seize the majority of the Spirit Seeds, but Niu Youdao also transformed the Yan – Wei – Qi alliance into a strategic lock, thoroughly severing the possibility of the remaining forces uniting, ensuring that no single faction possessed enough strength to threaten his number one spot.

=> planning, strategy, adaptability, tactics, manipulation, leadership, thinking.

The final moment ultimately arrived. After a full year of isolation, the spatial gate of the Holy Realm opened, marking the exact moment Niu Youdao's Serial Trap entered its climax and resolution. The various sects began preparing to depart. Though Yan Li desperately wanted to leave the Holy Realm immediately, he still had to remain behind to execute the final move in Niu Youdao's grand layout.

On Niu Youdao and the Overseas group's side, they also received word of the gate opening. He merely remarked calmly that he would exit first, while the rest would depart the following day. Afterward, disguised as a Piao Miao Pavilion member, he swiftly entered the mist-shrouded zone near the exit. The moment he arrived, he incinerated his disguise into ash and charged straight outside. However, no sooner had he stepped out of the Holy Realm than he was intercepted by Chu Fengping and a group of disciples. A fierce battle instantly erupted between both sides, but in the end, Niu Youdao still successfully escaped.

→ At this point, his first objective was fulfilled: safely exiting the Holy Realm. Yet his most vital objective remained ahead: bringing all the Spirit Seeds outside without a single soul discovering where they were kept.

Upon seeing Niu Youdao leave the Holy Realm alone, Yan Li immediately cooperated according to the prepared script. He deliberately affirmed that Niu Youdao carried no Spirit Seeds on his person, while reiterating Nyan Baoru's prior accusation that the three neutral factions had secretly conspired with him. Next, he guided everyone's deduction: if the Spirit Seeds were truly on Niu Youdao, he wouldn't need to risk running out first; moreover, he had previously traveled alongside the Overseas group, yet ultimately abandoned them to escape alone.

From these details, Chu Fengping concluded there was only one possibility: Nyan Baoru's words were true, and the Spirit Seeds were indeed in the hands of the three neutral factions.

Yan Li countered by asking why the Overseas forces had still assisted Niu Youdao, making everyone believe even more firmly that a secret transaction existed between the two parties. The entire weight of suspicion was thus shifted completely onto the three neutral factions.

→ This was the true purpose of the pawn Nyan Baoru. From a very early stage, Niu Youdao had seen through her nature, knowing with certainty that she would betray him, and thus intentionally allowed her to learn a fragment of a false plan. He did not need Nyan Baoru's loyalty; rather, he needed her to step forward personally to accuse the three neutral factions. In the eyes of outsiders, the testimony desperately put forth by a "traitor" carried far more persuasive power than any explanation. Therefore, even if the three neutral factions denied it, the seed of doubt had already been planted in everyone's minds.

Yet that was merely the final smoke screen. The real Spirit Seeds were not in the hands of the three neutral factions at all, but were instead being secretly carried by the seven hundred Overseas cultivators. Niu Youdao's objective was to make everyone believe that searching the Overseas crowd was utterly futile, thereby concentrating all investigative focus onto the three neutral factions. As long as attention was diverted in the wrong direction, the seven hundred Overseas cultivators would have the highest possible chance of bringing all Spirit Seeds out of the Holy Realm safely.

The next morning, the Overseas group appeared precisely on schedule. Yan Li immediately cooperated to act out the final show. This time, he played the part with absolute realism, going so far as to genuinely kill people. A chaotic battle broke out right before the Holy Realm gate; the majority of the Overseas cultivators successfully broke through the encirclement, while only a portion were slain on the spot.

→ The goal of this battle was very simple: to further erase any suspicion that the Overseas forces were carrying a massive quantity of Spirit Seeds. If they truly held all the Spirit Seeds, no one would believe they would risk their lives charging out in such a reckless manner. Furthermore, the deliberate killing of a portion of them made everyone naturally assume that if the Overseas forces truly possessed many Spirit Seeds, Yan Li would have robbed them clean long ago.

Not long after, Chu Fengping and Shan Hai rushed over to ask what happened. Yan Li calmly led the two to where disciples were inspecting a small stash of Spirit Seeds, flippantly fabricating a story that the Overseas crowd wanted passage, so they had to pay a "toll." However, because they offered too little, he was dissatisfied, directly killed some of them, and conveniently confiscated those Spirit Seeds.

That absurd explanation actually gained their complete trust. In their minds at this moment, the largest portion of Spirit Seeds was still on the three neutral factions, while the Overseas crowd merely held a trivial fraction. Just like that, all the real Spirit Seeds were successfully brought outside, while everyone continued pursuing a completely wrong target.

