Niu Youdao - The Interlocking Stratagems

Background Introduction:

The Ethereal Pavilion was established by the Nine Great Sovereigns. Every time the Sacred Realm opens, they force the various sects to send disciples inside to compete for Spiritual Seeds within a one-year period. The Spiritual Seed is an extremely rare fruit that grows within the Sacred Realm, and whichever faction collects the most will claim the top spot.

- Niu Youdao was originally just a rogue cultivator, not belonging to any sect. However, because he had too many enemies, the elders of the various sects proposed to the Ethereal Pavilion that, in addition to sect disciples, rogue cultivators should also be dragged into the Sacred Realm to trim their numbers. Conveniently, this would also make it easier for the Ethereal Pavilion to control the martial world.

The manager of the Ethereal Pavilion, Sha Rulai, agreed and requested the sects to register the names of the rogue cultivators who must enter the Sacred Realm. Niu Youdao's name was listed the most times.

Upon receiving the news, Niu Youdao understood clearly that this time, he was being targeted by the entire world.

- Before entering the Sacred Realm, he prepared extensively. The Moon Crest Pavilion—the assassin organization currently cooperating with him—secretly transacted with him, informing him that among the sect disciples, there would be people from the Ethereal Pavilion blending in, while also providing secret hand signs for mutual recognition. In addition, there were Yun Huan and Yun Ji, both of whom possessed their own forces, but due to various circumstances, they could currently only stand on the same side as Niu Youdao.
- On the opposing side, the three major sects of the Zhao State and the Jin State had nearly resolved to kill him within the Sacred Realm.
- Meanwhile, the three major sects of the Yan State temporarily cooperated with Niu Youdao because Shang Chaotong, who held 90% of the Yan State's military power, was listening to him. However, this relationship was highly fragile; the moment interests shifted, they could turn their backs at any time.
- Upon arriving at the entrance of the Sacred Realm, Niu Youdao immediately encountered the mass of sect disciples from various countries gathered there. The rule of this place was that no fighting was allowed.

In the mountain valley outside the entrance, the various forces had divided up territory many years ago. At this moment, the people of the Zhao State were forcing the Wandong Heaven

Mansion of the Yan State to leave their residential area, creating an extremely tense atmosphere.

Three elders of the Zhao State directly blocked the entrance, refusing to let Niu Youdao pass through.

Niu Youdao understood very well that if he endured it today, then after the Sacred Realm concluded one year later, this crowd of people would still be standing outside the door to block and kill him. Since it was already like this, there was only one way to solve it.

He directly drew his sword and slaughtered every single elder and disciple of the three Zhao State sects right there in the valley.

The surrounding crowd was entirely stunned; no one expected Niu Youdao to dare kill people in an area managed by the Ethereal Pavilion.

The commotion was so massive that Sha Rulai came in person to interrogate him. However, thanks to his prior preparations, Niu Youdao ultimately escaped the death penalty.

Even so, Sha Rulai still punished him for causing a disturbance.

The punishment was that if he failed to secure the Number 1 spot in the Sacred Realm this time, he would be executed.

- To claim the top spot, one had to collect the most Spiritual Seeds, but the biggest problem was that Niu Youdao had almost no one truly trustworthy.

The next day, during discussions, due to a conflict of interest, Zhu Fengping, an elder of the Yan State, lost face and immediately turned his back. He even played dirty, using his influence to separate Niu Youdao from the remaining two sects of the Yan State, deliberately stating that without the support of the three major sects, it was impossible for Niu Youdao to get Number 1, and his end would only be death.

The remaining two elders, Yan Li and Shan Hai, also turned their backs immediately. Even a few people who had previously followed Niu Youdao abandoned him for the other side, feeling that he no longer held any value to rely upon.

From that moment on, Niu Youdao was completely pushed into an isolated position within the Sacred Realm.

To deal with the current situation, he could only begin layout out a plan.

The first step in Niu Youdao's plan was actually not to search for Spiritual Seeds, but to secretly sneak to the place where the Ethereal Pavilion disciples were bathing to steal a set of uniforms, and then he released a wild boar to carry it away. When it was discovered, they only saw the boar wandering around while the clothes had vanished. His purpose was very simple: to

prepare in advance for a long-term planning step further down the line, to be used to escape a fatal deadlock when necessary. From beginning to end, no one knew about this matter, including Yun Ji and Yu Zhaoxing. Currently, only a few people remained by Niu Youdao's side:

- Yun Ji and her son, Yun Huan
- Yu Zhaoxing

The head count was pitifully small. Wanting to compete for Number 1 through normal means was nearly impossible. The other forces all had vastly superior numbers, while his faction combined consisted of only a few people. Most importantly, almost every single sect inside the Sacred Realm currently wanted to take a bite out of Niu Youdao. After pondering over the forces participating this time, Niu Youdao began to construct a chain of interlocking stratagems.

The first step of the plan targeted the overseas cultivators.

He led his people to search for their traces, and after a few days, finally discovered a group of three disciples from the Tianxing Sect operating near the overseas region. Niu Youdao proactively approached to greet them. During the conversation, he secretly made the secret hand sign of the Moon Crest Pavilion to test them. The moment he saw the sign, one man among the three immediately caught the meaning. His name was Xu Fuhua, a spy planted by the Moon Crest Pavilion inside the Tianxing Sect. Xu Fuhua directly moved his hand to kill the remaining two fellow disciples. Only then did Niu Youdao assign him a task: to investigate the whereabouts of the overseas cultivators.

