**GAUNTLET OF FIRE**

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Prologue

(*Opening shot: fade in to an extreme close-up of several gems embedded in a rock face. These become enveloped in a magic glow and are pulled loose; zoom out to reveal the caster as Rarity, wearing a hard hat accessorized with her cutie mark and a large blue bow. She and Spike are in a cavern; he holds a basket full of precious stones, and the area is only illuminated by the headlamp on her hard hat. She tilts her head upward, the camera following the motion to stop on a cluster of bats hanging upside down from the ceiling. Each has its claws clamped onto a projecting jewel, and Rarity’s beam dissipates just short of reaching them with its full intensity.*)

(*At ground level, she swivels her head intently to look in Spike’s direction and the gems she has just harvested land in his basket with the faintest clink. He licks his chops at the idea of being able to turn them into a gourmet meal.*)

**Rarity:** The last time I was here, I woke them and ended up with a mane full of bats. (*She flicks her mane worriedly and sighs.*) Thanks for being my basket holder, Spike.

**Spike:** (*surprised*) Basket holder? I thought I was your bodyguard!

**Rarity:** Wh—? Oh! (*chuckling*) Yes, yes. That of course, too. (*She floats some more gems out of the rock.*) Oh, for once I wish unicorn magic wasn’t so…luminescent.

(*She looks up; cut to the bats. A bright gleam from somewhere below camera level causes pair after pair of beady black eyes to open.*)

**Rarity:** (*from o.s.*) Spike! (*Back to her.*) You’ll wake the bats! Turn that off!

(*Cut to the little guy, who has set the basket down and begun to glow over every inch of his body—this was what roused the nocturnal flyers. He scratches madly at himself as the camera zooms in slowly.*)

**Spike:** I can’t!

(*A pained groan, a gasp from the mare, and the bats come down in a swarm thick enough to fill the screen. Wipe to black as the last of them pass.*)

OPENING THEME

Act One

(*Opening shot: fade in to a long shot of the Castle of Friendship during the day and zoom in slowly.*)

**Twilight Sparkle:** (*voice over*) I’m so glad you two could come!

(*Cut to the dining room. She and Princesses Celestia and Luna are seated around the table, on which a spread of pastries and tea has been laid out. The zoom continues.*)

**Luna:** Of course. We so rarely get a chance to relax and just visit.

**Celestia:** There’s usually some crisis we have to deal with. Somepony always needs our help. But today—

**Rarity:** (*from outside, shrilly*) HEEEEEEEELP!!

(*Pan quickly to the room’s closed doors, which burst open to admit the prospecting unicorn. She still wears the hard hat and is now good and filthy, with Spike riding on her back. They have disposed of the basket of collected gems, and she has extinguished her headlamp.*)

**Rarity:** (*floating him forward*) Twilight! There’s something wrong with Spike!

(*She gallops in; close-up of a patch of tabletop as her magic clears the dishes and sets him down on his back. He continues to glow and scratch.*)

**Twilight:** (*from o.s.*) What’s wrong? (*Cut to frame all five; he sits up.*)

**Spike:** (*between grunts*) I don’t know! All of a sudden, my scales just started glowing and burning!

**Luna:** Little is known about dragon culture, but this is a phenomenon we’ve seen before. It is the call of the Dragon Lord.

**Celestia:** Dragons glow whenever the Dragon Lord has need of them in the Dragon Lands.

**Spike:** Great. (*Grunt.*) How do I make it stop?

**Luna:** The only way to end the summons is to answer it. You must journey to the Dragon Lands and see what is expected of you.

**Rarity:** B-But…but… the Dragon Lands are full of…dragons! And they’re ghastly creatures!

(*That assessment earns her a very funny look from the one in the room. She shoots him an embarrassed little grin and crosses to him in close-up.*)

**Rarity:** (*lifting his chin*) Oh, oh, not you, of course, Spikey-wikey. But remember that rotten Garble? (*Spike swallows fearfully.*)

**Spike:** How could I forget? He would’ve burnt us to a crisp if you weren’t there.

(*A reference to the events of “Dragon Quest.”*)

**Spike:** If I have to go to the Dragon Lands… (*Zoom out to frame Twilight as well; he stands up.*) …would you two come with me?

**Twilight:** (*excitedly, rearing up for a moment*) Ooh! Oh, my goodness, I’d love to! We are sadly lacking any information on dragon culture and customs. I could research them, maybe even write an article! This could be my chance to make a great contribution to the knowledge of Equestria!

(*She caps off this bit of aspiratory exposition with a pleased grin, not immediately catching the quizzical looks coming her way from the rest of the group. When she finally takes notice, she shifts down a gear or three.*)

**Twilight:** (*laughing sheepishly*) And be there for Spike, of course.

**Celestia:** Be very careful. The Dragon Lands are particularly dangerous for ponies. It would be wise to be discreet.

**Rarity:** (*clapping front hooves*) Ooh! I’m sure I still have the dragon costume we used the last time we snuck into the Dragon Lands. (*Giggle.*)

**Twilight:** I think we might want something a little more practical this time.

(*Wipe to a close-up of Spike, now sitting atop a rock surface and shivering with fear. A zoom out reveals his perch as the upper face of an outcropping with two pairs of eyeholes cut into its front, one above the other. Rarity is in the upper spot of this camouflage, Twilight the lower. They are on a rocky, broken plain, and a gloomy gray sky stretches above them as animal growls and howls echo in the distance.*)

\*\*\* *All lines marked with one asterisk (\*) are delivered from within the mares’ disguise.* \*\*\*

**\* Rarity:** Hmm…well, it may be practical, but this disguise isn’t flattering in the slightest.

**\* Twilight:** (*hushed*) It’s not supposed to be flattering— (*A glowing dragon wings slowly past.*) —it’s supposed to blend in.

