

## ***The Rithmatist***

**By Brandon Sanderson**

P R O L O G U E



Lilly's lamp blew out as she bolted down the hallway. She threw the lamp aside, splashing oil across the painted wall and fine rug. The liquid glistened in the moonlight.

The house was empty. Silent, save for her panicked breathing. She'd given up on screaming. Nobody seemed to hear.

It was as if the entire city had gone dead.

She burst into the living room, then stopped, uncertain what to do. A grandfather clock ticked in the corner, illuminated by moonlight through the broad picture windows. The city skyline spread beyond, buildings rising ten stories or more, springrail lines crisscrossing between them. Jamestown, her home for all sixteen years of her life.

*I am going to die*, she thought.

Desperation pushed through her terror. She shoved aside the rocking chair in the middle of the room, then hurriedly rolled up the rug so that she could get to the

wooden floor. She reached into the pouch tied to a loop on her skirt and pulled out a single bone-white length of chalk.

Kneeling on the wood planks, staring at the ground, she tried to clear her mind.*Focus.*

She set the tip of the chalk against the ground and began to draw a circle around herself. Her hand shook so much that the line was uneven. Professor Fitch would have been quite displeased to see such a sloppy Line of Warding. She laughed to herself—a desperate sound, more of a cry.

Sweat dripped from her brow, making dark spots on the wood. Her hand quivered as she drew several straight lines inside the circle—Lines of Forbiddance to stabilize her defensive ring. The Matson Defense . . . how did it go? Two smaller circles, with bind points to place Lines of Making—

Scratching.

Lilly snapped her head up, looking down the hallway at the door leading to the street. A shadow moved beyond the door's clouded window plate.

The door rattled.

“Oh, Master,” she found herself whispering. “Please . . . please . . .”

The door stopped rattling. All was still for just a moment; then the door burst open.

Lilly tried to scream, but found her voice caught in her throat. A figure stood framed in moonlight, a bowler hat on his head, a short cape covering his shoulders. He stood with his hand on a cane to his side.

She could not see his face, backlit as he was, but there was something horribly sinister about that slightly tipped head and those shadowed features. A hint of a nose and chin, reflecting moonlight. Eyes that watched her from within the inky blackness.

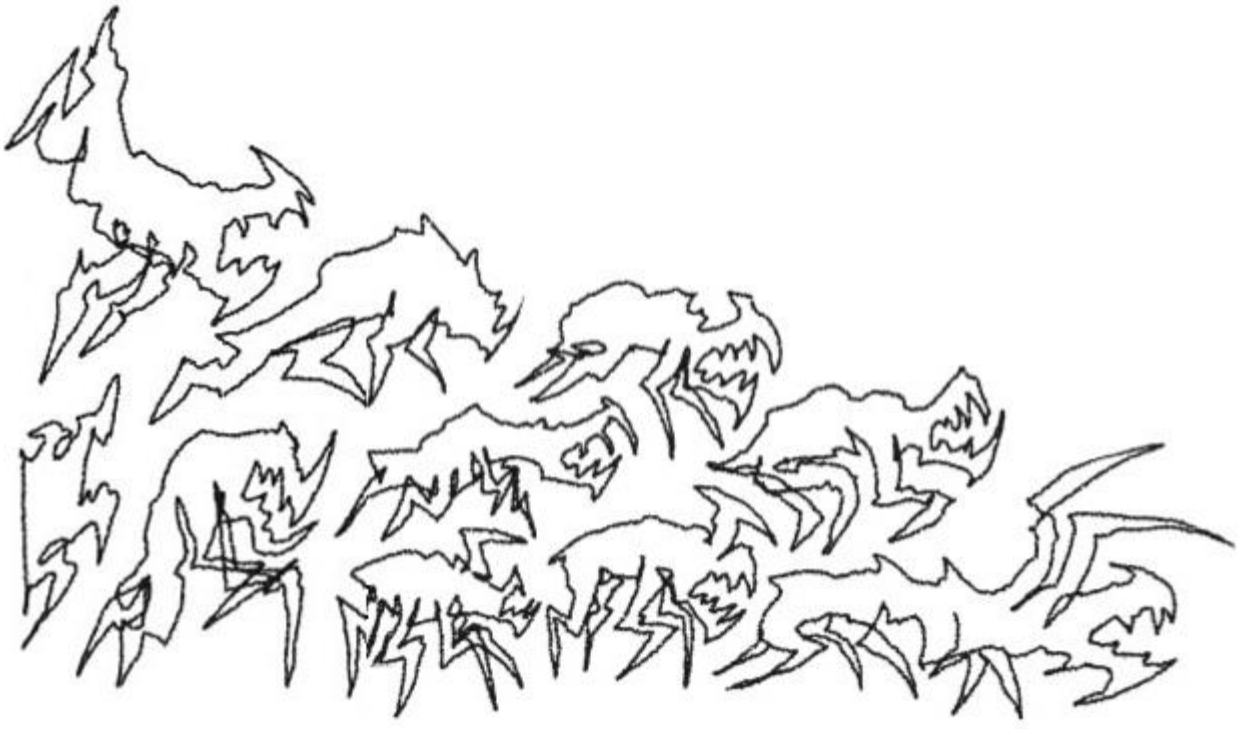
The *things* flooded into the room around him. Angry, squirming over floor, walls, ceiling. Their bone-white forms almost seemed to glow in the moonlight.

