“Urrrrrrghhhhhh…”

Shining Armor was standing outside the interrogation room, his hoof over his face and his teeth tightly gritted in frustration. Even after several hours of intense interrogation, he hadn’t gotten anywhere with the criminal who was recently apprehended. Part of him wanted to go back upstairs and take a quick breath, or even just buy himself a coffee to keep up his energy. Unfortunately, given how badly the Crystal Empire’s citizens were reacting to the current news, the last thing he wanted to do was go back up there and deal with the pandemonium.

“*Ughhhhh*... why did he have to be found *alive*?”

Shining muttered that to himself weakly, but the hallway was empty enough for his voice to echo a little down both ends. Over a month had passed since that fateful discovery miles above the Frozen North, when the intact body of King Sombra was found encased in ice. Twilight Sparkle and her Element friends investigated the remains, and were shocked to discover how well-preserved he was beneath the surface. Shining could still recall how strongly he and Cadance protested their plans to revive his body, especially since Discord would’ve been involved to enact such a practice. In the end though, the one saving grace both of them had was the fact that Sombra’s horn was broken off from the magical blast during his defeat; they had no idea where it went, but they could only assume it was far out of reach when even *Discord* couldn’t find it…

Unfortunately, even with nothing but a jagged stump atop his head, the stallion was far too dominant and imposing for even the strongest Crystal Guards to stay in his presence for longer than a minute.

Shining huffed to himself bitterly, and nearly punched the wall with his hoof. Over the past few weeks, everyone from the Princesses to the Elements themselves were all desperate to get any information out of the former Tyrant. However, despite being locked in tight isolation with nothing but the most basic amenities, it didn't seem like anything was effective enough in getting him to talk. Twilight tried to bring up the importance of friendship, while Celestia and Luna resorted to empty threats that went nowhere. By the time all other resources were used to no avail, all who was left was *Shining* to try and get him to act cordially.

"Come on, come on…" Shining was leaned against the door, and pinching the bridge of his snout to try and maintain his composure. "Just calm down, Shining… He can't stay like this forever…"

He had tried every legal avenue he could think of to make Sombra open up and talk. Part of him expected the Ex-King to at least give a snide remark, or deliver an insult bad enough to warrant a punch in his fanged maw. But alas, Shining couldn't help feeling that his silence was *far* more insulting than any taunting statement. Not to mention, Sombra's smug grin was just as sinister as what the Princesses from earlier had described… never changing and always pointing at him like the eyes in a creepy painting.

Shining Armor knew he couldn't stay outside the interrogation room forever, even if Sombra was unable to escape his chain bindings. The last thing he wanted to do was lock himself in an enclosed space with that slave-driving Tyrant for any longer than he already had; but at the same time, he knew that Cadance and the castle staff were dealing with way more headaches up above with the protestors outside their castle. He was fortunate that Twilight Sparkle and her protegè (and maybe possible girlfriend) Starlight Glimmer were upstairs, since it allowed him the opportunity to spend all afternoon interrogating that sadistic fiend. However, the Prince was fully aware that if he wasn't able to get through to Sombra soon, this whole day -- let alone the efforts of everypony else before him -- will most likely be all for naught.

He sighed out deeply one last time, and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his foreleg. Shining then pulled himself away from the door, before turning around to re-enter that blasted room. The walls were all a garish shade of white that made Shining's eyes sting under the fluorescent lights; and since the room was only ten by ten feet all around, the metal table in the middle took up most of the limited space. The only other pieces of furniture were two metal chairs welded to the floor, and magically discharged to ensure no static electricity could be used for a possible escape. Of course, Sombra didn't seem the slightest bit perturbed while sitting across from Shining. Even while wearing heavy metal cuffs around his neck and wrists -- not to mention the thick brass cap over the base of his broken horn -- his smile remained as smug and untelling as it looked before his interrogator exited the room earlier.