The reason Niu Youdao told Xu Fuhua to kill those two people was so that after returning, he could report to the Tianxing Sect that they were ambushed by the overseas cultivators, and two disciples were killed by them.

As long as this news spread, the entire Tianxing Sect would automatically help Niu Youdao hunt down the whereabouts of the overseas cultivators. He barely needed to waste any effort searching by himself.

\=\> planning

10 days later, Niu Youdao went to meet Xu Fuhua again.

At this time, Xu Fuhua already had three additional Tianxing Sect disciples accompanying him. Niu Youdao simply came over to ask a few questions and then left very quickly, looking outwardly as if it were just a chance encounter. However, his true purpose had two layers.

First, it was to intentionally let those disciples see him, so they would report Niu Youdao's whereabouts upward to the Tianxing Sect elder.

Second, it was to use this meeting as a signal, informing Xu Fuhua that the plan on the Tianxing Sect's side had concluded, and there was no need to continue acting, so as to avoid exposure.

After dealing with the Tianxing Sect side, Niu Youdao's interlocking stratagem began moving to the next part. Following the direction pointed out by Xu Fuhua, he led his people to search for the Wei State cultivators. A day later, they finally encountered a group of Wei State disciples.

Niu Youdao proactively came forward to ask about their leading elder, Yu Xianding. The Wei State disciples were extremely defensive. Everyone knew Niu Youdao was being targeted by the Ethereal Pavilion; if pushed to a dead end, the matter of robbing resources and killing people could entirely happen.

Niu Youdao understood their thoughts, so he only smiled: "I am not yet foolish enough to touch a team that clearly has an elder backing them up from behind."

He only asked for Yu Xianding's whereabouts and left it at that. After a moment of hesitation, the disciples still pointed him in a direction. Niu Youdao immediately led his people away. His true purpose was not to find Yu Xianding, but rather to use the Wei State's forces to locate more of his spies. Inside the Sacred Realm, the various forces all chose to disperse to search for Spiritual Seeds. The scope was too wide to gather entirely in one place; running back and forth would be an extreme waste of time.

Therefore, the elders of various countries usually designated an approximate direction for the next assembly, and after meeting up, they would disperse again. The Wei State disciples did not know exactly where Yu Xianding was, but the place they pointed out was certainly the next assembly location for the Wei State forces. By nightfall, Niu Youdao as expected encountered three Wei State elders. He said he only wished to lodge for a night because he feared being assassinated along the way. Seeing nothing suspicious, the three elders agreed. At night, while gathering firewood, Niu Youdao secretly approached a disciple named Xia Xinru.

He was also Niu Youdao's spy. Niu Youdao lowered his voice: "When setting out tomorrow, eliminate all the people traveling with you."

Hearing this, Xia Xinru knitted his brows: "Can't do it, I don't have enough strength to kill the entire group."

Niu Youdao replied: "Leave a mark, I will help you."

The next day at noon, following the mark left by Xia Xinru, Niu Youdao tracked them down and directly slaughtered four Wei State disciples. Afterward, he let Xia Xinru return to report the news that they were ambushed by overseas cultivators.

Not long after leaving with Xia Xinru, Niu Youdao encountered a group of Zhao State cultivators. This time, he took out the Ethereal Pavilion uniform he had stolen previously and put it on, pretending to be a person from the Ethereal Pavilion to deceive the Zhao State cultivators. He demanded that they call Chen Zifei to come meet him. After Chen Zifei appeared, everything went exactly the same as before. Slaughtered completely.

However, this time Niu Youdao did not tell Chen Zifei to shift the blame to the overseas crowd. He asked how the current situation of the three Zhao State sects was.

Chen Zifei replied that after losing their elders at the entrance of the Sacred Realm, although the three Zhao State sects still cooperated to handle common matters, they no longer had anyone with enough prestige to decide major affairs.

They had thought about joining other forces but feared being used. Hearing this, Niu Youdao immediately changed his mind. He began to secretly track the movement direction of the Zhao State cultivators through the marks left by Chen Zifei. After a period of time, he finally traced down the whereabouts of the overseas cultivators. However, Niu Youdao was in no rush to appear. He knew the time had not yet come.

Three months later, Niu Youdao's group of four had nearly searched through all the various forces secretly once over.

This time, the target was Li Yude—a disciple of the Qi Cloud Sect from the Jin State. Everything initially proceeded just like the previous times: eliminate all accompanying persons, then pin the blame on the heads of the overseas crowd.

However, variables also began to appear.

According to Li Yude, the overseas crowd this time was extremely overbearing; after being framed too many times, they would definitely turn back to investigate to the very end. Even he began to fear that he would be exposed, affecting Niu Youdao's plan. Not long after, Niu Youdao discovered that he had lost track of the spy line on the Ling Sect's side. The chain of plans that was originally running smoothly was suddenly cut off midway. Wanting to turn back to find Li Yude was also impossible. Using the old method to contact other spies also failed. Every single time, the rogue cultivators were perfectly fine, while everyone else was completely dead. It defied common sense too much. If it continued, it would easily cause others to discover that someone was intentionally orchestrating a layout from behind.

