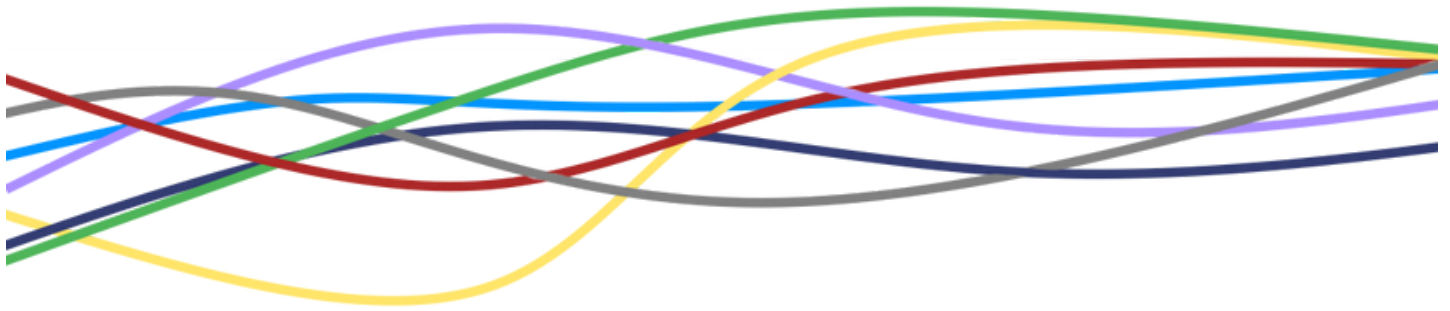


Chapter 0 - Introduction

A collection of dimensions, called Paths, weave past each other towards the future. Each contains a world and unique power all their own, but they all seem to travel towards a single convergence.



It's in one of these Paths that a masked Stranger prepares the Phoenix Tournament. Using their ability to open Gates between Paths, the lion-masked figure brings fighters from many paths back to their own, with the help of an equally mysterious Carnation Society. To what end the Society is assembling these powers, nobody seems to know - but the promise of an exciting event in the peaceful Cradle Path is exciting enough to erase any suspicion from its citizens.



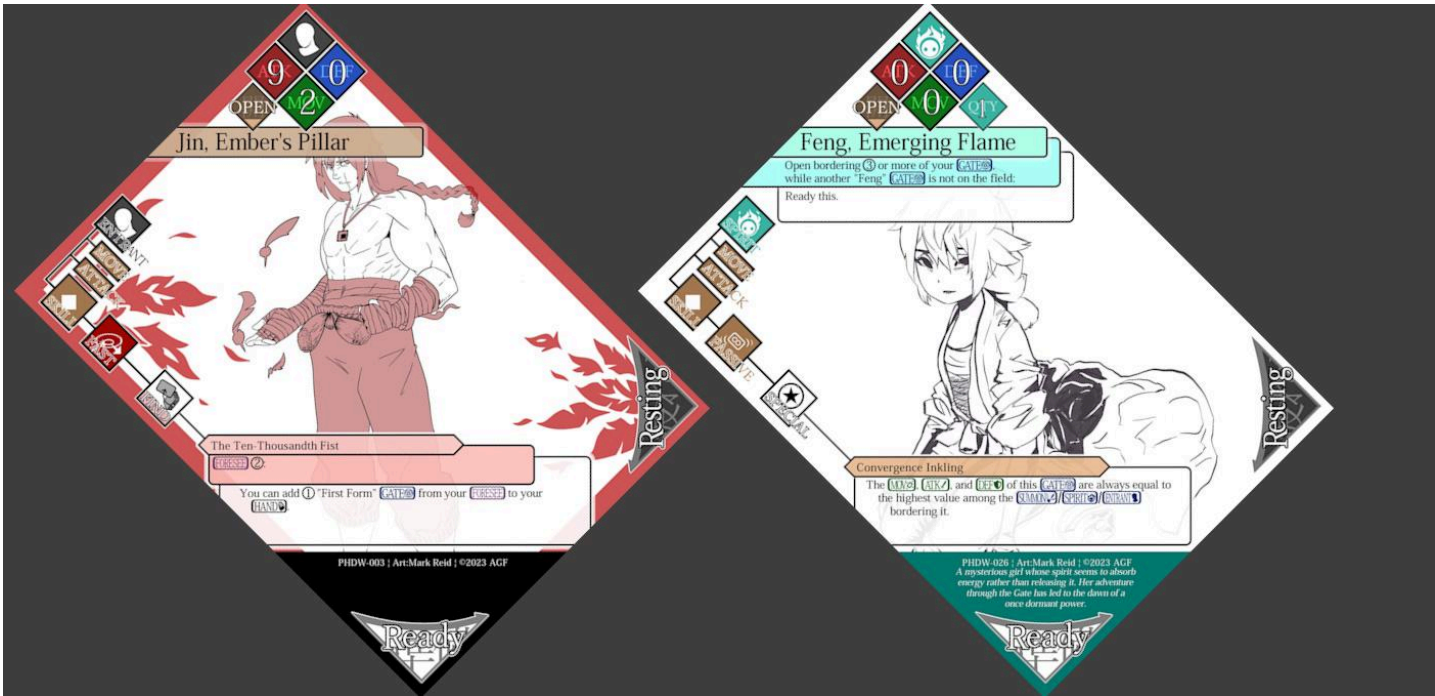
As the Tournament grows closer, the Gate is opened again, and the masked Stranger steps through...

Chapter 1

An isolated clearing opened before Jin, and a familiarity washed over him along with the unfiltered sun.

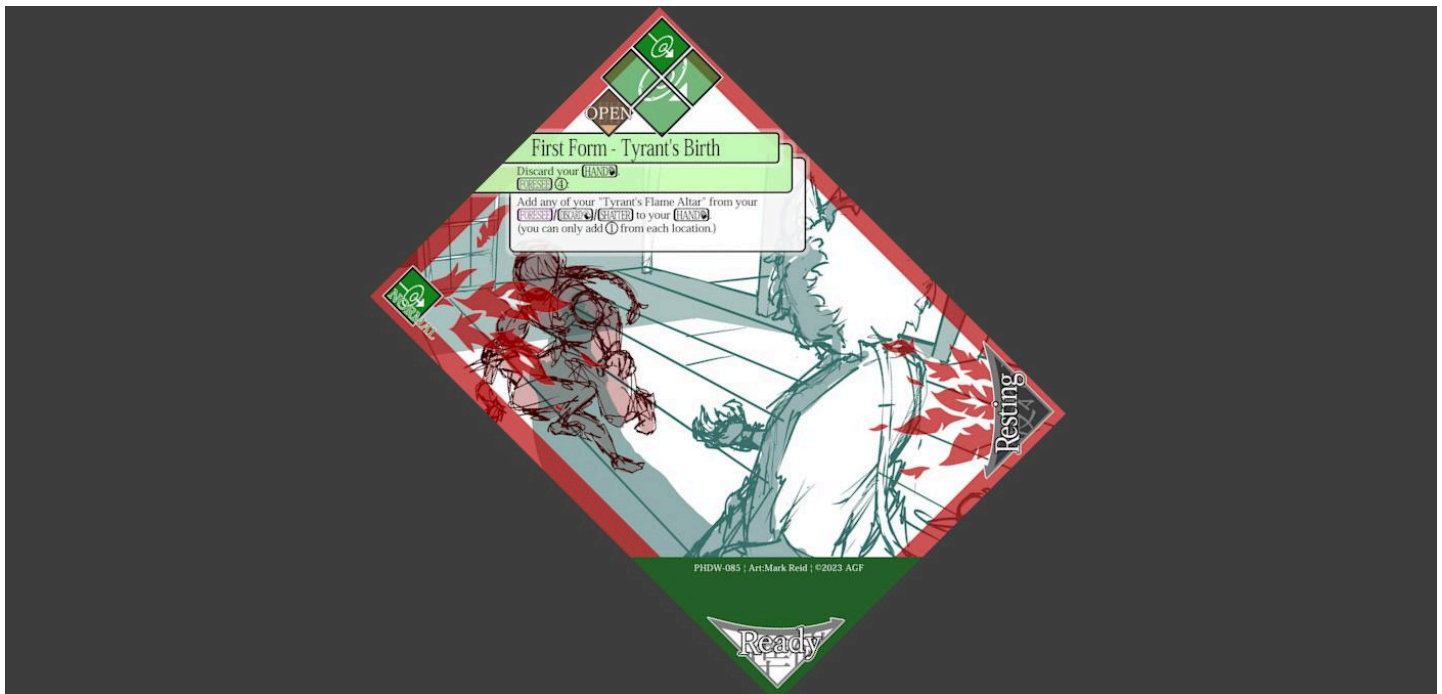


The Ember's Pillar entered the dilapidated dojo he'd inherited along with his title, welcomed by his only family - Feng, his frail younger sister. She wiped sweat from her brow cheerfully while hanging clothes to dry. "You're back already Brother?"