Shining didn't say anything, nor did he try to show much emotion as he sat down in the chair across from Sombra. He wasn't expecting to hear him say much, since Sombra had already

proven himself to be a master of silence before the Princesses and Elements before him. If anything, the most significant "response" he had given Shining the past few hours was the slightest widening or narrowing of his eyes between brief blinks. Combined with the cocky grin practically welded to his muzzle, Shining had to keep himself from grimacing in aggravation. Not wanting to show any weakness to his foe, Shining Armor kept his own expression as blank and untelling as the stallion before him.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and silently breathed in before focusing on Sombra once more. "*Okay*... Well, I'll definitely give you this. You are a **very** patient stallion…"

Shining hoped that he could at least shrug his shoulders, or give the slightest nod of his head in compliance with that compliment. Unfortunately, the former King remained stoic in place to ensure his streak wouldn't be broken. Shining didn't try to show any discomfort, and merely exhaled through his nostrils. He then leaned forward in his seat, resting his forelegs on the table between them. "Listen… I know that you're probably just as sick of being locked in this room as any of us. Believe me, the **last** thing I want to do is continue wasting my time with somepony like *you*."

That time, Sombra's brows raised the tiniest bit in response. Shining didn't say anything, but he was quick to notice it and carry the slightest semblance of hope. But instead of faltering, he held his hooves up while his elbows rested against the table. "*However*... Considering the circumstances right now, I feel like I need to give the Princesses something when I leave here. You don't have to say much. Heck, you don't even have to explain how your dark magic works.

All that I want is for you to tell me something… ANYthing so we can make some progress here!”

Shining tried not to raise his voice too much, since the room was small enough to make the slightest inflection sound like a full-blown scream directly against the eardrum. Unfortunately, he still cursed himself internally for showing that tiny amount of emotion at the end. Sombra didn’t move an inch, and just carried that same damn grin with the tips of his fangs poking out tauntingly. Several seconds of uncomfortable silence passed between them, before Shining Armor closed his eyes and let out a more audible sigh. “*Ughhhhhh…*”

“Why?”

Shining nearly lept off his chair from how suddenly he jolted back. He was fortunate not to yelp out in a panic, but it was obvious that Sombra’s one word was more than enough to startle him. The Prince’s eyes were as wide as saucers, and he had to blink a couple times to process what he just heard. He stared back at Sombra for a moment in awe, and weakly asked without thinking, “W… What was that?”

“Why should I comply?”

Shining’s lips tightened shut, and he breathed out shakily through his snout without any statement to give. He may have had to encounter Sombra before, but this was the first time he ever heard him speak that wasn’t a ravenous growl or overconfident speech. Sombra’s voice was

as rich and deep as molasses, carrying both a regal smoothness and intimidating tone that made Shining's fur stand on end. Luckily for the Prince, that was mostly along the length of his back outside of Sombra's view.

"Because from where I'm sitting," continued Sombra, whose blood-red eyes slowly darted across the room to study his surroundings more tactfully. "... it seems that I've been doing quite *well* just sitting around and doing nothing, don't you think? I mean, aside from a few slaps in the face from your Aunts-in-Law, I would consider myself rather *lucky* I'm not outside this castle right now~"

Now it was Shining who was finding it difficult to speak out loud. While he knew he should've been grateful that his captive foe was actually speaking, it didn't mean much when all the recording devices were in the other room. Plus, he wasn't exactly too thrilled to hear Sombra speaking so nonchalantly about his imprisoned state. Even though he wasn't technically *wrong*, it was still enough to make Shining's lips tighten frustratedly.

"Ohhh, don't get *too* upset with yourself~" Sombra was disturbingly quick to catch Shining's expression altering the tiniest bit, which made him narrow his eyes on the Prince and widen his fanged grin. "Honestly, it's quite *admirable* that you thought you could get to me when the Princesses all **failed**. Boy, you should've been around when your *wife* tried to interrogate me~"

Shining's hooves slammed down on the table. *"HEY!!!"*

“Now, *now*, Shining…” Sombra couldn’t lift up his hooves too high while chained, but he managed to raise them a couple inches to motion the Prince to sit still. “I’m just making a *point*, see? Now, I just pointed out that none of the all-powerful Alicorns were able to make me talk. *However*... I’m currently talking with **you** right now. And do you know *why* I would do that?~”

