

# BRITTLE

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Brick Cave  
Film Festival

A 2019 Brick Cave Film Festival Category

*Brittle*

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### **A Brick Cave Film Festival Category**

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Brittle, her fingers were, brittle. Long and thin. So thin they seemed like they should break when she lifted the paper from the scarred wooden table to read the crabbed writing inked upon it.

“I suggest burning.”

She dropped the document and spun around, the world blurring a moment before she recognized his aura. Graying hair topped an angular face that hovered above broad shoulders. She smoothed her features and waved a spindly-fingered hand in his direction. “This aspect is...new.”

He frowned. “The other was...inadequate.”

She held out her hands, splaying her bony fingers. “I understand now.”

“Whereas before?”

She shrugged. “I thought perhaps you had fallen prey to vanity.” She waved a hand at him. “But—”

“But this aspect disproves that?” He quirked an eyebrow. “How so?”

She glanced around the room, searching for an answer that would suffice. “It suits the setting.” Honest enough. Lies of omission were not directly punishable.

His look told her she was treading too near the edge.

“Your own aspect is new, if I am not mistaken. Much older than the last time we spoke.”

“True.” She glanced down at her gangly limbs. “I was encouraged to try something...different.”

“So, were you contemplating something other than fire?” He glanced at the sheaf of documents spread out upon the table.

Was this a test? Had they found her out so soon? Her frantic mind searched for the misstep that might have given her away.

His face held no suspicion. No, she reassured herself. Each step thus far had been precise, well planned. Like moves on a game board. She was still ahead. Her plan still in play. Ahead, but not safe, she reminded herself. Never safe. Not since the moment the thought had first entered her mind. A flickering thought that freedom might be hers, if only she might find the courage to make it so.

Her fingers twitched. Why then had he told her to burn the note?

“Why burn?”

“Fire is cleansing,” he said, patting the pockets of his velvet

jacket, “and generally considered an act of God. Always a good choice.” He withdrew a small tin and held it out to her.

“What’s this?” She reached for the box.

“Friction matches. In keeping with the period, of course. Don’t leave the box behind. If it’s found...”

Relief shivered up her body and across her scalp. Of course. He’d not meant the note. But... “Good advice.” She rubbed a fingertip along the cold edge of the tin, hoping against hope. “Will you be staying?” She meant it to sound neutral, but her voice wavered. She clamped her teeth together.

His face darkened and her body tightened with fear. Perhaps she’d pushed too far.

But his face cleared and she relaxed.

“I’ve not come to witness.” He brushed his hands along the soft sleeves of his jacket, then tugged at his lapels. “Nor am I here to interfere. In fact, I have a previous engagement. This was the closest entry point and I was merely passing when I sensed your presence.” He tilted his head. “I was not informed you were on assignment in this sector. Yet, here you are...” He waved a hand, indicating the room. “Contemplating?”

She forced a smile across the thin lips of this aspect. “Intrigued.”

“Curiosity?” His left eye twitched.

“One can never be too informed,” she responded, hiding her shaking fingers. “Or so I’ve been taught.”

A flicked of approval washed across his aspect. “Yes. Well, then. I should be going.”

She bowed her head to acknowledge his leave-taking and waited, breathless, until the door had closed behind him. Her brain released a slew of chemicals and her body shook in reaction. The encounter had been too close. Too sudden. Too convenient. Was his presence truly a coincidence? They’d ingrained in her the laws against lies, but did the superiors adhere to their own rules?

With her senses focused beyond the door, her awkward brittle fingers tucked the tin within the pockets of her heavy skirts, then riffled through the scattered papers on the table, reading and discarding each until she found what she was searching for.

She gripped the map with shaking hands, rereading the accompanying clues. Riddles. She hated riddles. Likely, most

of the answers would be found upon this plane or in the realm, but a few would likely be more than difficult to decipher. Yet, she would find a way. She would finally be unbound.

She folded the paper and tucked it into her pocket, fingers brushing against the tin of matches. Perhaps they would be useful, after all.

###

“The fire was unsanctioned?” He held the silver box, stroking it with his thumb.

“Unassigned.” The Delegator’s voice rattled from between desiccated lips.

“Fine,” he said, irked at himself for having forgotten the need for specificity with these creatures. “Listed, but not scheduled, then?”

“No assignment was scheduled for the sector beyond your own visit,” the specter rasped. Chained to the thick tome that lay open upon the ancient table, it would have no relief for thirst nor hunger, nor would it rest until the book’s pages were filled. Yet, unassigned or unsanctioned activity would not reduce its sentence, only add new pages, many of them blank, until the action was resolved. So, it had no reason to lie. In fact, it would have an urgent desire to reduce those pages, in whatever manner was most efficient, as long as no rules were broken.