**Spike:** Shhh!

(*Cut to a slow pan across the stark landscape before them. Several dragons of varied shapes, sizes, and colors have already landed before a tall formation that has eroded into the rough shape of a natural throne, and a few more join them. All are lit up under the influence of the Dragon Lord’s summons. As one walks past the fake rock, here comes the surly red Garble with a couple of buddies.*)

**Garble:** Hey-hey, look! It’s our old friend Sparkle-warkle.

**Spike:** (*acidly*) It’s Spike.

**Garble:** Are you sure your pony friends didn’t give you a pony name?

**Spike:** It’s nice to see you too, Garble. (*The red face leans into his.*)

**Garble:** I didn’t say it was nice to see you. It’s not. (*pushing Spike off the rock*) I don’t like you. (*He hops on.*) Was I not clear about that?

(*The recipient of this verbal abuse can muster no immediate response. Inside the fake rock, Garble’s weight has half-caved in the top, squashing Twilight and Rarity and eliciting a distressed moan from the latter. She has cleaned herself up, is no longer wearing her hard hat, and has climbed onto Twilight’s back. Cut to Spike, his dander up.*)

**Spike:** Hey! That’s my rock!

**Garble:** (*mockingly*) Oh, really? Then why aren’t you sitting on it?

(*Laughter from the other nearby dragons, which ends as if slashed off with a knife when a colossal shadow falls over the group. Spike takes a very scared step back toward his pony friends, after which the camera cuts to a close-up of an immense red-orange wing with a couple of splits in its webbing. The bones are covered in blue-gray hide, and they pull in to furl the wing partially. A massive tail is seen next, its tip and hide matching these colors and showing more rips and nicks. Darker diamond-shaped markings are visible on the tail hide as the appendage curls down to hang over the side of the stone throne. In close-up, the head attached to these body parts straightens up into view: male, irregular yellowed teeth, broad horns that sprout from atop the head and curve down behind it to jut forward below the chin, a crown of jagged red crystals perched between the horns’ bases. A thick gold band encircles one of the horns, which go from tan at the base to pinkish-red at the tip. This is Torch, the Dragon Lord, and the lines on his forehead and around his eyes speak to his age. His eyes are initially closed, but he opens them to expose fiery red-orange irises and pupils that narrow to reptilian slits as he pulls in a breath. He speaks with a broad, gravelly Australian accent, his first line carrying enough force to shake the whole area. Unlike the others in attendance, he is not glowing.*)

\*\*\* *Any lines of his that are capitalized and end with two exclamation points (!!) are accompanied by these tremors.* \*\*\*

**Torch:** DRAGONS OF EQUESTRIA!! (*Zoom out quickly to frame the entire gathering.*) HEAR ME!!

(*This camera motion exposes a dark gray armored vest with gold accents covering his torso, and also picks out his vast size relative to the others—at least twice the height/length of even the biggest. A tiny, glimmering, light blue-green speck can be seen hovering next to his head.*)

**Torch:** I have been Dragon Lord for longer than many of you can remember, and my reign has been extraordinary!

(*Close-up; the speck can now be barely discerned as another dragon.*)

**Torch:** AGREE WITH ME!!

(*They do so, shouting approval—except for Spike—and a chant of “Torch! Torch! Torch!” starts to float up. Torch lets it continue for a few seconds, then holds up a hand to silence them.*)

**Spike:** (*pointing*) Who is *that?*

**Garble:** It’s Dragon Lord Torch, dummy.

**Spike:** No, next to him.

(*Cut to a close-up of the mighty Torch and zoom in on the blue-green dragon. Female, haughty expression, with narrowed red eyes, violet head spines and wing/tail webbing, short horns that descend down the sides of her head and end in a short curve under the jawline. Her hide sports diamond markings similar to Torch’s.*)

**Garble:** (*from o.s.*) That’s his daughter, Princess Ember. (*Back to him and Spike.*) I wouldn’t even look at her if I were you— (*Close-up of a shaking Spike; he continues o.s., pointing into the violet face.*) —unless you want Torch to eat you.

(*Spike forces down a gulp as the clawed red hand is withdrawn; tilt up to Twilight’s vantage point.*)

**\* Twilight:** (*whispering*) This is fascinating! (*Cut to her and Rarity inside the blind.*) Dragons are notoriously reckless, but they do whatever the Dragon Lord says.

(*Cut to Torch and Princess Ember.*)

**Torch:** Unfortunately, according to dragon law, it is time for me to step down. Sad, I know. (*He glares at the silent throng.*) BE SAD!!

(*They do so, weeping and wailing for a moment before he resumes.*)

**Torch:** This is why I have summoned you—to compete for the throne in the Gauntlet of Fire!

(*Cheers and whoops all around, but Spike grimaces and starts to sweat rivers, every fiber of his body quaking with abject fear.*)

**Torch:** Whomever has the strength and fortitude to retrieve this Bloodstone Scepter from the heart of the Flame-cano will be crowned LORD OF THE DRAGONS!!