Shining was still sneering at him angrily for mentioning Cadance negatively. However, it took a few seconds for the Prince’s expression to soften the tiniest bit, and his eyes to close before breathing out calmly. By the time he was able to stare back at Sombra’s confident smirk, all he could do was relent his earlier frustration and confess, *“I... I don’t know...”*

“Well, I’ll tell you why…” Sombra leaned forward in his seat, and got up close to Shining’s face with a wide and lecherous grin. “... It’s because I prefer the company of **stallions**, if you catch my drift~”

It took a moment for Shining to catch what he actually said; but the moment the realization came to his head, he reeled back a little with his eyes significantly widened. Granted, Shining Armor couldn’t say that he was particularly *surprised* to learn such a private detail from the former Tyrant. If anything, his theatrical entrances into the Crystal Empire should’ve been a big hint that he had more… *unique* preferences when it came to ponies. But even with that being said, Shining tried not to let his blush remain too prevalent while keeping a neutral expression pointed back at him. “Ummm… *O-Oh*, uhhh… Is that so?”

“Indeed it is…” Sombra leaned back in his seat, and shot Shining a smug-looking grin. “Besides, I didn’t think it’d be appropriate to intimidate any of the *mares* who rule over you. I mean, what kind of stallion would I be to torment any of *them*? I might have done a lot of things back during my rule, but I’m not a *misogynist*.”

Shining opened his muzzle for a moment, but nothing could come out to counteract that claim Sombra just made. Sure, the fact that Sombra wanted to talk with a *stallion* certainly implied some strong gender bias; however, the Prince could understand not wanting to insult or intimidate any of the Alicorn Princesses who could retaliate with more than some strong words. A couple more seconds passed before Shining closed his muzzle, and gave a brief nod to make Sombra’s grin widen a little more. But before Sombra could say anything else, Shining gave a quick and insistent retort. “Well, ummm… I hope you understand that this doesn’t mean I’m going to cut you any slack!”

“Well, of course you wouldn’t,” said Sombra with a sincere-sounding, but still slightly ominous tone to match his cheeky smile. “After all, you’re supposed to report back to the Princesses up above about whatever I have to say. You’re just doing your *job*, am I right?~”

Shining narrowed his eyes on him in suspicion, and slowly leaned back so he was against the back of his seat like Sombra was. “That… That’s right… A-And I’d prefer you could help me with this for *both* our sakes.”

“Well, that implies that we should *both* get something out of this by the time you leave, correct?”

Shining paused briefly, but his muzzle remained closed while processing the King's implied wording. Sombra kept a stern, patient stare on the stallion as he maintained his peculiar smirk. Shining took a split-second to glance back at the door, even though both of them were aware that nopony was likely to be waiting outside in the hall to eavesdrop. The Prince eventually breathed out before giving a shrug, and turning back to the smirking stallion across from him. "Well, ummm… I'm sure that something could be arranged…"

Sombra's grin finally widened enough to expose the pearly whites between his glistening fangs. "You see, Shining Armor? *That's* why I wanted to speak with you and none of your Superiors. I knew that **you'd** be willing to negotiate~"

Shining breathed out and quickly clenched his muzzle, not wanting to reveal how much that telling statement got him flustered. He wasn't sure what Sombra was planning, but he was on high alert regarding him trying anything funny. He leaned forward again, and stared Sombra down in an attempt to catch any weakness in his lecherous smile. But alas, it was clear as the crystals above that Sombra was the one with a stone-cold composure compared to the Prince across from him.

"So," began Shining, whose voice was surprisingly more confident than he would've expected when he heard it escape his muzzle. "What are you wanting to propose?"

"*Hmmmmmm*..." Sombra's grin remained as wide as could be, while also staring intensely at the stallion without any fear of retaliation. "Well, let me ask you *this*... Considering how I'm a prisoner of this castle, and official Equestrian law dictates that **any** prisoner, regardless of criminal offense or notoriety, is entitled to a monetary account to be used for commissary purchases while incarcerated…"

Shining's eyes nearly bulged out of his skull from how surprised he looked from that detail. While it was certainly accurate by legal standards, he couldn't imagine how somepony like Sombra could be aware of such a thing while frozen for Celestia-knows how long.