“But you’re certain the fire was set?” He mused over this information, the face he wore wrinkling in thought.

The cloaked specter raised its head and pressed a bony hand upon the open page. Even without eyes its body language conveyed the sense of an angry glare. An awful sigh issued from its throat.

Despite his position in the upper ranks, it would not serve him to anger a Delegator. He held up his hands. “I meant no disrespect to your work.”

The Delegator offered no response to his attempted apology.

He thought back to his encounter with her. Why, he wondered, would she move on an unassigned task? What purpose might her zealousness serve? Was she seeking advancement? Such a thing was not unheard of, but the rarity of it made it unlikely. What then?

“Well, then. I shall look into the matter. Transfer the listing and any related information to me.”

“Credit?” The word rattled out like gravel sliding down a metal chute.

“Of course. You shall retain all credit.”

The spector tilted its head.

Always these creatures sought an end to their painful limbo, nor could he blame them, indentured as they were for ages upon ages in recompense of their crimes committed on the lower plane. “You may also transfer any open pages this issue has added to your book. I will accept them without additional debting.”

The Delegator sighed long and low, then swiped a clawed hand across the open book.

He nodded and strode away, shaking off the chill that always seemed to invade his aspect when dealing with the chained servants. Purification. It sounded so clean. Yet, in truth, what he dealt with—what they all dealt with—was purgation in one form or another. A deeper chill invaded him along with this blasphemous thought. He should, of course, unburden himself to his confessor, but he’d learned long ago that penance could not erase doubt. Better to focus on the task at hand. Distract himself with another’s sins. And hope The Gaze remained fixated elsewhere.

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The burning had been a risk, she knew it as soon as she’d struck the match and touched its flaming end to the first document. But his unexpected appearance had unnerved her. What if he’d decided to return, to review the contents of the room? His review of what the room contained might lead him to conclusions. Conclusions that were better unmade. No. It would be easier to justify her actions as spontaneous and enterprising, than to explain away why she had been searching the contents of an identified target without a direct assignment. Better to burn the evidence than have to account for making an unsanctioned journey to scrutinize forbidden material. She probably should have burned the map as well, but the fear that she might not recall every detail had caused her to risk holding onto the damning piece of evidence. Besides, if she should be found out now, she’d be subjected to the worst possible punishment. what

difference would a single piece of paper make?

Once more she wondered why then risk it? What was so bad about her situation that she should feel the need to escape? Was it merely the assignments? The requirement that she go out into the lower plane and destroy anything or anyone considered dangerous? Or was it simply the desire to not feel trapped? There were worse fates, weren't there?

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He scanned the stack of new pages that had arrived on his workstation. Vellum. He despised vellum. It always felt as if something of the creature it had been lingered, coloring the text in unintended ways. The mere contact of it with his fingertips caused a bitter impression on the back of his tongue that he hated. It didn't seem to matter the aspect he wore. Though some seemed to amplify the revulsion. He slipped on the black cotton gloves he kept for just such tasks, pushing down between the fitted fingers. Then he pinched the first sheet between thumb and forefinger and laid it on the table before him.

Interesting. The site had been a study belonging to an alchemist of little note. Not generally a worrisome target. However, this alchemist had seemingly stumbled upon some rather meaningful arcane knowledge, which would explain the study becoming listed. The incompetence and lack of abilities of the researcher would be why the task had remained unassigned for a longer period than usual. No real danger of his implementing the theoretical formulations had been anticipated. But while the delegator had not seemed concerned, something about the subject matter worried him. While the theory of accessing multi-level passageways was not a subject of normal concern, it appeared that this particular alchemist, though too wrapped up in his search for personal riches to ever realize the value of what he had, had somehow uncovered the navigational tools to support traversing the pathways.

Well, then, she was seeking promotion, after all. She was likely at that moment preparing to report that she had identified the threat that had escaped his notice and nullified it. Damn her enthusiasm. He would be at the very least replaced, if not altogether demoted. His eons of hard work diminished along with his position under the Gaze.

He slammed his hands down onto the table and rose

up in frustration. He paced the room. There was no way of stopping her. The purging had been efficient and a report would be expected. No, stopping her would be impossible. He paused, staring down at the parchment. But if he could find a way to discredit her... He threw himself into his chair and picked up his quill, tapping away the excess ink in a splatter that fell upon and stained the vellum as he began to write.

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She pored over the map and the accompanying riddles, still blinking back the doubt. The passageways were no longer rumors whispered about in the dark by those longing for another existence. What had at first seemed to be riddles were step-by-step instructions, confusing and difficult to decipher, but clear enough on one point, if she were to accomplish this, it must be in a single-minded manner. Once the first doorway was opened, the Gaze would surely know and she must push from one gate to the next without hesitation.