A few days later, Niu Youdao began using smoke fires to intentionally lure people close, but repeatedly failed. Until one day, while observing from up in a tree, he finally saw a group of overseas cultivators being hunted down by disciples of the seven countries to the point of running like battered dogs. With just one glance, Niu Youdao knew his plan had succeeded.

He immediately took the initiative to meet the leader. That person was named Hong Gaitian. One of the four major leaders of the overseas faction this time. Niu Youdao directly proposed a cooperation. He said he could help the overseas crowd escape from their current predicament.

Right now, the seven countries had secretly united to hunt down the overseas faction; if they didn't cooperate, sooner or later the overseas crowd would be squeezed to death inside the Sacred Realm.

Hong Gaitian asked in a cold voice: "Why did the seven countries suddenly target the overseas faction?"

Niu Youdao replied:

- "Because this time, the timing of the Sacred Realm opening was not right. The war among the seven countries was forced to a halt by the Ethereal Pavilion. Afterward, the Ethereal Pavilion even modified the rules, dragging a massive number of rogue cultivators into the Sacred Realm. According to the Ethereal Pavilion's intent, that number of rogue cultivators must have their numbers trimmed. But upon entering here, the majority of rogue cultivators have already been solicited and absorbed by the seven countries. If too many rogue cultivators die, the strength of the various countries will suffer a loss."

Niu Youdao looked at Hong Gaitian and continued:

- "Therefore, they need a group of scapegoats. You overseas people are the best choice. As long as enough overseas people are killed, then the rogue cultivators of the seven countries won't need to die. If they fail to complete this matter, upon exiting the Sacred Realm, the Ethereal Pavilion will not let the seven countries off easily."

Niu Youdao's entire previous plan was, in truth, to create a pincer formation.

One side was the seven countries.

The other side was the overseas cultivators.

He secretly used his spies within the various sects to kill the accompanying disciples, and afterward, all of it was blamed on the heads of the overseas crowd. From the Tianxing Sect, to the Wei State, and then to other forces, the news that "overseas cultivators ambushed and killed people" continuously spread out.

Initially, it was just a few small groups hunting them down.

But the further it went, the larger the scale became.

Gradually, all the forces of the seven countries began to regard the overseas crowd as a target that needed to be wiped out. Waiting until the overseas faction was truly backed into a dead end, only then did Niu Youdao appear.

He directly took the matter of "the Ethereal Pavilion wanting to clear out rogue cultivators" as a springboard to persuade Hong Gaitian.

According to his words: this time the Ethereal Pavilion intentionally dragged a massive number of rogue cultivators into the Sacred Realm; if fewer people died, then after going out, the Ethereal Pavilion would not be satisfied.

But the issue was that the majority of rogue cultivators currently had already been absorbed by the seven countries.

Therefore, the seven countries did not want the people of their own factions to die, so there needed to be another crowd to step out and shoulder it instead. And the overseas faction was the most suitable choice.

These words immediately caused Hong Gaitian to understand the logic behind the hunt.

Because everything was entirely logical.

The overseas cultivators originally had no enmity or grudges with the seven countries to the point of being targeted for such frenzied hunting. If there were no underlying interests driving it from behind, this matter could not happen.

At this moment, the second framework part of Niu Youdao’s interlocking stratagem truly kicked off.

He used the status of a person from the seven countries to tell the overseas faction about the internal situation. In reverse, he also used this matter to exchange for the trust of the overseas crowd.

Because currently in the eyes of Hong Gaitian: Niu Youdao was the only person on the seven countries' side willing to tell them the truth, and furthermore possessed extremely vital information; if they cooperated, they could find a path to survival.

As for Niu Youdao, he also needed to borrow the strength of the overseas faction to continue completing his subsequent layout.

From this point in time onward, he began standing between the two factions.

One side was hunting.

One side was being hunted.

As for Niu Youdao, he secretly controlled both sides to proceed in the direction he desired.

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

After listening, Hong Gaitian still did not completely trust Niu Youdao.

He said: "Only hearing words from your single side is not enough. We must confirm whether the remaining three houses of the overseas faction have encountered a similar situation."

Even so, he still allowed Niu Youdao’s group to follow along. Because currently, Niu Youdao's words were not necessarily false, and furthermore, they were indeed being hunted down to the point of having no path of retreat left.

The next day, Hong Gaitian led Niu Youdao's group to meet the remaining three overseas houses.

The four overseas forces this time consisted of:

- West Sea Fu Hua
- North Sea Hai Wuchang
- South Sea Hong Gaitian
- East Sea Lang Jingkong

At this point, the four overseas houses officially gathered in full. After cross-checking each other's situations, all four leaders discovered that the words Niu Youdao spoke matched perfectly. The overseas forces were indeed being secretly hunted down by the alliance of the seven countries. At this time, Niu Youdao officially brought forward his offer of cooperation.

However, Hai Wuchang immediately said in a cold voice: "Cooperation? On what basis must we hand over Spiritual Seeds to you to help you take Number 1?"