"... would it be inappropriate to ask for some… *financial* compensation in exchange for an open conversation?~"

Shining narrowed his eyes on him, and blinked a couple times with utter confoundment. Granted, he was aware that deals like that have been offered for prisoners in *standard* lockups in exchange for information. But considering how Sombra was anything *but* a "standard" prisoner, he had to take a moment to process actually complying with such an offer. "... are… are you asking for a *bribe*?"

Sombra was quick to shake his head while keeping a confident smile. "Of course not, Shining. What I'm *asking* is for you to show your worth by offering me something the Princesses would **never** do. None of them would be willing to pay me to talk, which is why I've remained silent for so long. But with **you**, well…"

That was when Sombra leaned forward in his seat once more, with his muzzle less than a foot away from Shining Armor's. His stare seemed to penetrate into Shining's very soul, which made the Prince struggle not to shiver in his line of sight. Meanwhile, Sombra tilted his head and said in a casual manner, "I technically gave you a *big* piece of information regarding my true orientation, did I not? I doubt even **Discord** was aware I swung that way. That *alone* should be worth a deposit into my commissary account~"

Shining sighed and closed his eyes, but he didn't try to say anything immediately to retort Sombra's claim. When he finally reopened his eyes, he wasn't aware of how studiously Sombra was scanning his face for any blushing or flusteredness. He eventually rolled his eyes in relent, and tried to counteract with, "Well… I'm sure I could talk with the Royal Sisters abou--"

"Oh, no, no, *nooooo*..." Sombra couldn't lift his hoof higher than a few inches from his chair's armrest, but he was still able to wave it in dismissal before Shining could finish talking. "You see, if you mentioned that to them, they would likely *scold* you for agreeing to something as petty as monetary payment to make me talk. If anything, they might be upset that *they* haven't considered it themselves…"

Shining's muzzle zipped right up with a look of startling realization. Sombra leaned back in his seat once more, and shrugged when he said confidently, "If you want me to talk, I would want you to use your *own* bits. Not any of *theirs*. **Yours**~"

Shining didn't realize he was blushing a little after hearing that clarification. Granted, it wasn't like anything Sombra said was inherently *wrong*. If Shining trotted back upstairs and told Cadance what was discussed, she'd likely yell at him for even *contemplating* paying the former Tyrant for his cooperation. However, the Prince was also aware that he was in a bit of a tight spot when it came to obtaining information from Sombra, and helping to dispel some of the commotion above ground…

"I'll tell you what…" Sombra's grin lessened to a more natural-looking smile (or at least, how "natural" one's smile could look while sporting a pair of viper-fangs), and he shot Shining a more genuine stare to show his sincerity. "If you deposit, ohhhh… a *hundred* bits into my commissary account, and I receive **proof** of that amount to be used after this interrogation, I'll tell you of how I obtained the knowledge of my dark magic. Surely you have more than *that* in your personal account while living in such a lavish castle with all your amenities paid for, am I right?~"

Shining had to look away from him to hide his offended expression. While he couldn't deny that he had more than enough bits to throw a hundred in Sombra's way, the idea of actually *agreeing* to such a thing was enough to make him feel embarrassed. Considering how two bits were enough to purchase an apple in Ponyville's farmer's market, such a bribe (or whatever Sombra called it himself) would mean he would be well-fed for a couple weeks at most. His muzzle tightened to reveal his conflicted look, and he exhaled sharply through his nostrils in thought. In the end though, Shining couldn't deny that a hundred bits was likely a minimal price to pay to appease the Princesses up above, as well as Sombra's cooperation.

"... So…" By the time he turned back towards Sombra, Shining was still blushing a little when he asked, "If… if I deposit a hundred bits into your account… you won't mention it to the Princesses if they interview you?"