After battling sickness throughout her youth, she'd recently begun to help with chores around the house. Seeing her busy brought him comfort as he returned from hunting for their dinner. His reflection was cut short as a glowing circle split the air between them, and a masked stranger stepped through.

"Your inheritance is required elsewhere, Jin." As the stranger spoke, the siblings' unease grew, and the Pillar waited for an opportunity to violently reject this brazen offer. "Your sister is special. She starves in this Path, for the energy leaking from mine." Suddenly, she crumpled. The Stranger continued as the Pillar rushed to his sister's side. "I can stop the leak whenever I please - or you can come with me, and earn as much of her health as you desire." With the wave of a gloved hand, her color began to return.



"I understand." With short words and fast resolve, the Pillar laid his sister in her bed and walked towards the Stranger.

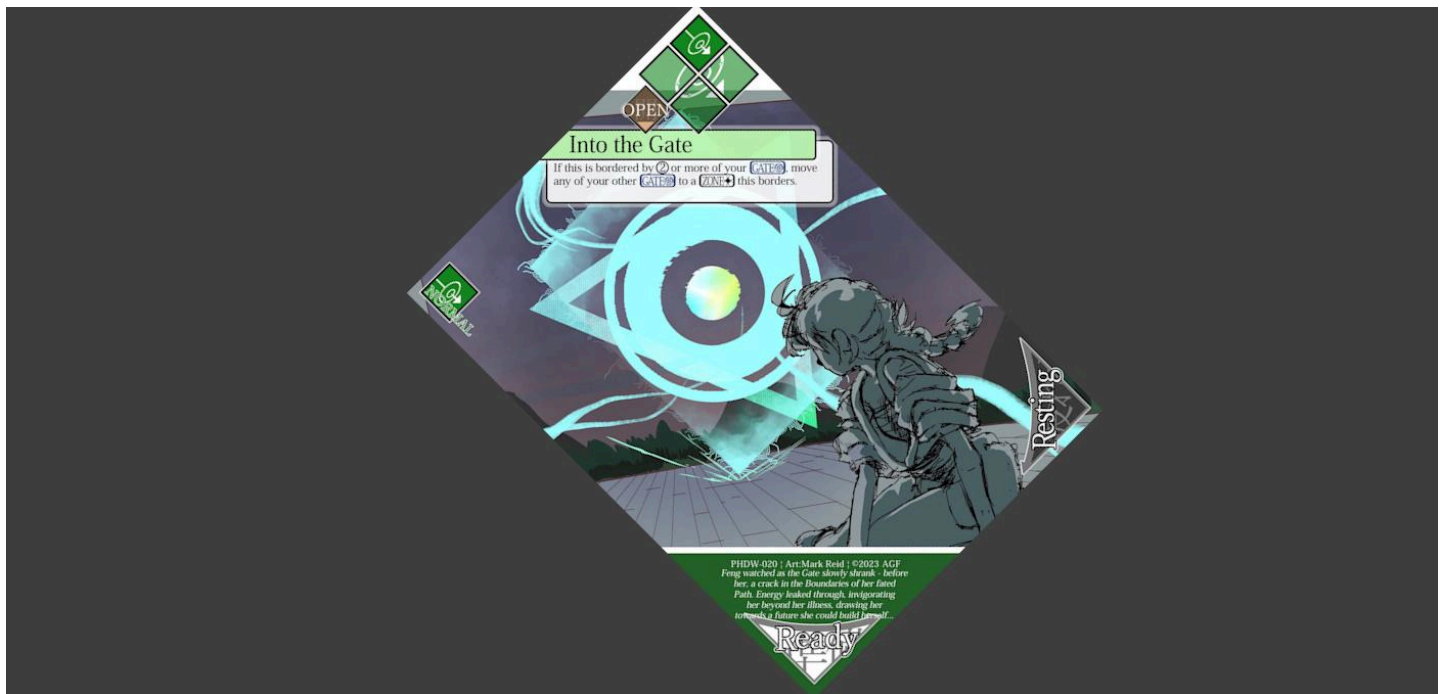
"A pleasure negotiating with you." The Stranger smirked, somewhat amused at how quickly Jin had accepted his offer. The Gate shook with energy as the Stranger gestured towards it. "After you."

Jin looked back at his sister for only a moment, before directing his determination back at the Gate in front of him. As he stepped through, the Stranger looked back towards Feng as well.

"We'll be seeing you soon, Vessel."

They passed through the gate together, while a girl exaggerating her weakness brimmed with curiosity towards her purpose and these strange words. He had called her Vessel, and understood her sickness, even controlled it! As the

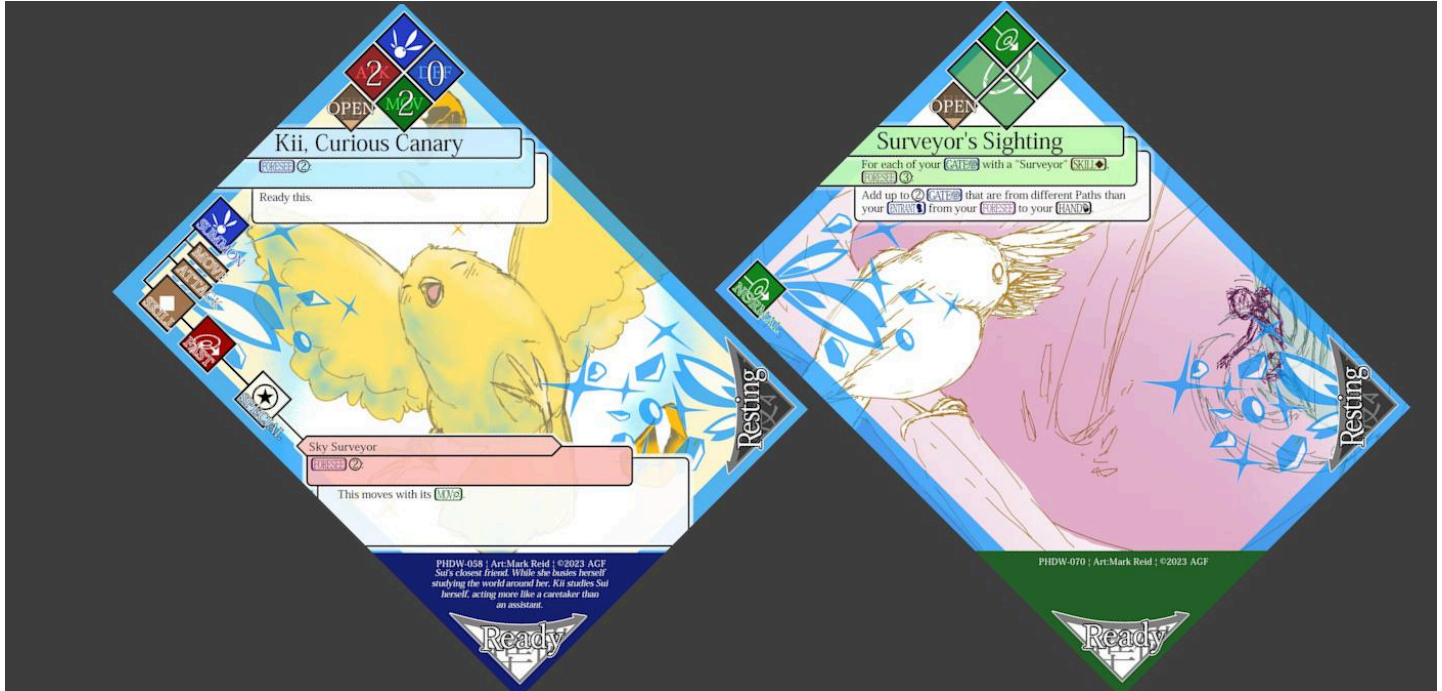
Gate faded, she slipped through, determined to find her way, and prove a capability all her own.