(*He holds up this item in time with mentioning it: violet shaft topped by a large, vivid red gem, and dwarfed to the size of a toothpick by the colossal thumb and forefinger pinched around it. A flick of those digits sends the Bloodstone Scepter hurtling through the overcast skies to plunge neatly into a fractured summit that glows with a lurid red light from within. Zoom out to show it as the topper of a twisted peak on a fog-shrouded island; both it and the surrounding ocean are liberally studded with red crystal growths at crazy angles. A solid jet of flame roars skyward from the shattered upper end—this is the Flame-cano, and a red shock wave emanates out from it before the blast gives way to a tired dribble of smoke. The wave washes over the gathered dragons, extinguishing their glow, and Spike looks himself over with surprise when his own fades out as well. Cut to Twilight and Rarity within their blind.*)

**Twilight:** (*whispering*) When the Scepter disappeared, the dragons stopped glowing. We are learning so much!

(*She floats up a notebook and quill and begins to write. Zoom in slowly on Rarity as she tries desperately to stifle an impending sneeze, triggered by the non-business end tickling her nose, then cut to outside. Garble has kept his seat atop the ersatz monolith throughout all of this, and he and the other dragons in the vicinity are caught off guard by the sound of a very demure nasal explosion from within it.*)

**Spike:** (*hastily, wiping nose*) Uh…uh, ’scuse me!

(*He has tried to pass the sneeze off as his own; evidently it works, as Garble jumps down with visible revulsion.*)

**Garble:** Ugh! You even sneeze like a pony.

**Torch:** The Gauntlet is dangerous, for *I* designed it myself. Only dragons with my ferocity, strength, and determination will be able to finish.

(*Cut to a closer shot of him on “strength” and “determination,” then cut to frame the entire multitude once he finishes his sentence with a chuckle.*)

**Torch:** We will gather at the cliff when the sun is at its peak! (*Cheers.*)

**Spike:** (*to Twilight/Rarity*) I don’t want to be Dragon Lord *or* dragon toast, and I stopped glowing. So let’s sneak outta here!

(*He starts pushing the “rock” away toward whatever might pass for an exit out of this realm, but Torch takes notice with a surprised grunt.*)

**Torch:** Where do you think you’re going, little dragon?

(*The rest of them quickly clear out to one side or the other, leaving said little dragon very painfully exposed on the stony terrain. He stops pushing and turns back to face Torch.*)

**Spike:** Oh, uh…hi, Your Lordship! Uh, I was…just going home. (*Torch leans down to face him straight on.*)

**Torch:** You don’t get to leave unless *I* say you can!

(*As Spike just stands there, paralyzed with fear, Ember descends to stand next to him. She is perhaps twice his height when standing on her hind legs, and her voice suggests that she is only a few years older.*)

**Ember:** Dad, look at him. (*patting his head*) He’s just a runt. Besides, he doesn’t even want to compete. Let him go.

**Torch:** He is rather tiny. (*Chuckle.*) I could squish him with my pinky claw.

(*And he drives the point home by extending that digit with another derisive laugh. Spike tries to join in the mirth, but a glare from Ember shuts him up in a hurry.*)

**Torch:** (*no longer smiling*) That wasn’t a joke, it was a fact. When I want you to laugh, I will say, “BE AMUSED!!”

**Spike:** Of course, Your Lordship. I, uh, guess I don’t understand dragon customs—another reason why I shouldn’t compete.

**Torch:** (*grumbling a bit*) Hmph. Very well, little dragon. I release you.

**Spike:** Thank you— (*to Ember*) —and thank *you*.

(*A wink in her direction is met with a slightly disgusted eye roll, and they part ways, he pushing the disguised ponies away and she darting toward her father. However, Torch snaps one huge hand shut to pluck her out of the air.*)

**Torch:** Where do you think *you’re* going?

(*The scaly palm is so huge that it might take three or more of her to reach from the wrist to the base of the middle finger.*)

**Ember:** To prepare for the Gauntlet.

**Torch:** No, you’re not! You’re not much bigger than that runt I just sent home!

**Ember:** (*flying up to his face*) But…I’m smarter than most of these boulder-heads and you know it!

**Torch:** Being smart won’t help you win this Gauntlet! It was designed for a big strong dragon to win, because it takes a big strong dragon to lead! Besides…I SAID NO!!

(*Those three words pitch her backwards several yards; she rights herself in midair and glares at him with all the fury that a teenage daughter can drum up.*)

**Ember:** (*growling*) I hate when he does that!

(*She flies off in a huff. Tilt down quickly to ground level, where the contenders are trash-talking each other and psyching themselves up. A light violet female voices a scoffing laugh in close-up.*)

**Violet:** When I become Dragon Lord, I will make burps an official greeting.

**Male voice:** Ha!

(*Zoom out; the speaker, a brown male, stands alongside.*)

**Brown:** You? Please. When I win, I will pillage Equestria for all their pillows. (*Violet rolls her eyes.*) Why should these ponies be comfortable while *we* sleep on rocks? (*Garble pushes them aside.*)

**Garble:** That’s nothing. When I’m in charge— (*smacking one fist into other palm*) —the first thing I’ll do is get revenge on those puny ponies. They’ll regret they ever crossed Garble! (*pacing; they fall in behind him*) We’ll take whatever we want from Equestria and burn the rest.