If only there were a way to test out the instructions beforehand. But there would be no second attempt if the first failed. She thought of the flames that had licked the walls of the alchemist's study, eating away at parchment, drape and wood. What would that devouring fire feel like to a soul? Perhaps, she should have destroyed the map, after all.

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He sprinkled the sheet of vellum with a dusting of fine sand to soak up the excess ink, then leaned back in his chair to give it a moment to dry before shaking the sand back into the container. His alternative report would reach the upper levels before she could file. None would suspect he had any reason to claim participation in another's feat, and in truth he had been there. There could be no argument on that count. He had even recommended the burning. And provided the tools. When her own report was submitted, the details would be questioned, but he was respected and held the higher position and, therefore, the upper hand.

Doubt would cloud her veracity, and so her actions would be questionable. Before a full inquiry could be made, he would have time to have her removed for some other fault. He merely had to discover one damning enough.

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She leaned forward, pushing aside the leafy foliage and

traced the webbing of the wolf spider, following the threads from end to beginning as the riddle instructed. The heady scent of roses settled around her and she fought to keep from falling into old memories. She hadn't always been this. Hadn't asked to become this. A bodiless entity that acquired the discarded aspects of various creatures from mid-level planes.

She thought back, searching her memories, wondering if she had ever been otherwise. But any remnants of her past being had perished long ago. Or had perhaps been destroyed. She'd never bothered before to wonder which. A mental cleansing would not be beyond the capabilities of the Gaze, she supposed. The bigger question was whether or not the being she had been previously would have consented to such a thing. The fact that she doubted she could ever consider such a thing had no bearing on the possible truth of the matter. Who she was now, was far removed from anything she might once have been.

She realized with a start that she had once more lost track and would have to begin again. The spider continued to hover at one side of the web, trying to camouflage itself against the undergrowth. Would she be able to hide once she had unlocked the passageway between planes, she wondered, or would she be as visible as this insect attempting to hide itself in plain sight?

She traced the webbing once more, carefully following each thread, winding backward in time, until her thoughts dangled from the first strand of silk. The thin wisp began to glow, and she gasped as before her the golden outline of a door glimmered into existence.

She stared at the outline, keeping her gaze fixed but relaxed, according to the instructions on the map and almost missed the crackle of twigs beneath the treading feet of another in the garden. She dropped her gaze and the doorway shimmered out of being. She spun on her heel and knelt upon the mossy ground, assuming a thoughtful mien, eyes shut, just as a swath of branches parted.

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He cleared his throat and her eyes shot open. They glittered in the dappled sunlight. Was that fear or merely surprise?

"Your pardon. I did not intend to interrupt." He gave her his most formal bow. "You were meditating?"

"I was...contemplating, yes." She reached placed a hand

against a tree trunk and rose in one smooth movement then waved an arm at the greenery surrounding them. "It's lovely, and this aspect seems quieted here."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "You aspect retains remnants of its past?"

"No. I don't think so," she responded carefully. "I only meant that there is something calming about this place. I was..." She glanced around them. "That is, I felt the need of solitude." He nodded, but his thoughts spun. Why here? What might she be up to here? He tried not to appear too interested as he surveyed the scenery. "Perhaps, a new aspect would better suit you?" He kept the smile from his lips. It would be a convenient excuse to have her out of the way for a time.

"No," she said, quickly. "That isn't necessary. It was nothing. Only a momentary feeling. It has passed."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. Most certain." She smiled in a way that suggested she was unused to making such a gesture. It probably was. The aspect was still new to her, after all.

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How had he found her? He must know something. She felt her heartbeat increase in speed and fought to keep herself from showing the fear that caused her blood to rush. She clutched her hands together to keep them from shaking. The map was tucked safely inside her waistband, but if she was forced to shed this aspect and assume a new one, what would happen to it then? Would it also be sloughed away? Or...she pictured the damning bit of parchment fluttering to the ground as she passed from this aspect to another.

No. She couldn't risk it. She must do everything possible to keep this aspect, to protect it. She would have to take it with her.

"I should be getting back." She nodded in the direction from which he had come.

"Very well." He stepped aside and parted the greenery for her to pass.

She hid her surprise at the polite gesture and picked up her long skirts, brushing quickly past him to the edge of the garden where the standard plane portal stood open. Had she left it open when she'd come to this level? Was that how he had discovered her? Or was he purposely following her? Seeking her

out because he knew what she intended? If so, then why had he not called her out? Why had he not brought the full attention of the Gaze upon her?

Perhaps he wanted proof. But that suggested uncertainty of his suspicions. And that gave her the opportunity to change her mind. Or move ahead. She stepped through the dark light-limned doorway, passing back into their own realm and tried not to worry about what his apparently stumbling upon her twice in such a short time might mean, or to think about the risk that lay before her and how easy it would be to simply change course and continue as things were.