Niu Youdao was very calm. He said that currently, having even more Spiritual Seeds did not necessarily carry too much meaning. To put it plainly, the final reward still had to rely on the Ethereal Pavilion's ranking to be distributed. The thing Niu Youdao needed was merely the title of Number 1 to keep his life. As for the rewards behind it, he held no interest.

Fu Hua heard this and smiled: "If we can already rob enough Spiritual Seeds by ourselves, then why do we need to share them with you?"

Niu Youdao did not panic at all. He only said slowly: "Not speaking of inside the Sacred Realm, just speaking of the outside. Your Four Seas forces were originally the opponents of the seven countries, correct? But any random country concentrated together is also stronger than you. If inside this Sacred Realm you truly strike too ruthlessly against the seven countries... then after going out, you will certainly be hunted down until you die."

The entire overseas crowd fell silent instantly. Niu Youdao continued: "Therefore, you need to cooperate with me. With me here, the situation will be different."

Hearing this, Hong Gaitian sneered: "Don't you look at yourself in the mirror? If you truly could control the seven countries, why would you currently need to be chased like a battered dog? Why would you still have to come here to beg for cooperation with the Four Seas?"

Niu Youdao only replied dispassionately: "Before was different, now is different. Outside the Sacred Realm, I hold nearly 70% of the Yan State's power. To the east, I once defeated the Song State. To the west, I forced the Zhao State back. To the north, I blocked the Han State."

His voice was very light. But the words just spoken caused all four overseas leaders to fall silent.

Niu Youdao continued: "Slaughter inside the Sacred Realm involves the life-and-death interests of the various sects. Therefore, many grudges can be temporarily put down. Today it is you die or I live. Tomorrow we can still laugh and talk like friends. All of it is for interest."

He looked at the people in front of him and went on: "As long as I return alive, I can affect the war situation between the Yan State and the Zhao State. The three major sects of the Yan State will not dare to lightly confront me face-to-face. My grand army has already marched directly into the territory of the Zhao State. With just a single sentence from me, the Zhao State won't even be able to look after itself, so where would it find the peace of mind to cause trouble for the Four Seas? The Han State is currently engaging in battle with the Song State. As long as I open my mouth, forces will strike into the territory of the Han State. To stabilize the situation, the Han State must also show me some face."

"The Song State normally has to rely on the Yan State sending troops to assist. Currently, protecting itself is already difficult, so it dares even less to offend me.

The Qi State and the Wei State also have their war situations affected by me.

As long as they do not want me causing chaos from behind, they must also show some face.

The most troublesome is only the Jin State.

But if the remaining six countries all remain motionless, the Jin State alone cannot accomplish anything."

Speaking up to here, Niu Youdao finally concluded: "It is still that same sentence. Outside is different, inside is different. If I die in the Sacred Realm, these words are naturally useless. But if I return alive, then all of it has the possibility to become true. What's more, this time it was your Four Seas that caused trouble first inside the Sacred Realm. After going out, the seven countries might not necessarily have the free time to take revenge on the entirety of the overseas faction. Taking a step back to speak... the one targeted first will also be me. It was I who stood out to pull you into cooperation. The person the people of the seven countries want to kill first is definitely Niu Youdao. The people of the Four Seas are merely standing behind. Therefore, the best choice right now is cooperation."

Hearing up to here, Fu Hua finally spoke up: "If we help you take Number 1... what if you turn your back after going out?"

Niu Youdao replied very quickly: "After the Sacred Realm concludes, the various countries still have to continue their military affairs. There is no need to invite additional trouble upon oneself for the sake of the Four Seas. If you still do not believe... then we can add a bit of constraint."

After speaking, he directly proposed to become sworn brothers with the four overseas leaders, causing even the overseas crowd to be slightly surprised.

After leaving, Yu Zhaoxing asked in confusion: "Becoming sworn brothers like that originally carries no binding meaning at all. Why did you still have to do such redundant things?"

Niu Youdao only replied dispassionately: "In the future, there will be a time when it's needed. Or perhaps it won't be needed."

Niu Youdao flapped his mouth for a while mainly to use prestige as capital. Otherwise, later on once the plan succeeded and benefits were obtained, this crowd could completely forget everything, and it wasn't even very necessary for these overseas people; if it happened, it was good, if not, it wasn't a problem either.

\=\> negotiation, persuasion.

After successfully cooperating with the Four Seas, Niu Youdao began arranging the next step of his interlocking stratagem. His plan was very simple. First, he would target the Yan State. As for the Jin State, which was currently the strongest faction, it would certainly have thoughts of robbing the Spiritual Seeds of other countries. As long as they were guided well, it was entirely possible to cause the Jin State to provoke the remaining six countries so that both sides would consume each other. To accomplish that, it had to start from the weaker factions.

For example, the Zhao State.

Niu Youdao was very clear about his current situation. If he appeared alone before the people of the seven countries, he would almost certainly be hunted until he died. But the issue was that currently, no one knew he had joined hands with the overseas faction.

Therefore, as long as they encountered Niu Youdao, the first reaction of the seven countries' people would certainly be to hunt him down, entirely unthinking that there was an ambush behind. At this time, Fu Hua secretly said to the remaining three people:

- "Niu Youdao is, after all, a person of the Yan State. It is impossible for him not to care about his foundation outside. What if he is a double agent?"