Shortly after, the Overseas group met up with Niu Youdao outside the Holy Realm and immediately confronted him in anger.

Fu Hua furiously demanded to know what he and Yan Li had discussed that caused the latter to renege and kill Overseas members. Niu Youdao merely replied calmly that everything was executed according to his plan, with the sole purpose of maximizing the elimination of suspicion. Only when the Overseas forces truly suffered pursuit and casualties would the other factions believe even more strongly that the Spirit Seeds were not on them.

Fu Hua instantly flew into a rage, declaring that all the Spirit Seeds were currently in the hands of the Overseas forces, and whether they handed them over to Niu Youdao depended on their mood. Duan Wuchang also added in a cold voice that those Spirit Seeds could easily be given to someone else to claim 1st place.

Niu Youdao merely sneered faintly, then calmly analyzed the situation. He stated that if they switched to anyone else, the Overseas group would be lucky to keep even half the benefits. Once the seven nations realized they had been duped by him for an entire year inside the Holy Realm, the wrath of all major forces would inevitably fall upon the person holding 1st place. No one could receive a massive quantity of Spirit Seeds and immense rewards out of nowhere without having their origins investigated. As long as they couldn't explain it, that person would instantly become the prime target of all seven nations.
Meanwhile, Niu Youdao was the only individual capable of shouldering this entire situation. Every plan inside the Holy Realm was set up by him, and every suspicion had already been met with a pre-arranged countermeasure.

Even if the Overseas forces held the Spirit Seeds, they could not convert them into actual benefits on their own, because in the end, they would still have to face the pursuit and interrogation of all seven nations. Therefore, they had no choice left but to compromise with Niu Youdao.

→ As for the terms discussed regarding cooperation with the Overseas crowd, he had calculated those from the very beginning. If the various factions exited the Holy Realm and realized they had been duped, all seven nations outside would hunt the Overseas forces to the bitter end.

And no fool would accept this massive responsibility of 1st place rewards without questioning where it came from. The Overseas crowd understood this: only Niu Youdao possessed the capability to bear the burden of 1st place when the seven nations outside discovered what transpired inside the Holy Realm, leaving them with no alternative but to yield to him.
As for the seven major sects, Niu Youdao had little to fear because the war situation among the nations outside also effectively locked down the Four Seas.
After leaving the Holy Realm, the various nations would not place hunting the Four Seas people as their top priority, because by then, everyone would be swept up in war and their own core interests.

Analyzing each nation one by one:

Yan State: He held power over Nanzhou and could directly influence the imperial court and the war effort. The three major sects of Yan State needed him to maintain the overall board, so they would not easily oppose him or those under his protection.

Zhao State: Yan State's army had already marched into Zhao territory. As long as Niu Youdao issued an order or shifted strategy, Zhao State would have to exert full effort to deal with the war, leaving no capacity to investigate the Four Seas people.

Han State: Han was currently engaged in war with Song. As long as he dispatched Yan State's Beizhou forces to strike Han's border, Han State would be forced to focus on defense and show him respect to avoid opening another front.

Song State: Song originally needed Yan State's support against their enemy. In such a desperate situation, they dared not offend Niu Youdao over Holy Realm matters.
Qi State & Wei State: Both nations had war situations subject to his decisions. If he intervened or broke the balance, their interests would suffer, forcing them to make concessions as well.

Jin State: This was the only nation he acknowledged as difficult to directly influence. However, if Yan, Zhao, Han, Song, Qi, and Wei all refrained from acting due to being occupied by war, Jin State alone could hardly mobilize a massive force to hunt the Four Seas people.
From this, the conclusion was drawn: the war among the seven nations served as a shield for the Four Seas people. As long as he returned alive and continued manipulating the war situation, he could force the nations to prioritize battlefield interests over vengeance. This was also the reason he asserted he was far more valuable than anyone else in guaranteeing the safety of the alliance after the Holy Realm concluded.

This was Niu Youdao's "third strategic layer," mapped out from the very first moment he cooperated with the Four Seas.

→ Not only did he trick the factions into suspecting the wrong target, but he also bound the Four Seas crowd, forcing them to obediently hand over the Spirit Seeds.
Right here, the entire Serial Trap finally concluded.

→ Niu Youdao's ultimate strategic objectives from beginning to end were achieved:

Claim 1st Place.

Survive and leave the Holy Realm.

=> Planning, Strategy, Leadership, Negotiation, Persuasion, Adaptability, Mind Reading, Manipulation, Deception, Tactics, Thinking, Foresight.