Chapter 2

A strange energy pulsed in a still clearing, its light reflecting off the crystal forest surrounding it, and piquing the curiosity of a nearby canary. Tasked with surveying the air of its land, it dutifully glided towards the anomaly - and soon arrived at a slowly fading gate in the air. Just as it was nearly gone, a child stepped through, wide eyed and fidgeting. As she took in her new surroundings, the canary landed lightly on her shoulder. She jumped in surprise, broken fully out of her stupor.

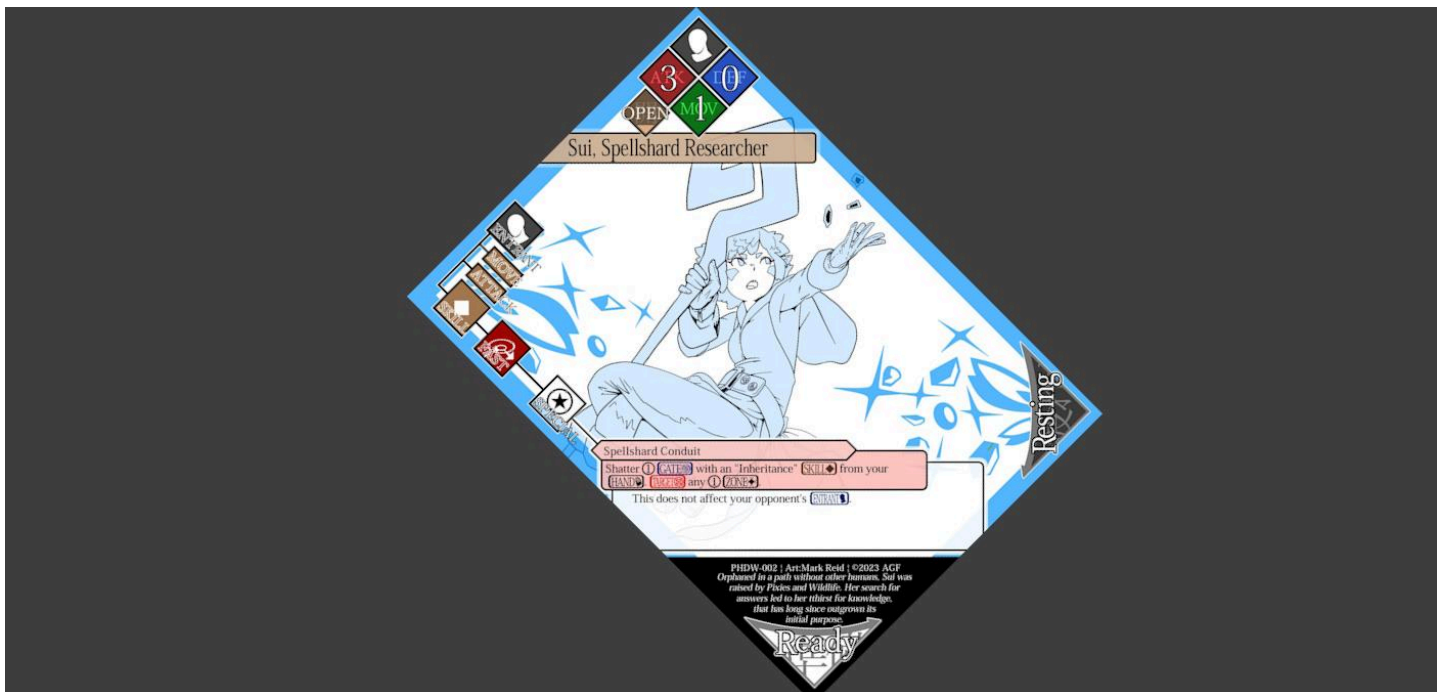
"Wah! Oh, who do we have here?"



The canary simply pointed its wing and puffed its chest - a bird of this intelligence was a first for her, and it clearly had their destination in mind. "If I can't trust a bird, I'll never get anywhere, isn't that right? Off we go then!"

The canary chirped brightly, and the two headed off to meet its keeper. She entered the small hut to find a stack of books, and the sound of a pen scratching behind them.

"Is that you Kii?" A young girl stepped out from behind her desk. "Wait, who are you?"



Kii began gesturing with its wings, before flitting up onto the desk itself. Pen in claw, it began jotting notes.

"Are you... like me?" Disheveled and sleepy, the mysterious girl cautiously approached Feng, who was still plenty cautious towards this mysterious encounter. "I think so? You're human right?", she responded.

"Human? What is a Hum - " Kii flew up between them, cutting her off. "Oh, yes, what do you have for me?"

She picked up Kii's notes and quickly glanced over them.

"A Gate you say? Like the one you say my parents came from! Well, you MUST be like me then! But then, you've been on the other side of it!"

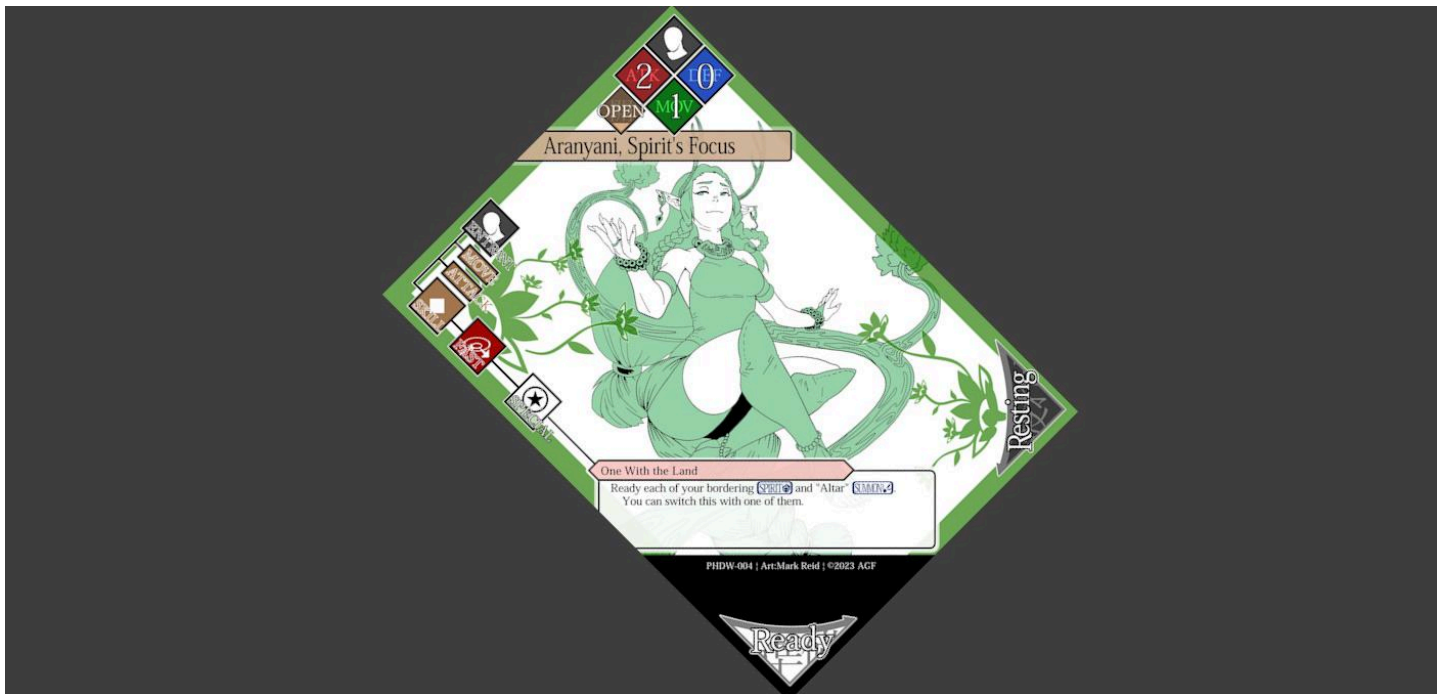
Suddenly, the girl brimmed with energy and grabbed Feng's hands. "I'm Sui - you're just what I've been looking for!"