The remaining few people upon hearing this also began to be on guard. A period of time later, Hong Gaitian reported that they had discovered the traces of people from the seven countries. With one look, Niu Youdao recognized that they were Yan State people.

He understood immediately. The overseas crowd was intentionally testing him. If this state of suspicion continued to drag on, the subsequent plan would certainly ruin.

Niu Youdao then said: "I will give you an answer."

After speaking, he directly departed, leaving the three people—Yun Ji, Yun Huan, and Yu Zhaoxing—behind with the overseas faction to serve as hostages.

Afterward, he went to find the disciples of the Zijin Cave under the command of Yan Li. Upon meeting the opponent's people, Niu Youdao spoke only one sentence:

- "Go back and report to Elder Yan that I have a matter to discuss. As for what matter it is, small fry like you are not qualified to know. Just pass the word along."

Before leaving, he also deliberately warned: "It's best not to alarm the remaining two sects; if something happens, you won't be able to shoulder it."

Half a day later, Yan Li truly came to meet him. The two stood on the mountain peak, confirming there was no one tracking them around before revealing themselves. Upon meeting, Yan Li secretly let out a breath of relief.

After all, previously he did not truly want to turn his back on Niu Youdao; he was merely caught between the remaining two sects and could only close his eyes and ignore it. Niu Youdao did not beat around the bush but directly stated he needed assistance to take Number 1.

The plan was very simple: his side would be responsible for slaughtering, while Yan Li merely needed to step aside, while also secretly revealing the locations of the remaining two sects.

In addition, if in the end the Spiritual Seeds were still insufficient, Yan Li had to help him make up for the missing portion. Hearing this, Yan Li hesitated slightly: "If in the end the Zijin Cave ranks too low, how will I account for it to the disciples?"

Niu Youdao only replied: "I said in the event that it's not enough."

That evening, he returned to meet the four overseas people. Niu Youdao was very natural: "I just went to find an inside agent. Believe it or not is up to you."

Afterward, he continued to arrange: telling the person responsible for receiving information that Yan Li's side would secretly leave behind the target locations.

Not long after, Yan Li's side transmitted information regarding Zhu Fengping's location.

Niu Youdao then took a large quantity of the Spiritual Seeds he carried, and then ran to a place that easily attracted attention and intentionally built a fire to roast fish. He even specially left a very large pouch of Spiritual Seeds right by his side, the mouth of the pouch intentionally left half open.

Not long after, a group of nearby disciples discovered the column of smoke and secretly crept over. Upon seeing the pouch of Spiritual Seeds, the eyes of the entire crowd changed instantly.

They quickly divided their people: one person went back to report the news, while the remaining number continued to tail Niu Youdao. During the pursuit, Niu Youdao pretended to flee.

On Zhu Fengping's side, upon receiving the news that Niu Youdao was still alive, he was also slightly surprised.

But after hearing that he was carrying a large quantity of Spiritual Seeds, greed instantly arose. Zhu Fengping discussed with Situ Miao—the person who used to be Niu Youdao's ally—wanting to swallow this batch of Spiritual Seeds entirely alone, not letting the remaining two sects know.

Situ Miao, in truth, did not want to confront Niu Youdao anymore. But he also understood that if he did not listen to Zhu Fengping, their entire crowd of people would encounter trouble.

Under the guidance of the reporting disciple, a large group of Zhu Fengping's people along with Situ Miao quickly pursued down to a mountain cave. The inside was extremely quiet.

A moment later, Niu Youdao poked his head out to look around and then immediately shrank back as if he were extremely vigilant. That action caused the crowd outside to believe even more firmly that he was hiding inside the cave. A moment later, Niu Youdao appeared once again. Right at that exact moment, the overseas group behind rushed out instantly. Zhu Fengping's crowd entirely failed to react, being ambushed on the spot.

In the end, only Situ Miao was kept alive. Niu Youdao looked at him and said slowly: "Now you have seen with your own eyes Zhu Fengping's disciples die cleanly. Do you think you can still return as if nothing happened?"

Situ Miao immediately fell silent. Because he knew Niu Youdao spoke no wrong; from the moment he stood watching that crowd of people being killed without making a move, he no longer had a path to turn back.

After getting Situ Miao to stand on his side, Niu Youdao still continued to use the old method to bait other sects into falling for it.

But this time, during movement, he accidentally crossed paths with Yan Baoru. The moment he saw the opponent, Niu Youdao understood immediately that his tracks had been exposed. He almost without any hesitation directly struck out, wanting to kill her to silence her.

After restraining her, Niu Youdao asked in a cold voice: "Who sent you?"

With difficulty, Yan Baoru replied: "Dong Mo... the grand eunuch beside the Yan State Emperor wants to kill you."

Hearing this, Niu Youdao instead did not kill her anymore. He directly released her to depart.

He knew very well that a person of Yan Baoru's type absolutely could not offer thanks for having her life spared; conversely, she would definitely think of every way to take revenge. But Niu Youdao originally did not care about that matter.

Because right from the start, his purpose was not to kill her to silence her. Rather, it was to keep Yan Baoru to serve as a chess piece for a deeper plan further behind.