Each was as flat as a piece of paper.

Each was made of chalk.

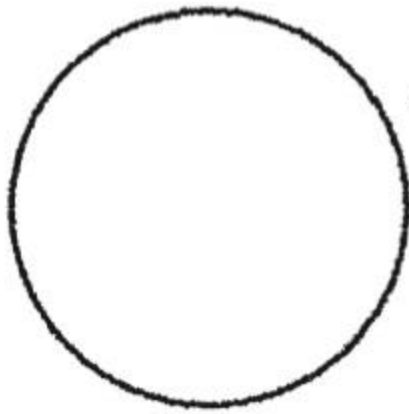
They were each unique, tiny picture like monsters with fangs, claws. They made no noise at all as they flooded into the hallway, hundreds of them, shaking and vibrating silently as they came for her.

Lilly finally found her voice and screamed.





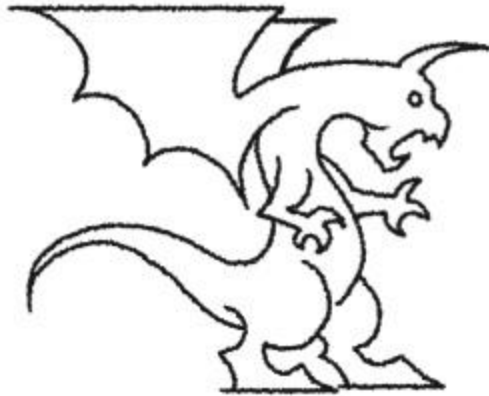
# THE FOUR RITHMATIC LINES



Line of WARDING



Line of FORBIDDANCE



Line of MAKING  
(Chalkling)



Line of VIGOR

## C H A P T E R



Boring?” Joel demanded, stopping in place. “You think the 1888 Crew-Choi duel was *boring*?”

Michael shrugged, stopping and looking back at Joel. “I don’t know. I stopped reading after a page or so.”

“You’re just not imagining it right,” Joel said, walking up and resting one hand on his friend’s shoulder. He held his other hand in front of him, panning it as if to wipe away their surroundings— the green lawns of Armedius Academy—and replace them with the dueling arena.

“Imagine,” Joel said, “it’s the end of the Melee, the biggest Rithmatic event in the country. Paul Crew and Adelle Choi are the only two duelists left. Adelle survived, against all odds, after her entire team was picked off in the first few minutes.”

A few other students stopped on the sidewalk to listen nearby as they passed between classes.

“So?” Michael said, yawning.

“So? Michael, it was the finals! Imagine everyone watching, in silence, as the last two Rithmatists begin their duel. Imagine how nervous Adelle would have been! Her team had never won a Melee before, and now she faced down one of the

most skilled Rithmatists of her generation. Paul's team had shielded him at their center so that the lesser players fell first. They knew that would get him to the end practically fresh, his defensive circle almost completely untouched. It was the champion against the underdog."

"Boring," Michael said. "They just sit there and draw."

"You're hopeless," Joel replied. "You are going to the very school where Rithmatists are trained. Aren't you even a little interested in them?"

"They have enough people interested in them," Michael said with a scowl. "They keep to themselves, Joel. I'm fine with that. I'd rather they weren't even here." A breeze ruffled his blond hair. Around them spread the green hills and stately brick buildings of Armedius Academy. Nearby, a clockwork crab continued its quiet duty, chopping at the grass to keep it level.

"You wouldn't think that way if you understood," Joel said, getting out some chalk. "Here, take this. And stand here." He positioned his friend, then knelt and drew a circle on the sidewalk around him. "You're Paul. See, defensive circle. If that gets breached, you lose the match."