"Oh! I - I'm Feng."

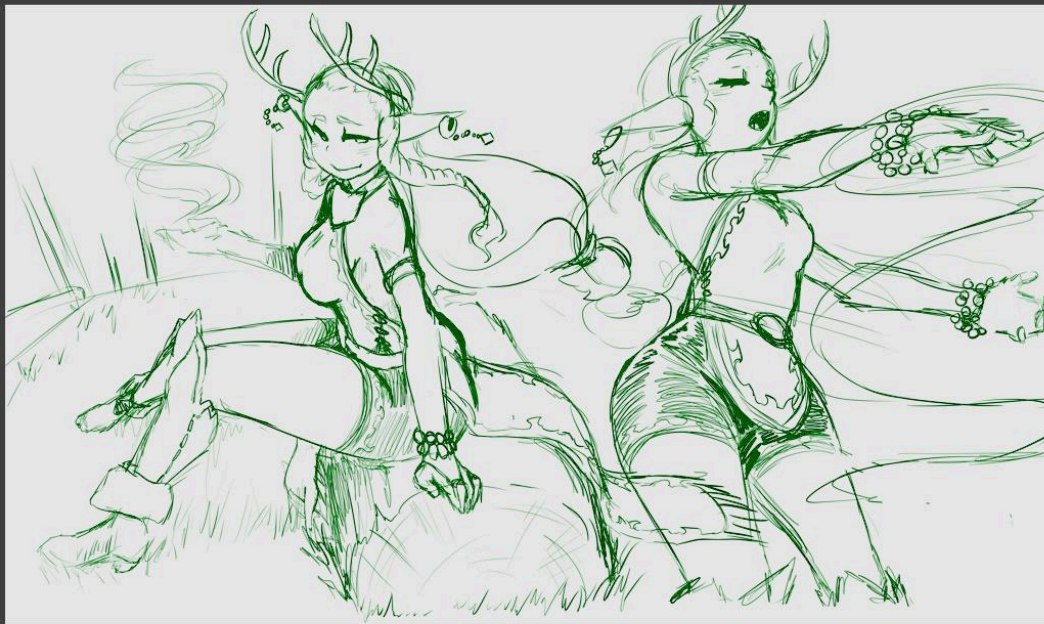
Kii watched as the two continued chattering. Content, he drifted down to a nest in the corner of the room and closed his eyes.

Chapter 3

Densely packed trees cooled the shadows beneath them, their leaves fluttering as deer passed between them. Suddenly, the wildlife scattered, leaving behind only an unnatural stillness and Aranyani.



Her Path suddenly felt unfamiliar - even the spirits had fallen silent. Before she could even consider investigation, a point of energy appeared before her. It expanded into a Gate before her, and a Stranger stepped out from inside.



"It's nice to meet you, Spiritcaller." She tilted her head in confusion.

"The Spirits have been neglected for quite some time, Stranger. Who are you to speak of my call to them?"

A gloved hand reached toward her, and she felt a strange pull emanate from it. A stunned Spirit flew past her and into the Stranger's grasp. A light green and translucent Rabbit squirmed as the gaze of a Mask directed towards it.

"Funny things, these Spirits. Unique to this Path, and yet their traces can be found in all others."



The forest shook around her as Aranyani prepared to protect it - but the Stranger had already placed the Spirit back on the forest floor, and released it.

"Don't worry, I won't hurt them. Provided that you come with me, of course. We have a... need for somebody like you where I'm from."

A conflict here would only create needless destruction - better to create chaos outside of her purview instead. "Very well."

Another simple coercion - the Stranger's mask hid his smirk yet again. "After you, then." But Aranyani only shook her head.

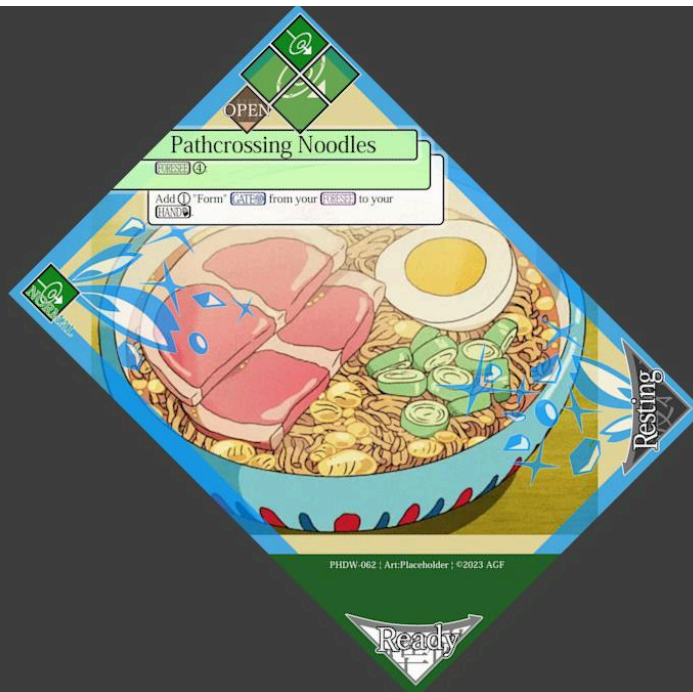
"You will not find my back turned to you today, Stranger." She could feel his energy shake momentarily.

"An understandable distrust." As the Stranger stepped through the gate, the Spiritcaller looked behind her at the forest she was leaving behind.

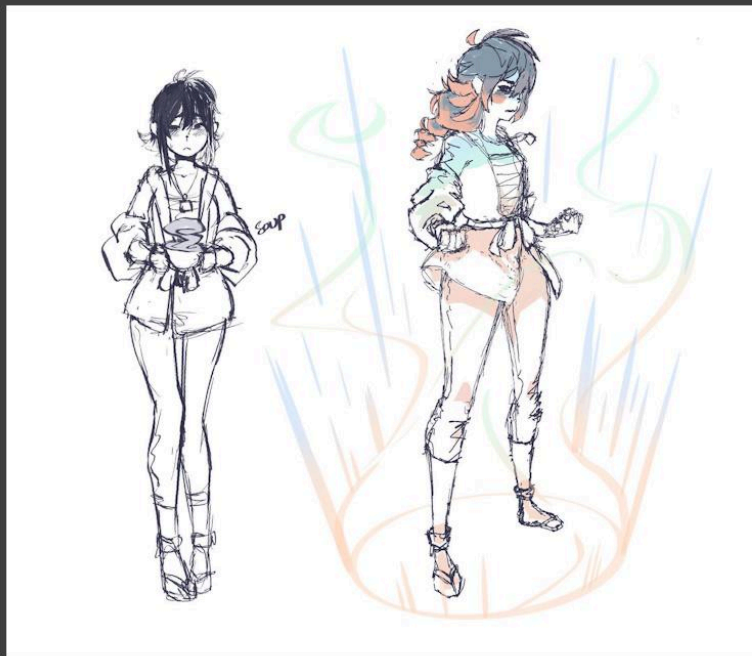
"I'll see you all again soon," she whispered, before passing through herself.