Upon returning, he handed the Spiritual Seeds back to the crowd and said he was slightly injured, so today he could not continue to go bait people. The next morning, Niu Youdao continued to act again.

This time, the target was the Han State cultivators. The result was also just like the previous times.

One of the three major sects of the Han State, after being enticed by the Spiritual Seeds, chose to tightly conceal the news, failing to report it to the remaining two sects. In the end, they were ambushed and wiped clean. Niu Youdao's side plundered a large quantity of Spiritual Seeds.

After that battle, the four overseas people immediately grew greedy, wanting to ride the wave of victory to directly rob the remaining two major sects of the Han State as well.

However, Niu Youdao shook his head and refused.

He said: "There is no necessity to continue targeting a single country; this time our side also suffered no small loss. If we press too hard against one faction, it will very easily cause them to discover there is a problem."

The thing Niu Youdao wanted was not to wipe out any single country particularly.

Rather, it was to cause all forces to begin suspecting one another.

According to the thinking of the various countries: one major sect was ambushed, while the remaining two sects knew absolutely nothing about the matter, so it was highly possible they were backstabbed by people of their own faction or another faction. As long as the seed of suspicion was planted, the various forces would automatically guard against one another.

Niu Youdao continued to analyze: "As long as the various countries gradually weaken, sooner or later they will cross paths with the Jin State. And that crowd of Jin State people is extremely tyrannical. As long as they see weakness, they will certainly rush in to rob."

Coming to that time: the Jin State would consume the other countries, and the other countries would in reverse consume the Jin State.

Niu Youdao from beginning to end had never touched the Jin State also for this reason. He did not want to drag the Jin State into the water too early. Because as long as the Jin State still maintained the strongest strength, the other countries would be unable to completely form an alliance.

And as long as the seven countries did not link up into a unified block... Niu Youdao's interlocking stratagem would still continue to operate.

\=\> deception, planning, manipulation, adaptability, negotiation, persuasion.

Afterward, Niu Youdao continued to use the old method to bait the enemy into falling for it. However, this time he no longer acted according to a fixed mold but began to adapt to circumstances according to each force.

For example, when targeting the people of the Zhao State.

This crowd, after being ambushed multiple times, had begun to fear death; the moment they discovered Niu Youdao's tracks, they directly called over the people of three other sects to hunt him down together.

Seeing that the situation was not right, Niu Youdao slipped away immediately, directly abandoning the plan aimed at the Zhao State.

Because he was very clear.

The most important thing about his interlocking stratagem was: causing the various countries to suspect one another, not truly risking his life to bite a single faction to death.

Afterward, he continued to change targets to the scattered major sects of: the Song State, the Qi State, and the Wei State.

The method of operation was still as before. Using Spiritual Seeds as bait to cause the opponent's greed to arise, then coordinating with the overseas faction to ambush them. As for the matter of one day being discovered by all seven countries that everything was orchestrated by him standing behind...

Niu Youdao originally did not care at all.

Because according to him: inside this Sacred Realm, wanting all seven countries to truly cooperate was an impossible matter.

Currently, each faction was suspecting one another. Everyone feared that they were the next person to be set up. While outside the Sacred Realm, it was even less worth worrying about. Niu Youdao was confident that as long as he walked out alive, with his current influence in the Yan State, no one would dare to lightly touch him.

One day, Niu Youdao discussed a new plan with Situ Miao again. He said he wanted to intentionally leak his own tracks out. Hearing this, Situ Miao was startled:

"Right now the various countries are hunting you everywhere. Revealing yourself intentionally is no different from looking for death by yourself?"

But Niu Youdao was instead very calm, analyzing:

- "The things I have done to the seven countries up to now... plus the large quantity of Spiritual Seeds plundered, are already enough to cause that crowd of people's eyes to

turn red. Wanting to keep the plan continuing to operate... we must force them to begin robbing one another."

According to Niu Youdao's original thinking, he intended to continue using the old method step-by-step to weaken the various factions. But currently, the situation was different.

The overseas military force after multiple battles was left with only around one thousand people. If they continued to consume it in the old fashion, by the very end the overseas crowd would no longer have enough strength to confront the various sects upon exiting the Sacred Realm.

And currently, the reason they still listened to Niu Youdao was only because of continuous victories. Once a massive loss appeared, confidence would collapse immediately.

By that time, let alone cooperation. Just the matter of maintaining internal stability alone would be enough of a headache. Therefore, Niu Youdao decided to change the way of playing.

He said to Situ Miao: "We currently have already plundered a large quantity of Spiritual Seeds. Just maintaining this advantage is enough. If one house grows strong too quickly... the other houses will certainly move to swallow it. As long as they continue to bite one another... our side will always have room to adapt."

Niu Youdao slowly went on: "I want to take my own self to serve as bait. As long as my tracks appear... the various factions pulling over will inevitably collide with one another. Once they begin to consume each other early on... our side will have many more choices behind."

But this matter, Niu Youdao did not intend to tell the overseas crowd.

Because he understood very well.

Those "fair-weather brothers" currently stood on the same side as him only for the sake of interest. If they knew he intended to take himself as bait to drag all seven countries into a chaotic battle, they might not necessarily dare to let him continue holding the active power anymore.