Joel paced back a ways on the concrete quad, then knelt and drew his own circle. "Now, Adelle's circle was nearly breached in four places. She quickly began to shift from the Matson Defense to . . . Okay, you know what, that's too technical. Just know that her circle was weak, and Paul had a strong, dominant position."

"If you say so," Michael said. He smiled at Eva Winters as she walked past, holding books in front of her.



“Now,” Joel said. “Paul started pounding her circle with Lines of Vigor, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to shift defenses quickly enough to recover.”

“Pounding . . . Lines of what?” Michael asked.

“Lines of Vigor,” Joel said. “Duelists shoot them at each other. That’s the point; it’s how you breach the circle.”

“I thought they made little chalk . . . things. Creatures.”

“That too,” Joel said. “They’re called chalklings. But that’s not why everyone remembers the 1888 Melee, even some twenty years later. It was the lines she shot. Conventional wisdom would have been for her to last as long as she could, draw out the match, make a good showing of it.”

He set his chalk out in front of his circle. “She didn’t do that,” he whispered. “She saw something. Paul had a small weakened section on the back of his circle. Of course, the only way to attack it would be to *bounce* a shot off *three* different lines left by other duelists. It was an impossible shot. She took it anyway. She drew one Line of Vigor as Paul’s chalklings ate at her defenses. She fired it and . . .”

Caught up in the moment, Joel finished drawing the Line of Vigor in front of him, raising his hand with a flourish. With surprise, he realized that some thirty students had gathered to listen to him, and he could feel them holding breaths, expecting his drawing to come to life.

It didn’t. Joel wasn’t a Rithmatist. His drawings were just ordinary chalk. Everyone knew that, Joel most of all, but the moment somehow broke the spell of his story.

The gathered students continued on their way, leaving him kneeling on the ground in the middle of his circle.

“And let me guess,” Michael said, yawning again. “Her shot got through?”

“Yeah,” Joel said, suddenly feeling foolish. He stood up, putting away his chalk.

“The shot worked. She won the Melee, though her team had been lowest favored in the odds. That shot. It was *beautiful*. At least, so the accounts say.”

“And I’m sure you’d love to have been there,” Michael said, stepping out of the circle Joel had drawn. “By the Master, Joel. I’ll bet if you could travel through time, you’d waste it going to Rithmatic duels!”

“Sure, I guess. What else would I do?”

“Oh,” Michael said, “maybe prevent some assassinations, get rich, find out what’s really happening in Nebrask. . . . —”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Joel said, pocketing his chalk, then jumping out of the way as a soccer ball shot past, followed by Jeph’s Daring. Jeph’s gave Michael and Joel a wave before chasing down his ball.

Joel joined Michael, continuing across campus. The beautiful, low green hills were topped by flowering trees, and green vines wound their way up the sides of buildings. Students darted this way and that between classes, in a variety of dresses and trousers. Many of the boys wore their sleeves rolled up in the late spring warmth.

Only the Rithmatists were required to wear uniforms. That made them stick out; a group of three of them walked between buildings, and the other students casually made way, most not looking at them.

“Look, Joel,” Michael said. “Have you ever wondered if maybe . . . you know, you think about this stuff too much? Rithmatics and all that?”

“It’s interesting to me,” Joel said.

“Yes, but . . . I mean, it’s a little odd, considering . . .”

Michael didn’t say it, but Joel understood. He wasn’t a Rithmatist, and could never be one. He’d missed his chance. But why couldn’t he be interested in what they did?

Michael narrowed his eyes as that group of three Rithmatists passed in their grey-and-white uniforms. “It’s kind of like,” he said softly, “it’s kind of like it’s us and them, you know? Leave them alone to do . . . whatever it is they do, Joel.”

“You just don’t like that they can do things you can’t,” Joel said.

That earned Joel a glare. Perhaps those words hit too close to home. Michael was the son of a knight-senator, a son of privilege. He wasn’t accustomed to being excluded.

“Anyway,” Michael said, looking away and continuing to hike down the busy sidewalk, “you can’t be one of them, so why keep spending all of your time talking about them? It’s useless, Joel. Stop thinking about them.”

*I can’t ever be one of you either, Michael,* Joel thought. Technically, he wasn’t supposed to be at this school. Armedius was horribly expensive, and you either

had to be important, rich, or a Rithmatist to attend. Joel was as about as far from any of those three things as a boy could get.