Chapter 4

"These are truly quite the curiosity," quipped Sui, spinning two thin sticks between her fingers. After over a week, Feng had begun feeling comfortable in the Researcher's hut, and had whittled some branches into chopsticks.



"Stop playing with your chopsticks and eat your noodles before they get cold, Sui. It's my Brother's signature dish!" Suddenly, Kii looked up from his own bowl of seeds.



"What's wrong, Kii?" Sui asked without much worry, but Feng had felt it too.

"Someone's coming, Sui. We have to go."

"Who? Nobody ever comes here!"

"I can feel the Gate I came from again. It's that... stranger. We have to run!"

"If he's so dangerous, I have to protect my research - and regardless, I'd like to meet this traveler myself." She stood up with her noodles and opened a nearby window.

"But we certainly shouldn't let him know you're here - quick, this way!"

With that, she threw the bowl into the surrounding bushes. Feng would have pouted at Sui if she had the time, but the Stranger's energy was only growing.

"You'll try those noodles one of these days - you can't live off the same seeds as a bird forever!" With that, she climbed out the window, and snuck into the nearby bushes herself.

"Sorry Kii, she didn't mean it." Before Kii could puff out even one feather, a Gate opened inside the hut. "Wow! This is incredible!" Sui marveled at the Gate that had suddenly appeared before her - within moments she was observing its edges closely, and continued taking notes as the Stranger stepped through.

"You are a curious one, Sui." The Stranger could see this would be another short talk - but then noticed a strange meal set on the table behind her.

"Are those... noodles? And chopsticks? Why do you - "

"What language is this?" She cut the Stranger off, worried only for the incredible display before her. "How did you open this?! Do you know anything about the principal behind this?"

The stranger set aside his concern - a strange woman's eccentric cuisine being similar to that of another Path's was most likely a coincidence, and he had plenty more places to be.

"If you must know, follow me through this Gate."

"Through! I can go through? I've always theorized there are other worlds and this must prove it! Look here," she grabbed a nearby journal and started flipping through. "Based on my theory, and some nearby ruins, there seems to be a core world that ours spawned from - I did some calculations and it seems like there are 3,412,509 worlds, and this is -"

"Paths, you mean. And just come with me and you'll find out." This time, the Stranger cut off Sui. Abruptly, she slammed the journal in her hands shut, and grabbed a nearby satchel.

"Paths! You call them paths...it's only a name, and yet you're so confident. Why is that? You've known about this for some time - actually, what are you waiting for? You can tell me on the way! Kii, Mido, let's go!"

Kii flitted over, and a small gecko with small round-lensed glasses came out from beneath another pile of loose papers. The three walked quickly through the Gate, leaving the Stranger standing alone in the debris of the girl ahead.



From the bushes, Feng watched as the Stranger sighed to nobody in particular. "What a pain." With that, the Stranger walked through the gate again, closing it. Feng waited a moment, watching the empty air where the Gate had once been.

"Well, now what..."

Cautiously, she climbed back through the window, dirty bowl and chopsticks in hand - curiously, she looked down at the notes Sui had taken on the strange letters surrounding the edge of the Gate - but what she found weren't notes at all, but a note addressed to her.

"'I'll be back for you.' - Sui"

Feng smiled, content to have made such a good friend in such a short time. Worries subsided, she sat down to finish the bowl of noodles left behind.

Chapter 5

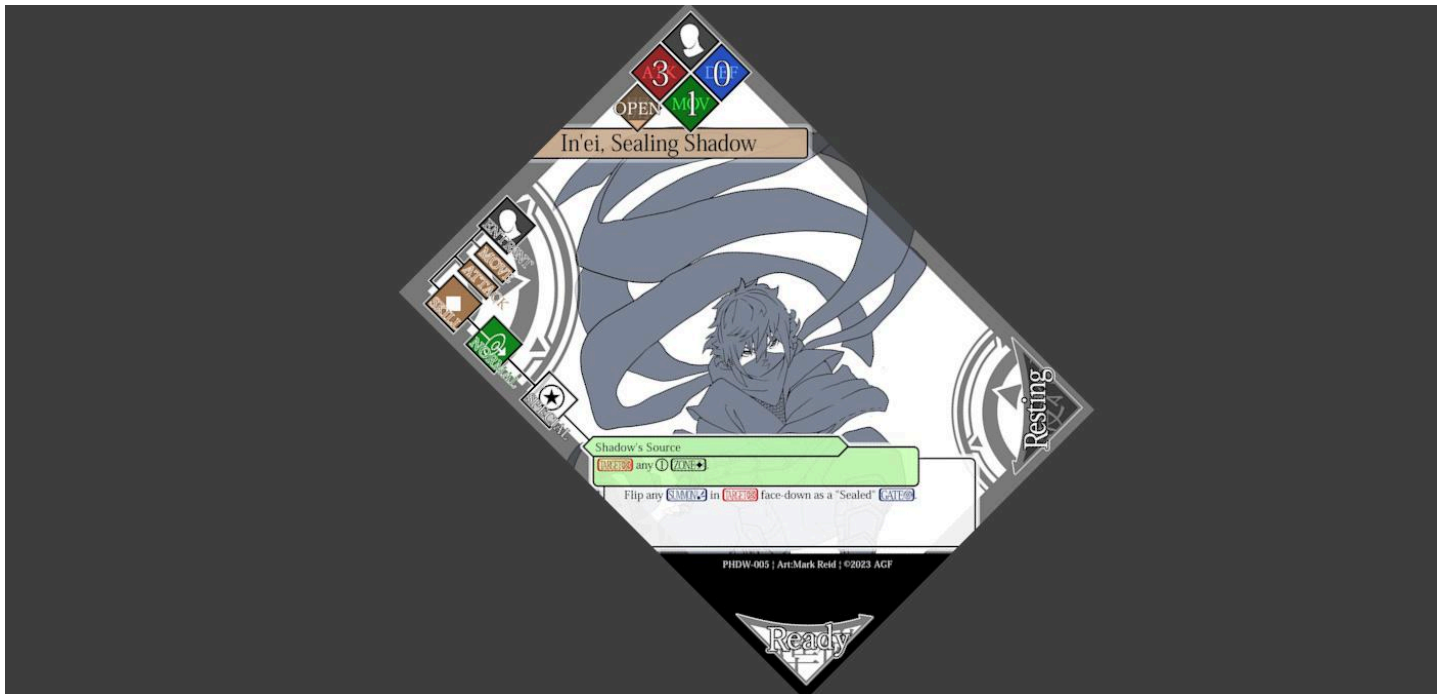
The Masked Stranger stepped out onto the empty battlefield, taking in the empty stands rising up around it. Soon, it would all begin. A uniformed member of tournament staff approached from behind, and kneeled.

"We're ready for the next one."

This next Gate would be tricky, to say nothing of the... enlistment itself. Still, the air rippled before them, and a Gate opened in spite of their unease, a continuing realization of a resolve long since set. It was too late for regrets, far too much was already in motion. The momentary hesitation passed as the Stranger continued forward.

In a shadowed moonlit clearing, a Stranger stepped out of a gate only to find an even larger gate on the ground beneath. As it began to glow, a shrouded figure stepped forth from the surrounding forest, and the glow shattered into shards of light that faded into the air.

The Stranger barely reacted as the shattered gate dissipated. "Hello, In'nei".



"How do you know me? And how did you find this place?"

The stranger paused before answering. "For a people so deeply familiar with using Gates to seal, it's hard to believe none of you have ever stepped through one."

Another smaller Gate opened behind the stranger, a Kunai shooting quickly through, directly into the waiting hands of the Stranger in its path. In'nei shifted his stance, preparing for conflict, but only met an exasperated sigh as the Stranger turned the Kunai over in their clawed gloves.

"This is quite a familiar thing... as was that... red carpet you laid for me. I'm not here to intrude on your collective. A tournament of fate will soon begin, and I imagine it concerns you - a Phoenix may gather there."

His Stance broke momentarily. He cursed his own inexperience as he questioned these words.

"It isn't time for this. It'd be generations too early for even an ember to leak through."