\=\> thinking, strategy, foresight, planning, adaptability.

But the biggest problem of this plan was: wanting to bait individual scattered forces to gather together was not easy at all. The various sects by now had already been ambushed too many times, so they were extremely vigilant. As long as they discovered the slightest thing not right, they would immediately withdraw or call for reinforcements.

Therefore, Niu Youdao called Situ Miao over. Right from the moment he kept his life, he had already prepared this card in advance for the current situation. Niu Youdao handed Situ Miao a piece of cloth, upon which was written the names of several spies within the seven countries.

He said: "Use your remaining people on the Yan State's side to make contact. After completing the work, withdraw immediately. No need to continue appearing."

In addition, there was another matter that caused the overseas crowd to be quite unable to understand.

From the start until now, Niu Youdao had nearly never touched:

- Wandong Mansion
- Ling Sect
- Tianxing Sect

These three sects nearly maintained a neutral stance, not standing completely on any side. According to the thinking of the four overseas leaders, the more a faction was neutral, the easier it was to strike down upon them. But Niu Youdao intentionally avoided them.

The true purpose was to save them for a deeper layout further behind.

These three sects currently had not yet been dragged into the whirlpool of chaotic battle. Therefore, in the future they still held utilization value for the subsequent interlocking stratagem. But the four overseas people did not know that matter.

They only began to suspect: "Why does Niu Youdao continuously not move against those three sects?"

Niu Youdao only replied indifferently: "No necessity. These three sects do not eat vegetarian food. It is not worth wasting military force in vain."

These words sounded highly reasonable, so the overseas crowd also did not ask further.

To reassure these four "fair-weather brothers", Niu Youdao also proactively proposed: the next target would be the Yan State. He said Yan Li's side would coordinate actions. Hearing up to here, the suspicion of the overseas crowd finally decreased by quite a bit.

After all, if Niu Youdao even dared to lay hands upon the Yan State's people, then the possibility that he was a double agent was also much lower.

After determining the subsequent plan, Niu Youdao was in no rush to act immediately. He requested the entirety to trim their formation and rest first.

\=\> thinking, EE, EU, EP, persuasion, planning, foresight, deception, manipulation.

Returning to the Yan State's side, Yan Li quickly received Niu Youdao's secret letter.

In the letter, Niu Youdao requested him to secretly arrange for Situ Miao's group of people to leave the Yan State contingent. Everything had to be done completely naturally.

When that group of disciples left, they even intentionally left behind word: "Sect Master Situ Miao is missing, we want to go find him."

The moment this matter spread out, the other forces immediately felt things were not right. Because recently, the quantity of missing people was growing more and more.

And the common characteristic was: all vanished when acting separately, or after intentionally concealing some information.

The entire crowd immediately realized: inside the Sacred Realm, there was a secret force operating covertly behind the scenes.

And right at that time, information regarding Niu Youdao's whereabouts suddenly began to continuously leak out.

The ones who spread the news were precisely the disciples under the command of Situ Miao, whom Niu Youdao had previously released. Following Niu Youdao’s instructions, they went to various places to intentionally reveal: "Niu Youdao is currently carrying an extremely massive quantity of Spiritual Seeds, hiding in an area ahead."

Upon hearing this news, the eyes of the various sects instantly turned completely red.

Before, they only wanted to kill Niu Youdao to execute the command of the Ethereal Pavilion. But now, the temptation of that massive stash of Spiritual Seeds was too immense. Whichever faction could seize it would almost certainly secure the Top 1 spot in the Sacred Realm.

Therefore, the various sects completely abandoned their previous caution. They began to call upon their companion sects to frantically surge toward Niu Youdao's hiding location.

What they entirely failed to expect, however, was that this was a giant trap meticulously laid out by Niu Youdao.

He had deliberately chosen a terrain that was highly narrow and dangerous, a bottleneck layout where one could easily enter but found it extremely difficult to retreat.

When the forces of the various countries simultaneously rushed into this mountain valley, they quickly discovered each other's presence. Under the driving force of immense greed, nobody was willing to yield a single step. They all feared that if they lagged behind, the Spiritual Seeds in Niu Youdao's hands would be snatched away by another country first.

"Niu Youdao is right ahead! Charge!"

"Block the people of the Qi State! Do not let them get ahead!"

Shouts and roars echoed throughout the valley. In the chaos, a small friction between a disciple of the Zhao State and a disciple of the Wei State instantly ignited a fuse. Swords were drawn, and a chaotic battle broke out completely.

The seven countries began to frantically slaughter one another inside the valley.

From a high mountain peak in the distance, Niu Youdao calmly watched the scene of mutual destruction below. Beside him, the four leaders of the overseas faction—Fu Hua, Hai Wuchang, Hong Gaitian, and Lang Jingkong—were entirely dumbfounded.

They finally understood what Niu Youdao meant by "taking himself as bait to force the enemy to rob one another."

Without requiring the overseas faction to waste a single soldier, the alliance of the seven countries had shattered by itself, severely consuming its own strength.

\=\> thinking, strategy, foresight, planning, adaptability, manipulation.