**\* Twilight:** (*whispering*) Oh, my gosh!

**\* Rarity:** Ooh, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I hope that burping dragon wins.

**Spike:** (*from o.s.*) None of them can win! (*Cut to him.*) Equestria’s in big trouble if any of them are in charge!

**\* Twilight:** (*normal volume*) But what can we do?

**Spike:** (*resolutely*) There’s only one thing to do, and only I can do it. I have to win the Gauntlet of Fire!

(*Cut to inside the blind, the two mares voicing a stereo moan of worry; Twilight has put away her notebook and quill. Snap to black.*)

Act Two

(*Opening shot: fade in to Spike facing his two undercover traveling companions. They are now alone on the rocky expanse, and Twilight and Rarity shuck off their disguise to stand side by side.*)

**Rarity:** What do you mean, you have to win the Gauntlet?

**Spike:** It’s the only way to protect Equestria from the dragons. You heard them. They have horrible plans for ponies if they win! So somehow, I have to do it.

**Twilight:** There has to be another way. It’s too dangerous. (*Rarity nods agreement.*) Besides, if you win, you have to stay here!

**Spike:** (*sadly*) I know. But there’s no other way to keep my friends safe.

(*Blue and purple eyes alike water up as their owners trade an apprehensive look, which shifts into quiet smiles and nods. Both blink away the tears before facing Spike again.*)

**Twilight:** Well, if you’re staying to compete— (*stomping for emphasis*) —then we’re staying to cheer you on.

(*The pint-size competitor aims a grateful smile up at her. Dissolve to a long shot of the flame-cano on its island and pan across the ocean to stop on a cliff at the shore. Torch towers over the dragons gathered at the edge, and a close-up shows them all with their backs to the water as he glares down at them—including Spike in the very front row. With the exception of him and Garble, nearly every one of them has donned armor of some sort.*)

**Torch:** I thought I released you, tiny one.

**Spike:** I decided to compete. I am a dragon, after all.

**Garble:** (*scoffing*) Are you sure? You can’t even fly!

(*Cut to a slow pan across the rest of the gang. The general reaction is one of unbridled derision, but a green one whose body is mostly hidden behind gold/brown armor remains noticeably silent. All others follow suit when Torch begins to speak.*)

**Torch:** (*from o.s*) All dragons are welcome to compete— (*Cut to him.*) —but they do so at their own peril. Flying to Flame-cano Island is the first of many challenges you will face in your quest to find the Bloodstone Scepter.

(*The behemoth unleashes a roar and a gout of flame that barely clears the entrants’ heads, startling them into a liftoff and flight toward the distant island. Spike and Garble remain at the cliff’s edge, the latter holding out a hand to shake.*)

**Garble:** Good luck! (*Spike reaches for the hand; it is yanked away.*) Just kidding. I hope you lose.

(*A lash of the red tail sends Spike over the precipice with a scream, and Garble takes wing as he plunges into the water. The little dragon gets his head above the surface and spits out a mouthful.*)

**Spike:** (*very snarky*) Thanks, Garble! I was planning on swimming anyway!

(*So he gets his stubby arms and legs to it, only for a mass of seaweed and driftwood to float into view after him. The strands are spaced far enough to allow a clear partial view of Twilight’s and Rarity’s faces.*)

**Rarity:** You can do it, Spike!

(*They poke their heads out to deliver a pair of encouraging grins, and he counters with one of his own. Before they can go much farther, a massive red/orange eel-like creature bursts up through the water to project a jet into the sky. One flyer is hit dead on and tumbles down, while another dodges to keep moving ahead. The beasts piston up and down, firing off their jets and hitting their marks, and one of them surfaces in extreme close-up. Fade to black, then snap immediately to Garble as he takes a glancing hit. Thrown off balance, he pitches backward into the silent, gold-armored dragon; the latter drops like a rock, but Garble gets his bearings and darts away. The splashdown occurs only a few feet in front of Spike, and the re-disguised Twilight and Rarity gape at the sight through their seaweed guise as the figure sinks slowly into the depths.*)

**Spike:** He’s gonna drown! (*He dives in.*)

**Twilight:** Spike!

(*The patch of water has gone deadly calm in far too short a time, and it stays that way until a stream of bubbles begins to float up and burst. A shadowy figure rises after them, resolving into Spike and the mystery dragon just before they too make it up to the air. Spike heaves for breath, having towed this one up by the helmet, and he continues the lifesaving haul-off toward Flame-cano Island as Twilight and Rarity paddle after him. Fade to black.*)

(*The view splits horizontally and widens as if it were an eye opening—the rescued dragon’s perspective. The view is of Spike and Twilight/Rarity—blurry at first, but quickly coming into focus—and the next words take a moment to reach full clarity.*)

**Spike:** Hey! Are you okay?

(*Long overhead shot of the four, now on the shore of the island. He stands over the prone figure, whose green coloration has given way to the blue-green/violet colors of Ember—evidently she had applied dye to herself, only to have it wash away. As her spasming lungs force out a cough, Spike removes the helmet to expose her face and bring the incognito act to a full stop. Each gasps upon recognizing the other.*)

**Spike:** Princess Ember!

**Ember:** (*standing up*) What do you think *you’re* doing?

**Rarity:** Only saving your ungrateful scales!

(*Stitching on a nervous grin, Spike moves over a notch to block Ember from getting a clear view of the two half-hidden ponies. The maneuver has exactly zero effectiveness.*)

**Ember:** (*pushing him aside, moving closer*) Did that seaweed just talk?

(*One good yank at the green fronds, and the white and light violet heads are fully exposed, the mouths curving up into a pair of tentative little grins.*)

**Ember:** *Ponies?!?* What are *they* doing here?

**Spike:** They’re my friends.

**Ember:** (*skeptically*) Friends? Dragons don’t do friends.

**Spike:** Well, this dragon does.

**Ember:** Whatever. (*grabbing helmet back from Spike*) I don’t care, as long as none of you get in my way. I have a Gauntlet to win.