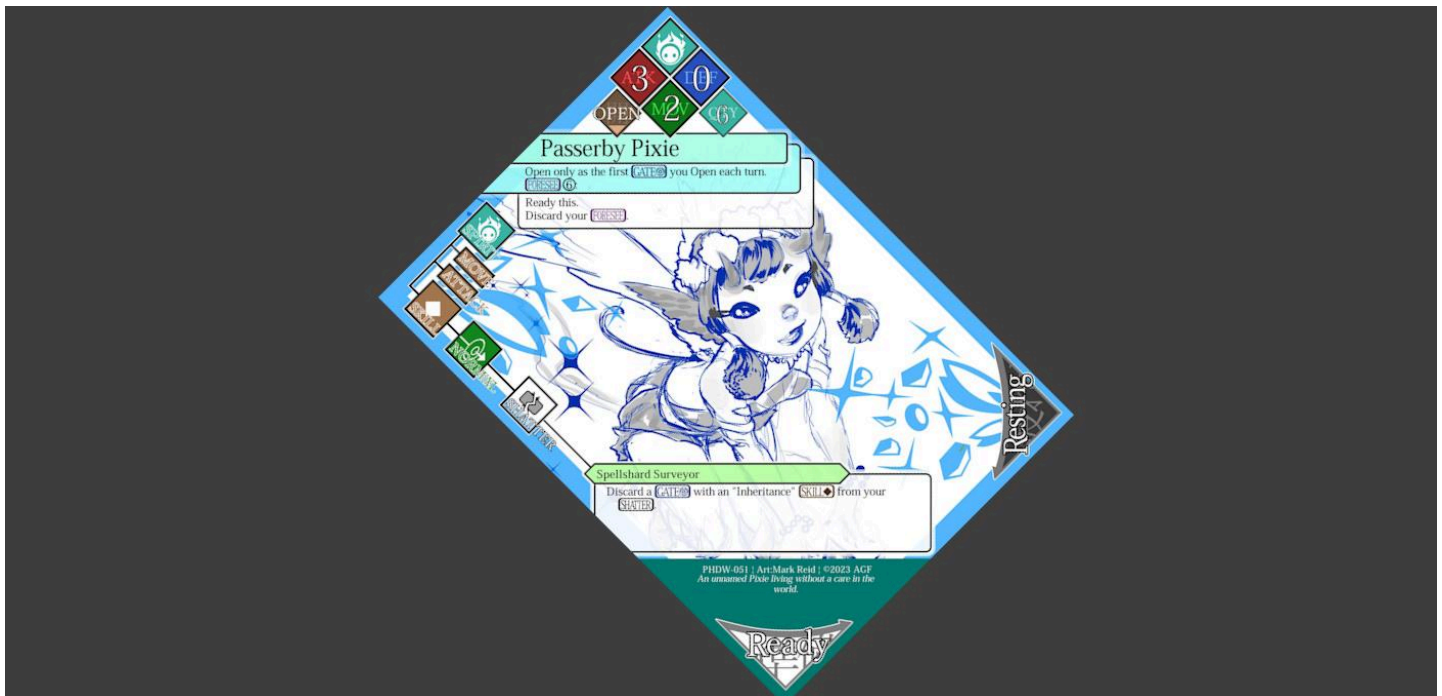
"There are more weaknesses in your seals than you think. And even then... I have my reasons to provoke it." The Stranger didn't like revealing so much like this, but In'nei's presence was crucial. This would have to do. The two stood in silence as the chirping of insects and rustling branches filled the air between them.

"Very well. I will follow you." In'nei settled his stance and walked towards the Stranger, whose shoulders slightly fell in relief as a Gate opened before them.

Chapter 6

Feng sat on the roof of Sui's hut, as the sun set over glinting emerald trees. A small pixie floated in front of her, telling her about the forest before them.

"...and our Queen has decreed that we have to pay a 1% higher tax on our tea now. Can you believe that?"



"That's just outrageous, Clara!" The pixies had approached Feng, expecting to give Sui a report on the state of the forest. Sui's parents had once asked them to watch over her while they were away on research trips - after their passing over a decade ago, they continued to uphold the favor. Now Sui had left the nest, without as little as a letter goodbye - and Clara visited Feng instead, waiting for Sui's alleged return. Little Sui's first friend that wasn't a bird, or a lizard, or a butterfly! It was fun to talk to someone new, and hear what other "Humans" were like - although now, she was talking more than listening. As Clara continued on, Feng suddenly felt a familiar energy.

"A Gate is opening!"

Feng hoped it was Sui, but couldn't be too careful. As the Gate opened below, she jumped down and hid behind a crate.

"Feng! I'm back!" Sui stepped out into the familiar clearing to see Feng pop out from behind cover nearby.

"Sui! There you are! Are you okay? Where have you been!" The pixie flitted down too, bombarding her with questions of her own.

"Calm down you two! Sorry Clara, but I'm heading out again, and I'm taking Feng with me."

"Yes! I was hoping you'd say that!" Feng grabbed a backpack she had set down nearby - already packed, and ready for her adventure to continue.

"You'll love this Feng - there's a tournament going on! I won a couple rounds and learned a bit about gates, so I came to get you."

"A Tournament! It was getting awfully boring around here, you know. If it wasn't for Clara I'd have gone mad. You could've left Kii behind."

"Sorry, sorry! Well, let's get to it then. Clara, take care of things around here won't you? We'll be back."

"You're leaving again already? You'll bring back a souvenir soon, won't you?" Clara circled Sui's head worryingly.

"We'll be fine! See you soon, and I'll bring you back something you like!" Sui ran back through the gate, dodging Clara, and Feng could do nothing but look back and shrug. "We'll see you soon for sure."

Clara waved as Feng stepped through the Gate too. As it closed, she turned towards Sui's hut, and sighed again.

"Unloading their chores off on me, hm? Those souvenirs better be spectacular!"

Chapter 7

The Masked Stranger stepped out onto the empty battlefield. This time, raucous crowds filled the stands around it, cheering their Announcer's entrance.

The Carnation Society had introduced the Cradle Path to the Phoenix - and formed a religion worshipping it. This tournament would choose the next Phoenix Pillar - a force to guide the Phoenix's wings. The Phoenix Pillar would be blessed with a long life, and their experience and connection to the Phoenix's flames would reach into every crevice of their society. Said to have created the universe and all things, those flames would bring fortune and peace to everything it touched - at least, that's what the Society promised. The people of the Cradle Path weren't necessarily devout quite yet, but a spectacle like this certainly helped amplify the expectations of prosperity that often followed the Society's presence.

At the head of the society was a Lion - a mask that spoke of bringing fortune from beyond the seas. Yet the lands the Stranger traveled to were beyond those seas - and fighters had been coerced to attend from other Paths entirely. Now, as they reached the semifinals, the machinations of Carnation's leader grew closer to completion.

"Welcome to the Semifinals of the Phoenix Selection!" The stands roared in excitement.

"We have Jin, a fighter whose flames represent the will of the Phoenix itself! Only in these battles will their faith be proven!"

From behind a dark entrance, Jin stepped out, wincing at the sunlight, and exhausted from having already defeated multiple opponents.

"Next we have Sui, a mage who calls on every element! Will her flames prove to burn brighter?" The crowd turned towards an entrance on the opposite end of the field, and watched as entryway remained empty. Suddenly, footsteps echoed from from the dark entrance - but the figure that exited those shadows was only a member of the tournament's staff. He ran towards the center of the stage and whispered to the Announcer.

"Shes... gone, sir."

"GONE? Where could she have gone? How did she get out of her cell?"

"She didn't, it's still locked. She's just... gone!"

Before the Stranger could decide how to react to this news, footsteps started to echo through the entrance again. This time, Sui ran out into the field. The crowd erupted at their fan favorite - a young charismatic girl who seemed to be enjoying each battle. She waved up towards the crowd, goading them on, and the Stranger froze in confusion.



"Is she... blowing them kisses? Nevermind, we'll talk about this later. Get out of here."