The chaotic battle in the valley lasted for an entire day and night, leaving casualties strewn everywhere and blood flowing like rivers.

When the various forces finally exhausted themselves and realized they had fallen into a trap, the overall strength of the seven countries inside the Sacred Realm had already dropped by more than half. Taking advantage of this golden opportunity, Niu Youdao ordered the overseas faction to launch a general sweep.

The thousand remaining elite cultivators of the overseas faction swept through like a tidal wave, easily plundering the Spiritual Seeds from the hands of the defeated and exhausted sects.

By this point, the total number of Spiritual Seeds Niu Youdao’s faction had collected reached an astronomical figure, completely guaranteeing the Top 1 spot.

However, a new crisis quietly approached.

As the deadline for the closing of the Sacred Realm drew near, the Ethereal Pavilion sent its inspectors inside to check on the situation. The inspector assigned to Niu Youdao’s region was Sha Rulai’s trusted subordinate, Ding Wei.

Ding Wei was a malicious and calculating man. He quickly noticed that the casualty rate among the seven countries was unnaturally high, whereas the overseas faction and Niu Youdao had somehow survived intact while amassing the most resources.

He blocked Niu Youdao’s path and spoke with a cold sneer: "Niu Youdao, you are quite capable. To stir up a chaotic war among the various nations right under the nose of the Ethereal Pavilion... Do you think the Sovereigns are blind?"

Niu Youdao remained perfectly composed. He took a step forward and spoke in a voice only the two of them could hear: "Inspector Ding, the rules of the Sacred Realm only stated that the faction with the most Spiritual Seeds wins. It never stated that the various countries are forbidden from competing against one another. Furthermore, if my faction wins Top 1, the credit

for managing this successful trial will ultimately belong to you and Grand Manager Sha, will it not?"

Along with those words, Niu Youdao discreetly passed over a secret storage ring containing a collection of extremely rare treasures plundered from the various sects.

Ding Wei swept his divine sense over the ring, and his cold expression instantly softened into a faint smile. He patted Niu Youdao's shoulder and said loudly: "Well said! The trial of the Sacred Realm has always been a survival of the fittest. Since you achieved this through absolute strength, the Ethereal Pavilion will naturally uphold the rules."

\=\> negotiation, persuasion, manipulation, emotional control.

With Ding Wei successfully bribed and managed, the final obstacle inside the Sacred Realm was cleared.

The one-year period concluded, and the gates of the Sacred Realm officially swung open once again. When Niu Youdao stepped out of the portal, leading the survivors of the overseas faction, the grand elders of the various sects waiting outside were completely shocked.

They saw their own disciples dragging themselves out in miserable, broken numbers, while Niu Youdao stood tall and unharmed, holding chests overflowing with Spiritual Seeds.

Sha Rulai personally stepped forward to announce the final results: "In this trial of the Sacred Realm, the rogue cultivator faction led by Niu Youdao has secured the Top 1 spot. According to the decree of the Sovereigns, Niu Youdao is cleared of all previous penalties and shall receive the supreme rewards of the Ethereal Pavilion."

The elders of the Zhao State, Jin State, and Han State clenched their fists until their knuckles turned white, their eyes bursting with homicidal fury. They wanted nothing more than to tear Niu Youdao to shreds right then and there.

However, right at that moment, the layout Niu Youdao had established *outside* the Sacred Realm prior to entering began to take full effect.

A messenger rushed into the mountain valley, presenting urgent military intelligence to the elders of the various countries:

"Report! The grand army of the Yan State, commanded by Shang Chaotong, has successfully breached the border of the Zhao State, capturing fifteen cities in a row!"

"Report! The Han State's internal royal court has fallen into chaos due to a sudden rebellion orchestrated by hidden factions, forcing their frontline troops to retreat!"

"Report! The Qi State and Wei State have officially signed a non-aggression pact, realigning their forces toward the borders of the Jin State!"

The entire mountain valley fell into a dead, terrified silence. All the major sects realized that the geopolitical landscape of the mortal world had completely shifted while they were trapped inside the trial.

Niu Youdao slowly stepped up to the elders of the hostile nations. He unsheathed his sword slightly, the cold gleam reflecting in his calm eyes, and spoke dispassionately:

"I told your disciples inside, and now I will tell you directly: Outside is different, inside is different. If you want to play a game of death inside, I will accommodate you. If you want to bring that war outside, my grand armies are already waiting at your doorsteps. Who wants to be the first to test my blade?"

Faced with the crushing weight of Niu Youdao's external military leverage and his absolute victory inside the Sacred Realm, not a single elder dared to make a move. They could only swallow their rage and step back, opening a wide path for him.

Niu Youdao turned to his sworn brothers of the overseas faction—Fu Hua, Hai Wuchang, Hong Gaitian, and Lang Jingkong—and gave a slight nod. Together with Yun Ji, Yun Huan, and Yu Zhaoxing, they walked out of the mountain valley in a grand, unobstructed manner.

Through a grand, interlocking web of ghostly stratagems, Niu Youdao had not only calculated a flawless path to survival against the entire world, but he had also completely rewritten the balance of power across the seven nations.

The interlocking stratagem concluded perfectly.

\=\> Grandmaster Strategy, Ultimate Victory, End of Arc.