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What was she playing at? He settled into his chair, then stood again. His nervous thoughts made him restless, a state he much despised. He blamed her. Her actions did not track with his expectations. He disliked feeling off-guard even more than he did feeling nervous.

If only her actions were more than simply inexplicable. Were she acting irrationally, he might be able to call attention, have her unseated. It wasn't unheard of. Some minds were not suitable to the unceasing task of cleansing. Even with the Gaze's exacting selection process, a chosen had been known to break after a time. It hadn't happened in his sphere, but there was precedent. As there was precedent for taking steps to remedy the situation before too much damage had been done.

Yet, she did not seem truly erratic. Her demeanor was not out of character. Nor did the aspect she had chosen seem to have had an overt influence that he could discern. She had not yet filed the report of her unassigned cleansing, which made him wonder now if promotion had been her plan at all? His own report would have already been reviewed and filed by now, which was of small comfort while not knowing what her true purpose might be.

He threw himself into his chair once more and stared at the pages that littered the surface when something caught his eye. A name. Fulcanelli. It was a name out of place in the documents. In fact, it was out of place on the plane where the study had existed. He pawed over the sheets, then swept up the vellum, ignoring the ugly tingling in his fingertips and reread the description of the room's contents.

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She gripped the map in trembling hands, certain this time to close the portal before rushing to the web. The spider had barely moved from his previous position. She inhaled deeply to settle her aspect, then let her mind and eyes relax, tracing the silken strands from end to beginning. Exaltation leaped inside her as the door appeared golden and beckoning. She rushed forward, brushing against the web in her haste. The thin strands juddered, setting the spider off at a mad scramble, and the door began to fade.

She threw herself forward in a mad frenzy.

“No!”

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He sensed her leaving and jumped up from his chair, striding across the room and out into the passageway. The nearest portal yawned as he neared, already activated by his desire to pass through. He recognized the garden, as soon as he stepped through and knew where she was headed. He thrust aside the greenery and burst through in time to see the shining door open upon a world he'd never seen before. He paused only a moment before rushing after her fleeting figure as she dove for the open doorway that already flickered and faded

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She inhaled the sharp cold air and rubbed her bony hands together for warmth. This aspect was no longer young. It would hold her for only so long. It would have been better, she supposed, to have waited, found a younger, stronger vessel. But her finding of the map could not have been predicted. No, she was beyond that now. Her choice had been made. There was no longer a path back. She must go forward, must seek shelter and whatever served on this plane as sustenance.

Footsteps cracked along the icy path and she froze in alarm. So, he'd been able to follow her, after all. It had all been for nothing. She would not be able to find the next door and open it, nor the next one after that. She should have known she'd not be able to escape. But she would not wither and whimper. She would not cry out for mercy. She would accept her fate. At least, her time beneath the Gaze would be at an end.

She grasped the map in her fist and squared her shoulders,

prepared to face the wrath that would be rained down upon her.

“My dear lady,” a man’s voice floated across the chilly air.

She turned toward it and the air caught in her lungs. She swayed a moment, then reached out a hand to steady herself.

He rushed to her side. “My apologies. I did not mean to startle you.” He took her by the elbow to help her keep her balance.

“I’m sorry,” she told him. “I thought for a moment that I knew you.”

He released his grip upon her arm and tipped his tall hat, giving her a polite bow.

She glanced down at her thin fingers that didn’t seem quite to be quite as spindly as before, then smiled at him and did her best approximation of a curtsy.

“Had we met upon a previous occasion,” he said, “I should surely have remembered.”

“As, should I.” She deftly tucked the wrinkled parchment into the waistband of her skirt.

She felt a warmth creep up her neck and across her cheeks. A blush? Was it possible this aspect was remembering? Perhaps. And perhaps she might have found a place to exist for a short time before she need to follow the next clue, pass through the next doorway. And perhaps this aspect might help her recall more of what it had been like to be alive, and human.

Beyond that, the only question left was whether or not she would be able to forget.

## **About Author Sharon Skinner**

Sharon Skinner holds a B.A. In English, an M.A. in Creative Writing and a Poetic License. She has worked as a landscaper, a cashier, a maid, a waitress, a communications specialist, a videographer, a technical writer, a project management consultant and a biomedical field service engineer and served aboard the USS Jason as one of the first women assigned to a US Navy ship.

Her poetry and fiction have been published in myriad local, national and international publications. Sharon is an active member of SCBWI (Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators) and serves as the Regional Advisor for SCBWI AZ.

Visit Sharon Online: [SharonSkinner.com](http://SharonSkinner.com)

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