**Spike:** But I thought your dad said that—

**Ember:** (*hotly*) I don’t care what my dad said. (*walking away a few steps*) I’ll show him, and every dragon who thinks I’m just some little princess, there are better things than being big and strong.

(*A huffing exhalation startles her into silence and causes all eight eyes to flick upward in sudden apprehension. High overhead, a thick, spiky tail attached to a dark gray body heaves a boulder off a cliff to score a direct hit on Garble. The weight carries him down, bouncing off one of the red crystals that jut from the water, and it slams down onto the sand in front of the pony/dragon quartet, with him pinned underneath. He strains to lift it free, without success, and Twilight quickly magicks the seaweed back onto herself and Rarity as Ember dons her helmet again. Spike, meanwhile, takes cover behind the two mares.*)

**Garble:** Don’t leave me here, Spike!

(*Who promptly hurries over and rolls away the stone, at which point his foe voices a mocking laugh and stands up.*)

**Garble:** Knew you’d do it. (*poking top of Spike’s head*) Your pony friends made you soft.

(*A tail sweep buries the little guy in sand, leaving only two irritated green eyes to glare out.*)

**Spike:** Uh-huh. (*Eyes narrow.*) You’re welcome.

**Garble:** For what? I didn’t say “thank you.”

(*He stops short and sniffs intently at the air just above Spike’s head for a second.*)

**Garble:** Wow. You even smell like ponies. (*Another sniff; he glances in a different direction.*) Or is it coming from over there?

(*He lets his nose do the leading as Spike pushes his head out of the sand, and it leads him straight to the two undercover equines. In close-up, he sniffs the area directly in front of them but does not catch sight of either face through the seaweed fronds before one gold-armored hand plants itself on his snout to stop him; zoom out to frame Ember.*)

**Ember:** (*deep voice*) Uh, that’s just me. I, uh, robbed some ponies on my way over here.

**Garble:** Huh! I like your style. Have I met you before? (*peering closely at her*) You kinda look like— (*Spike, now fully cleaned up, inserts himself between them.*)

**Spike:** —my, uh, old neighbor, uh…

(*Pan quickly to an empty stretch of beach in time with his first word, then to a tumble of boulders for his second.*)

**Spike:** (*from o.s.*) …uh, Sandy…Rockbeach!

(*Back to the group. The sound of a distant impact is heard; cut to the cliff-dwelling beast that shot him down.*)

**Garble:** (*from o.s.*) Stupid slingtails knocked me down. (*The group again.*) But I’ve wasted enough time making small talk. Get it? (*laughing, poking/shoving Spike*) Because you’re too small to win this! (*walking off*) I’m funny.

(*He lifts off, Ember waiting until he has cleared out to remove her helmet and address Spike in her normal tone of voice.*)

**Ember:** Why did you cover for me? You could’ve had one less competitor.

**Spike:** I could ask you the same thing. You could’ve told Garble about my friends.

(*Comes now the sound of a distant scream from overhead; the two look up in time to watch Garble dodging the anti-aircraft assault from the slingtails as other dragons are not so lucky.*)

**Ember:** (*scared*) Yikes. That looks rough. (*composing herself*) But… (*Sigh.*) …that’s what makes it a challenge.

**Spike:** Are you kidding? Those boulders are *huge!* (*He thinks a bit, then smiles.*) Hey! What if we work together?

(*The red eyes narrow suspiciously.*)

**Spike:** You fly me up there, and I’ll help you look out for boulders, like a second set of eyes.

**\* Rarity:** Pssst!

(*He moves toward the conglomeration of aquatic foliage and limbs, only to see it collapse as soon as he touches it.*)

**\* Rarity:** (*from o.s., whispering*) Spike!

(*Pan quickly to a hollow tree stump with two pairs of eyeholes—Twilight on bottom, Rarity on top as when they were using the rock disguise. A jutting limb waves to get his attention, and he crosses to her section in close-up.*)

**\* Rarity:** (*normal volume*) Are you sure it’s a good idea to team up with Ember? You don’t know her too well.

**Spike:** I do know she coulda told Garble about you, but she didn’t. I think we can trust her.

(*Zoom out. Twilight has emerged and is sitting on top of the stump, reading her notebook.*)

**Twilight:** Her behavior does seem contradictory to everything I’ve noted about dragons so far.

**Ember:** (*from o.s.*) Hey! You! Little fella! (*Pan quickly back to her.*) I’ve thought about it— (*Sigh.*) —and your plan makes sense. Let’s do it. (*He zips across to her.*)

**Spike:** Really? Great! It’s a deal!

(*The hand he holds out to shake gives her great pause, but eventually she pinches its forefinger between her own forefinger and thumb and works it ever so slightly up and down. The niceties observed, she lets go and brandishes her helmet to back him off a step.*)

**Ember:** Just so you know, this doesn’t mean we’re gonna pick flowers or exchange necklaces or whatever pony friends do. (*She stalks off.*)