The staff member ran out as the Stranger muttered to himself. "Fashionably late! How... intriguing."

Sui turned towards the Stranger and winked, eliciting an irritated groan.

"Just... let the battle begin." The Stranger quickly paced towards a waiting Staff member in the shadow of the field's entrance. Barely glancing towards him, the Stranger hissed in frustration. "Figure out where she went, and how to restrain her after this."

Chapter 8

"One meatball skewer please!"

Feng could hardly believe it - the atmosphere, the food, and so many people! As the stall vendor handed her her latest snack, she heard a familiar voice ring through the stadium, and caught her brother's name.

"Oh! I have to go!" She grabbed her skewer and ran for the field.

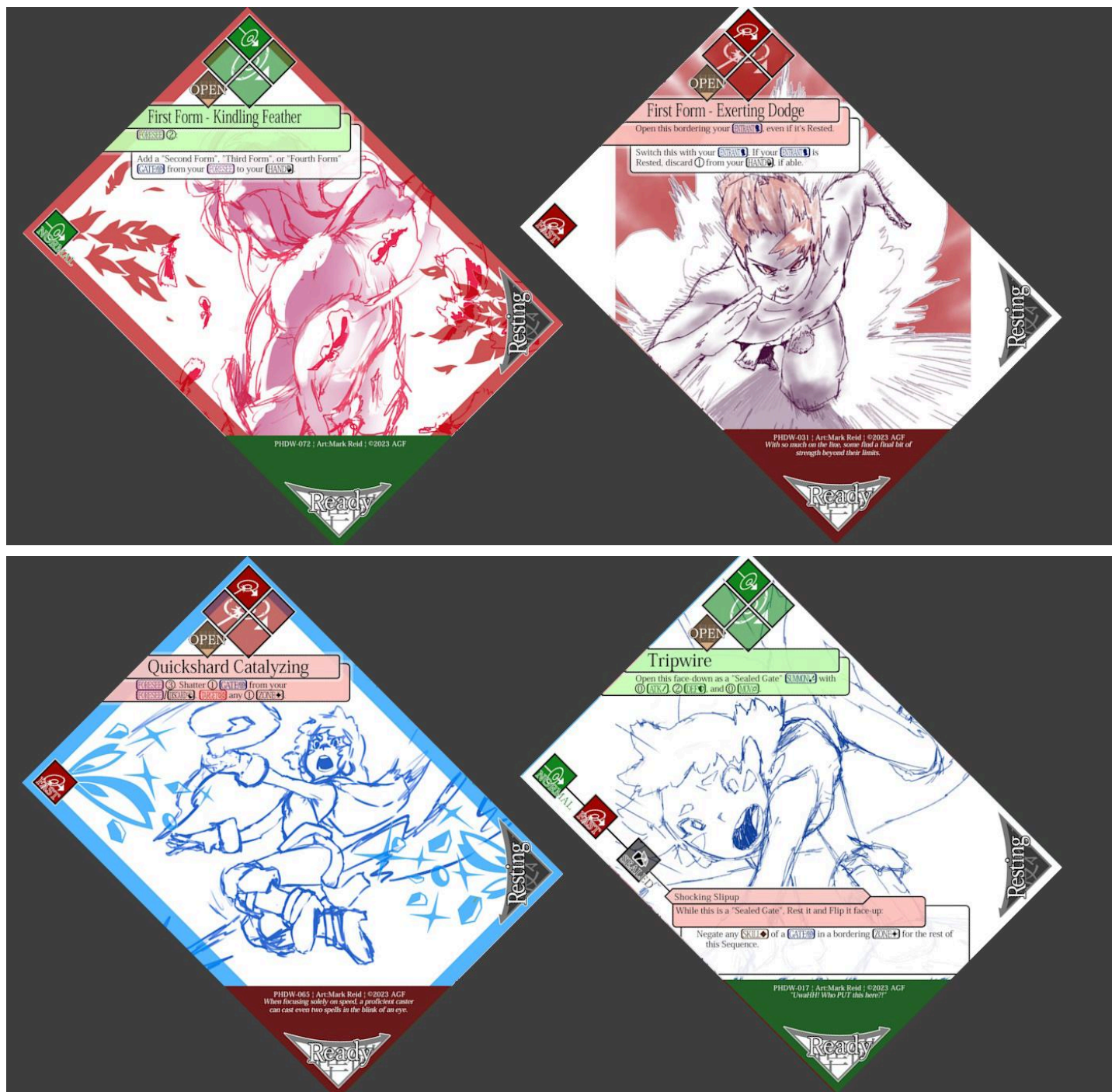
"Wait! You didn't pay me - " The vendor's complaints were cut short as his next customer started to order. "I'm too busy for this..."

She ran out into the stands and towards a wall, leaning over to see her brother and Sui fighting. Sui had told her who she'd be facing already - how exciting to see Jin again like this! But who to root for? As she pondered the simple question, Jin battled with far greater gravity below, unaware that Feng was already reveling in the health he was fighting for.



Feng herself had stopped thinking about her past sickness, enveloped in the atmosphere around her - since she'd found herself in Sui's path, that weakness had all but vanished. Having been treated like glass her entire life, she

had been afraid that Sui too would treat her carefully, never even mentioning it to her.. In fact, she now wanted to be down on that field too, fighting with her brother like she did as a child.



As Sui catalyzed shard after shard, Jin continued to deflect or dodge each attack.

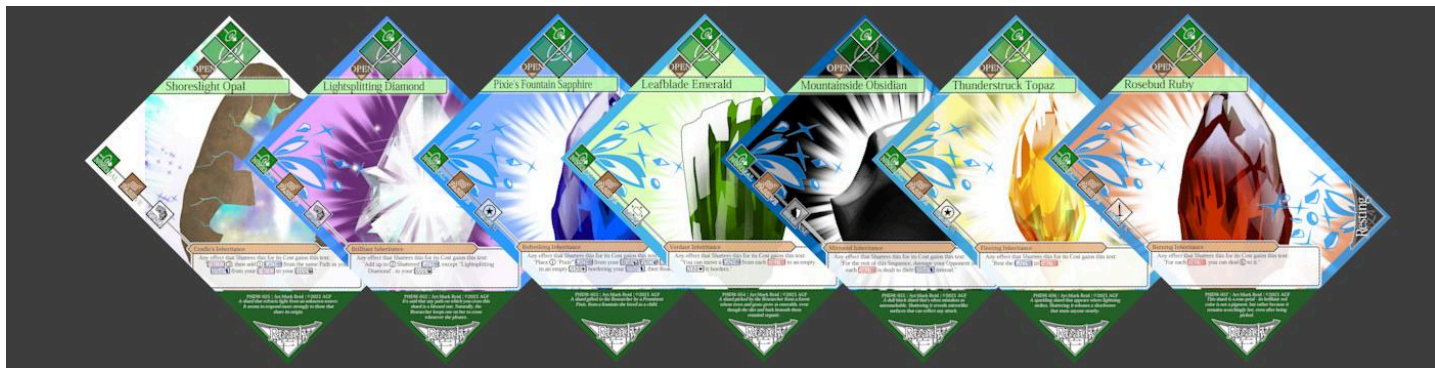
"Incredible! You're resonating with my magic so easily!"

"You're having fun?" Jin had fought several serious battles up until now, taking on the hopes and dreams of those he defeated. Yet this girl seemed to be fighting for no reason at all.

"Well, I can finally test my magic against somebody capable instead of some rocks!" She reached into her spellshard pouch to find it nearly empty.

"Oh, well I'm almost out of magic. Why don't you see if you can handle this?"

With a handful of her last seven shards, she held out her staff in front of her. A Gate appeared beneath her and began to expand. The Masked Stranger suddenly stood from a seat above the field.