**Twilight:** (*to Spike; he/she/Rarity wave to each other*) Good luck. We’ll meet you at the top.

(*He hurries after his new partner. Wipe to her in flight and no longer carrying or wearing her helmet, with Spike seated on her back and facing rearward. They dodge and weave past both a rain of boulders and the poor saps who have been hit dead on, and in short order they are cruising past the slingtails’ cliff. Up and up they go, Spike spotting an incoming launch from their six-o’clock position.*)

**Spike:** Pull up! There’s one on your tail!

**Ember:** (*doing so*) Whooaa…

(*The rock hurtles toward the camera to black out the screen. Snap immediately to the two still on the move as a fresh one is lobbed up.*)

**Spike:** Go left!

(*She does so; it is a clean miss, but a couple of other dragons go down for the count. Cut to Garble, who catches sight of Spike and Ember beginning to close in on him, then to the mouth of a broad, high-ceilinged cave on one clifftop. The scarlet delinquent flies into the blackness, while Ember comes in for a landing and Spike hops off her back.*)

**Spike:** So what do we do now?

**Ember:** (*pointing ahead*) I think we go through there.

(*Two other contenders have barely made it inside before a mighty jet of flame erupts from within. Once it ceases, they flap slowly out—whimpering, smoking, and nicely charred from head to tail. Spike and Ember trade nervous glances, suddenly very worried about their personal safety, but are interrupted by a yelp from the o.s. Rarity; zoom out to frame the fake trunk now standing alongside them.*)

**\* Rarity:** Oh, that looks scary. (*Pause; the side limb waves.*) I-I mean, you can do it!

**Ember:** Listen, Spike. I wouldn’t have made it this far without you. (*smiling*) So I guess, if you want to, we could keep working together. (*catching herself*) I mean, just until I get through that tunnel.

**Spike:** (*giving thumbs-up*) Okay! (*They run toward the cave.*)

**\* Twilight:** We’ll be right behind you.

(*Wipe to an overhead shot of Ember and Spike on the move through the crystal-studded interior of the cave. Pan to follow them for a brief distance; a crash is heard from o.s., and the camera cuts to a head-on view of them as they hit the brakes, surprised. A zoom out puts them and a couple of other dragons at the entrance to a new chamber, blocked by sets of stalactites and stalagmites that repeatedly slam together like a set of jaws. The camera then cuts to behind this bunch and frames several unfortunates who are clinging for dear life to the rocky projections as they piston up and down—the victims of incredibly bad timing.*)

(*Spike and Ember trade a determined nod, and he jumps onto her back for the takeoff. They swerve and pivot to avoid the chomping formations, cycling both horizontally and vertically now. Garble is not far behind them, clearing the hazards with ease until getting pinned in a vertical set; he strains ineffectually to get loose, but can only glower after his two prime opponents as they reach the exit from this funhouse. Spike is moving under his own power again. One last heave pops Garble free, and he thuds down to the cave floor on his face, the impact doing nothing whatsoever to improve his attitude. He is on his feet and racing after them in a trice.*)

(*Cut to Spike and Ember, now jumping and ducking their way through a passage in which huge crystal spikes punch back and forth at crazy angles. The baby dragon pauses to catch his breath, but the respite is short-lived; he gasps and dives ahead to knock Ember away from a spike that comes down from the ceiling .Once he is sure that neither of them has been skewered by the thrust, he helps her to her feet and they push on. Pan back from this spot to stop on Garble, who climbs over one spike only to get immediately plowed away by another. It retracts from the wall it has just thrust into, exposing a fresh, dragon-shaped hole in the stone face, and he emerges with a woozy groan to hit the floor.*)

(*Cut to an exit from this area and zoom out quickly as Spike and Ember step out. Before them is a multi-tiered expanse of lava pools, with streams overflowing from higher to lower levels. In close-up, they are distracted by a relieved sigh from the o.s. Rarity; on the start of the next line, zoom out to show two broad stalagmites now poking up from the floor nearby. The separate pairs of eyeholes pick out Twilight in one, Rarity in the other.*)

**\* Rarity:** You made it! Oh, we were so worried! (*The dragons smile.*)

**Spike:** About us? Bah. That tunnel was cake!

(*He immediately gives the lie to this boast by keeling over in a dead faint.*)

**Ember:** Wait. How did you two get through?

(*Before either of the interlopers can come up with a plausible answer, a sudden tremor nearly shakes them off their hooves. Rarity cries out in surprise as she slowly totters toward the brink.*)

**Spike:** (*running to her*) Rarity!

(*He barely makes it in time to pull her back from a spurt of molten rock. A few more panic-stricken exclamations give way to coherent sentences.*)

**\* Rarity:** Oh, thanks, Spike! (*Twilight joins them; he sighs.*)

**Spike:** It was nothing.

**Ember:** (*from o.s.*) Nothing? (*Cut to frame her with them.*) You just risked everything to save her. And they’re putting themselves in danger just to support you!

**Spike:** Well, that’s just what friends do. Don’t you have anyone who looks out for you?

**Ember:** Not really—unless I count you. (*icily*) Which I don’t. Because we were only helping each other get through the tunnel, and now we’re through the tunnel, so…that’s it.

**Spike:** Wait. What do you mean?

**Ember:** (*pointedly*) Well, there’s only one winner, one Scepter, and one Dragon Lord. So, I guess it’s every dragon for themselves.

**Spike:** (*deflated*) Oh. So we…aren’t really friends?

**Ember:** Maybe if we were in pony land. But, like I said— (*turning away*) —dragons don’t do friendship.

(*She lets the violet-shaded wings carry her off over the lava pools without another word, leaving her former number-one assistant to aim a hurt gaze toward the ground. Fade to black.*)

Act Three

(*Opening shot: fade in to a deep fissure or crevasse carved into the mountainside, spanned by passages high and low and marked by the glowing mouths of caverns. Hazy sunlight shines in from the far end. Spike and his friends are visible in the distance, crossing a natural bridge; his next line echoes across the space.*)

**Spike:** (*sourly*) I can’t believe Ember ditched me. (*Close-up of the trio.*)

**\* Rarity:** Oh, you’re better off. She was only looking out for herself. She’s just like all the other dragons.

**Spike:** She’s not, though. I know it! (*All stop; he turns to face the pair.*) She saved me, even when she didn’t have to. I don’t care what she says. (*walking on*) That makes us friends.

(*The mares get their legs in gear again as the view dissolves to the same stretch of territory, with Spike now leading the way at ground level.*)

**\* Twilight:** (*as all walk into view and stop*) Is it just me, or have we seen this crevasse three times already?

**Spike:** It’s kinda hard to tell. They all look the same… (*pointing ahead*) …except for this one! Look!

(*Stubby violet legs carry him ahead with all speed, the mares following, and they halt at one end of an arching span. Zoom out quickly to frame this new space: a vast interior chamber, glowing an ominous orange with the lights of fires hidden behind the mineral growths from floor and ceiling. The remaining path twists and turns through its ascent to a small plateau topped by a mass of red crystals.*)

**Spike:** We made it! (*Close-up of the three.*) I can’t believe I’m the only dragon to make it this far!

**Garble:** (*from o.s.*) You’re not!

(*All six eyes turn fearfully toward that voice; pan to frame the coward, bully, cad, and thief standing at the entrance to this cavern. He gets in Spike’s face in much less time than it takes to yell for a bouncer.*)

**Garble:** (*grabbing his head spines*) And I’m not losing to a puny, pony-loving dragon like you!

(*The dragon in question is unceremoniously hoisted off his feet. Cut to just below bridge level and zoom out to emphasize just how far down the floor—and the nasty big pointy teeth of its stalagmites—really are, then to Twilight and Rarity. The unicorn cries out in terror.*)

**\* Rarity:** We have to do something!

**\* Twilight:** Look!

(*And here comes Ember, swooping down to hit Garble broadside and plow him away to solid ground so that he knocks Twilight and Rarity over like bowling pins. He loses his grip on Spike, who drops screaming over the edge, but two blue-green hands clamp onto his midsection and carry him off.*)

**Spike:** Ember! I thought it was every dragon for themselves! (*She lands and sets him down.*) Why did you save me?

**Ember:** That’s what friends do, and…I am. I mean, *we* are. I never should’ve left you back there. (*groaning*) Please don’t make me talk about my feelings!

(*Cut to Twilight and Rarity, lying dazed and halfway out of their capsized stalagmites.*)

**Garble:** (*from o.s.*) What the—?

(*He lands in front of them, startling them upright and awake in one terrible instant, and lets his mouth curve into a savage grin. Snarling softly, he begins to back them up across the cliff; extreme close-up of one of Twilight’s rear hooves as it touches the edge and dislodges a few pebbles. Pan from here to Spike and Ember, who have stopped partway across the path leading to their goal.*)

**Ember:** Spike! Get the Scepter!

(*As he charges ahead, she doubles back to lay a flying tackle on Garble and pin him against a wall, back first. The red dragon looks past her and spots the violet one closing in on the crystal mound; his fury renewed, he manages to throw Ember aside and dart in. Before he can get a finger on Spike, though, he is yanked back hard—the Princess now has him by the tail and is hauling him up, up, and away. Spike is now close enough to the plateau to see the Scepter resting among its chaotic conglomeration of crystals.*)

(*Garble counters Ember’s strike by locking both hands around her throat and hurling her and himself to the ground. Spike glances between the Scepter and the fight, and lets a new, unshakable resolve take hold in his mind. One nimble leap carries him back to the brawlers, and a second launches him over the pinned Ember to land on Garble’s head so he can grab an ear and pull hard. The diversion lasts only a moment, though, and Garble yanks him free and pitches him to the edge of the bridge. Clawed violet fingers dig into the stone and hold on for dear life as Garble starts to force Ember backwards.*)

**Garble:** I am sick and tired of you two helping each other! Dragons don’t do helping!

**Ember:** These dragons do!

(*Scrambling up and over his head, she gets a firm grip and flips him over her back. He lands dazedly on his own in front of Twilight and Rarity, who applaud this display of camaraderie skillfully combined with finesse and force. The festivities are cut short by the laughter and chatter of many approaching dragons, and both quickly levitate their stalagmite disguises back over themselves. Just as Spike loses his hold, Ember’s hand lances into view to grab his and drag him up. At her encouraging smile, he runs the last few yards to the plateau, bounds up over the crystals, and regards the Scepter. The green eyes widen and an awed little moan escapes his throat as he puts a hand to the shaft and lifts the prize free, pointing the bloodstone at its head over the cavern.*)

(*The great gem emits a brilliant red fire, which washes over Spike’s body, and his pupils briefly dilate to the point that they nearly fill his eye sockets. He now shifts his grip to hold the Scepter upright, and it sends a jet of flame toward the ceiling as the camera zooms out across the cavern. A red pulse washes over the entire space, followed by a blinding white glare that washes out the screen. Snap to several dragons watching Flame-cano Island from the surrounding ocean; the energy and shock wave pour from the warped summit even at this distance.*)