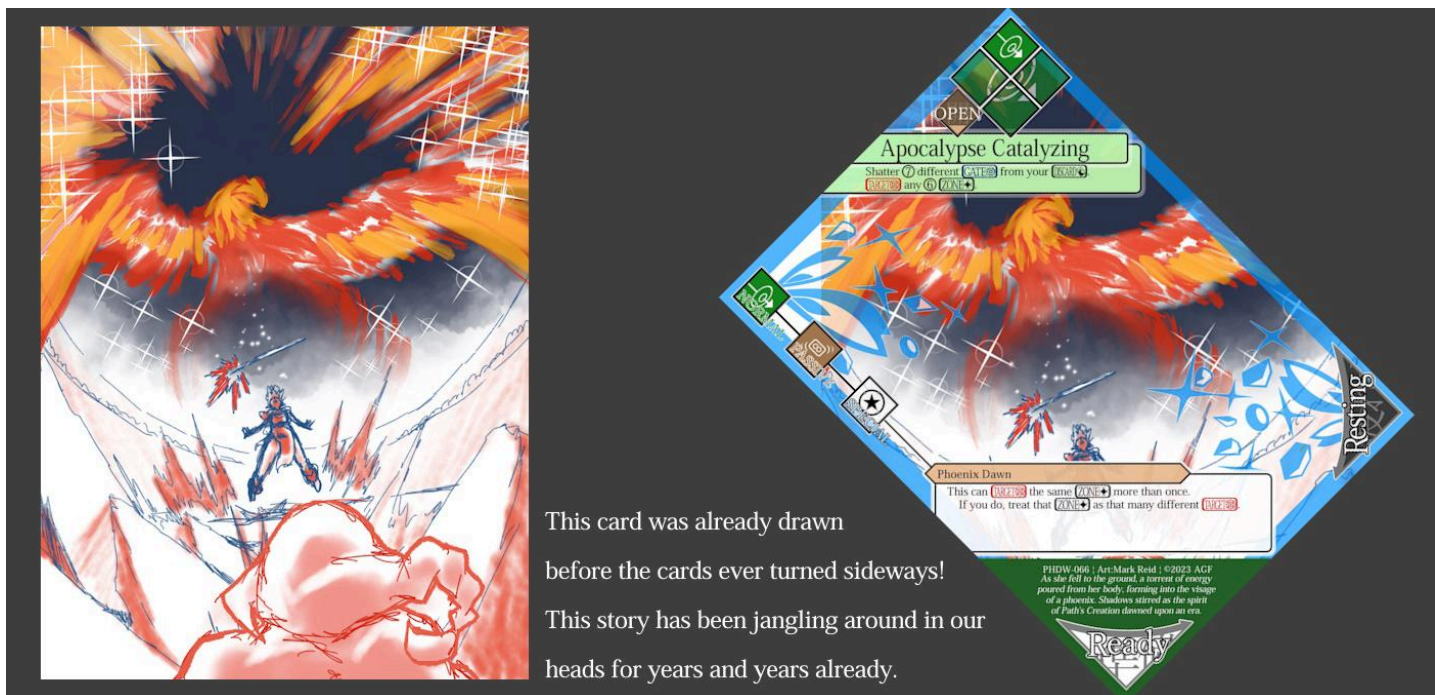


"Where did she learn that Gate?!" In panic, the Stranger leapt over a wall and down towards the stage. "Evacuate everyone! Now!"

Within the stadium, the stone walls began to shake. In'nei felt a sudden burst of energy, an unmistakable outpouring that had no natural cause. He stood up in his cell and walked towards its door. A guard looked back at him. "What do you want?" In'nei reached into his back pouch and flicked his hand out of it towards the door, and a silent impact blew both the door and guard down an empty hall. "Too bad you didn't go watch the fight with your friends." With a clear path, In'nei darted towards the chaos unfolding on the field.

Jin instinctively understood this wasn't something he could withstand. He ran towards Sui, fist clenched. To his surprise, his punch simply connected - but even before the strike, her consciousness had already begun to fade, the power pouring from her gate overwhelming her.

"No, I... should be able to control..." She looked towards Jin in a final moment of clarity.
 "Feng is here..."



The energy around her erupted into flame as the Gate beneath her turned bright crimson. The form of a Phoenix began forming above her as the stadium shook.

In another cell, Aranyani felt a spirit filled with emptiness. Something destructive, filled with an anger whose targets had long been lost to the ages, casting a shadow over this land. She closed her eyes, and focused upon the spirits beneath the stone floor, and vines began to grow through the floors of her cell. They burst through its door, taking her with them. As she entered the hallway, In'nei sprinted past her. "Ah, that's the way then."

As In'nei and Aranyani ran onto the field, they found ashes and rubble, the crowd evacuated and flames settled. Still, heat radiated from the brilliant Phoenix hovering above them. It turned towards the stands, where one girl remained, shaking.

"Feng?! Get out of here!" Jin yelled towards the stands, but she had already begun rising into the air.

"Sui! Help Sui! You can trust her! I'll be fine!" Feng desperately gestured towards her first friend as The Phoenix dissipated into pure flame, then rushed into Feng. Her body began to glow as she fell to the ground.

"Feng! No!" As Jin ran for the stands, Feng's collapsed body only grew brighter. Before he could reach her, she had already begun climbing to her feet. Now standing, she looked towards the Entrants with red, empty eyes.

"Oh, I've missed having a form." Fenghuang reveled in her new body for a moment, before jumping over the ledge in front of her, and floating slowly down to the field. The Masked Stranger approached her, then kneeled, removing her mask.

"I am here to serve."

In'nei questioned his eyes as the Stranger's face was revealed to him. "Nichiri? You're... dead!"



Nichiri only looked towards In'nei and smiled sadly. "She certainly is." As a Gate appeared beneath her and Feng, she stood and faced the Phoenix. Her resolve had taken its true form before her, glorious in its brilliant flame.

"Fenghuang has been reborn, and the time has come for a new age."

Jin ran towards them, cloaked in flame, hand outstretched to grab his sister's body. Fenghuang simply raised her hand towards him, and swept him aside with a wing of flame. As he was thrown towards the stands, a tree sprung up in his path, catching him in its branches. Fenghuang smiled, amused at the folly of her Creation. She then turned to look upwards, and the Gate beneath them rose into the sky, taking Nichiri and her with it. Only a trailing flame remained. As that too dissipated, four were left behind, Entrants in a smoldering stadium.

Chapter 9

Jin sat defeated beneath a small tree, and In'nei was resting in silence in the shadow of the stadium walls. Aranyani kneeled next to Sui's unconscious body.

"She's alive, but I don't know when she'll wake."

Sui opened one eye carefully, wondering if she should stay unconscious for now - but instead of anyone angry at her, she only found concern. "Maybe... right now..."

"Oh! Oh, are you -" Aranyani was interrupted by the sounds of further conflict erupting outside the stadium.

"I think I'll live... but the people outside may not be so lucky." Sui weakly turned towards Jin and smiled. "Feng spoke of you as the kind of person that would help them?"

Jin looked towards Sui, lost and defeated.

"You... so, you know Feng?"

"I do. We haven't known each other too long, but before we talk about that, the people outside..."

Aranyani furrowed her brow towards the battered girl. "What? But what about you? You can barely speak, let alone think about others."

"I'll be up and about in no time." A small yellow bird and green, bespectacled lizard scurried towards her with first aid supplies.

"These guys will take care of me. Come get me after I rest a little more." As the two animals started wrapping her wounds and casting healing magic, a relaxed look fell across her face. She closed her eyes and started to rest.

Aranyani was taken aback at how relaxed she was - or perhaps she was simply that exhausted.

"Unbelievable - after all that, here she is, snoring! And these are some talented creatures too." Kii looked up for a moment to nod proudly at Aranyani, who chuckled and sat down on the rubble beneath them.

Jin looked down at his sister's first friend. Perhaps she knew how Feng had ended up through the Gate in the first place. As he worried about his sister, trying to understand the tragedy around him, her last conscious words echoed in his mind instead. Aranyani waited in silence for Jin to act, or say something to her - but without a word, he stood and faced the stadium's exit, the crowd's screams echoing through. "Looks like Sui was right to trust you then?"

"Well, Feng asked me to trust her as well."

His resolve restored, he started towards his next battle.