(*Inside the cavern, the late arrivals can only watch in stunned silence—but Garble takes advantage of the light show to start sneaking up on Ember in close-up. The light show has now stopped.*)

**Spike:** (*from o.s., echoing*) *Leave her ALONE!!* (*He instantly shifts to total confusion.*)

**Garble:** (*walking past her*) What? (*Cut to Spike; he continues o.s.*) *You?!?* You have the Scepter?

(*Overhead shot of the three, the camera just behind the little guy.*)

**Garble:** But—that means that you’re—

**Ember:** —the Dragon Lord. (*bowing*) Dragon Lord Spike.

(*The others copy her gesture, Garble last of all and only with a reluctant groan.*)

**Garble:** (*petulantly*) Dragon Lord Spike.

**Spike:** That’s right! Uh…now go start your long journey home! (*smiling smugly*) And give every dragon you see on the way a hug. Don’t tell them why.

**Garble:** Aww, but that’ll be super-embarrassing!

**Spike:** (*pointing Scepter at him*) I command you to do it!

(*Grumbling at top volume, the defeated upstart heads for the exit but stops to hug a rather large one first. It breaks out into a big toothy grin.*)

**Garble:** (*under his breath, lifting off*) Aw, I can’t believe this! (*Spike crosses to Ember.*)

**Ember:** “Dragon Lord Spike.” Hm. Has a nice ring to it.

**Spike:** (*passing Scepter to her*) “Dragon Lord Ember” sounds a lot better.

(*Red flames lick over her body as she takes hold, just as they did to him when he picked it up. She is caught more than a bit off guard by the handoff.*)

**Ember:** What? No. (*holding it out to him*) You’re the Dragon Lord now.

**Spike:** The Dragon Lord is whoever brings the Scepter back to your father. Besides, you’ll make a great leader. I was just doing this to protect the ponies, but I know you’ll protect them just as well as I would’ve.

**Ember:** You sure about this?

**Spike:** Absolutely. My home is in Equestria with my friends.

**Ember:** (*smiling*) Well, you’ll have at least one friend here too.

(*The smile disappears as he darts forward to hug as much of her as he can grab.*)

**Ember:** What are you doing?

**Spike:** It’s called a hug.

**Ember:** Oh. I don’t know if I like it… (*smiling*) …but okay.

(*The embrace tightens as she blushes and gives his head a few indulgent pats.*)

**\* Twilight, Rarity:** Aww…

(*They lean their “heads” together to share in the moment as best they can. Dissolve to a long shot of Torch sitting alone on his rough throne under the perpetually gloomy sky. He is shaken out of his funk by a gleam from behind him o.s.; the source proves to be the Scepter in Ember’s grip as she leads the rest of his subjects down from the clouds. All of them have removed whatever armor they were wearing. Torch regards them with sheer disbelief; extreme close-up of his narrowed eyes.*)

**Torch:** Ember? *You?* (*Cut to her, hovering.*)

**Ember:** I know you didn’t think I could do it, but I did.

**Torch:** I expressly told you NOT TO DO IT!! Because you’re not—

**Ember:** I’m not big and strong! I know. But you know what? I won anyway. So maybe it takes more than just being big and strong to be a good Dragon Lord!

(*Grunts and nods of agreement from the crowd lead him to soften his attitude greatly.*)

**Torch:** I was wrong, Ember. You might not be big, but you are strong, and smart, and perhaps that counts for more than I thought. And you will make an excellent leader.

(*She perches on the tip of the horn that protrudes upward from the end of his snout.*)

**Ember:** Thanks, Dad. (*to the crowd*) AGREE WITH HIM!! (*Puzzled grunts in response; she smiles.*) Just kidding. That’s not gonna be my thing.

(*Now Torch lets go with a belly laugh.*)

**Torch:** Dragons! Hear me! I present to you our new Dragon Lord…Ember!

(*Enthusiastic cheers rise as she slowly hovers off his face and waves to her new subjects. The celebration gets a monkey wrench thrown into it when Garble wings into view and hugs the end of the massive blue-gray snout.*)

**Torch:** Hmm? What is the meaning of this?

**Garble:** I can’t tell you!

(*Ember allows herself a chuckle at this unexpected side effect of Spike’s one and only royal order. Cut to him, Twilight, and Rarity on the road for home, the latter two having shed their stalagmite covers.*)

**Twilight:** You did well, Spike. With Ember as Dragon Lord, the ponies’ll be safe and you’ve gained us a powerful ally.

**Spike:** And a new friend. (*Close-up of Twilight.*)

**Twilight:** Plus, Ember said I could write to her anytime I have questions about dragon culture. (*floating her notebook up*) With this much information, I’ll be able to write a whole book on dragons! (*Pan to Rarity.*)

**Rarity:** And I gained tons of ideas for a new line of camouflage clothing! I think I’ll call it “Camo-Maud”!

(*All three share a laugh, silhouetted by the setting sun, and the view fades to black.*)

(*The usual closing theme does not accompany the credits. In its place is a portion of the background score, beginning with the start of the dragons’ flight to Flame-cano Island and ending with Ember’s plunge into the water. Urgent, driving melody with full orchestration; brisk 4 with triplet feel; D minor, with the final chord in A major.*)