It took everything in him not to grin maliciously at Shining for asking such a dumb question. Fortunately, he nodded quite naturally and said in assurance, "You have my word, Shining Armor… When I receive proof that you paid me, I'll give you what you need~"

Shining didn't seem to catch the eerie wording of Sombra's statement, or how vague it actually sounded out-loud. Instead, the Prince sighed before pulling himself out of his seat. "Well, I… I suppose it wouldn't be too hard to do such a thing…"

Sombra's eyes narrowed on him the tiniest bit, but he kept a gracious smile as he nodded up at him. "Alright then… I'm *very* glad we have an understanding."

Shining nodded back, but it was fairly weak while carrying a weak skew across his muzzle. As he walked back towards the door, his hoof reached the knob before Sombra stated, "Oh, and one more thing…"

Shining glanced back at the Ex-King, and blushed a little deeper when he saw how sadistically his fanged smile became.

“If you want me to *continue* being this compliant, **I expect this to be a regular exchange between us~”**

Shining took a second before breathing out hoarsely, unsure of why that statement was enough to make him react in such a way. But alas, all he could do was nod before opening the door to exit the interrogation room. “Uhhhh… s-sure, I… I think something can be arranged…”

With that, Shining Armor left to find where Sombra’s personal finance account was located. Meanwhile, Sombra leaned back in his seat with a grin as wide as could be, and stared at the closed door with a truly evil gleam in his crimson eyes.

“*Mmmmmm*… Oh, I can’t *wait* to bleed you dry, you lousy excuse of a ‘Prince’...”

[hr]

One Month Later

Much to the Princesses’ shared surprise, as well as Shining Armor’s, that first monetary exchange seemed to do a lot for everypony’s benefit. Sure, depositing a hundred bits into the former villain’s commissary account was a risky move to say the least, especially when anypony could look through his records and see he was able to buy junk food whenever he wished. But at the same time, Sombra provided enough substantial details of his once-unknown past to leave the Alicorns in charge very satisfied. True to his word, Sombra never once mentioned Shining’s

payment when Twilight and Celestia interviewed him individually for more details. However, as the weeks went by, and Shining's involvement became more prevalent in obtaining more information, that first hundred bit payment was **far** from the last.

The second time Shining Armor returned to the interrogation room for a private chat with Sombra, the price was raised to a hundred *fifty* bits to learn of the events that led to the King's descent into dark magic. Once again, Shining reluctantly took the bits from his own personal bank account behind Cadance's back, and deposited the amount into Sombra's commissary account. In return, Sombra ended up retelling a rather long… and *detailed* story about a young stallion he courted who introduced him to a mythical book, and introduced him to numerous sexual endevours with the aid of dark magic.

By the time Sombra's rousing tale of intimacy and taboo pleasures was complete, Shining Armor was blushing heavier than a pony who just left a porno theater. He didn't seem to mind dishing out so many bits to hear such a story from the former Tyrant himself. However, when it came to recounting his findings to the Princesses upstairs, he told a more *condensed* version of events that wasn't nearly as inappropriate for the Royals' ears.

The third time Shining visited Sombra for another talk, which was the second time in that week, the price was once again raised to *two* hundred bits. The Prince didn't try to object too strongly, and already had the bits in hoof to make a deposit and get things going smoothly. Unfortunately, as soon as he showed Sombra the receipt of his commissary balance, he was met with quite a lot of ridicule for how swiftly he performed the task. Shining tried to bring their discussion back to

focus, and asked the King of what had happened after he obtained his dark magic. But instead of gaining any credible info, Sombra merely went on a long diatribe about the significance of power and control over others. He even went into extensive detail about why his ownership of the Crystal Ponies as slaves was *justified* (mostly for farming and strengthening his defenses against outside nations), all while Shining sat in puzzlement with his blush remaining a heavy shade of red. He wasn't given that much additional intel on Sombra's past by the time he left the interrogation room in a stunned stupor; however, when he recounted what Sombra said to Cadance and the other Alicorns, all of them agreed that it was better than just being met with a stone wall of silence like their *own* attempted interviews.

On Shining's *fourth* visit to Sombra, he was met with a **three** hundred bit charge if he wanted to hear more. To his credit, he tried to negotiate a lower amount that time around. In return, Sombra remained stoically silent the entire time, even after Shining deposited two hundred fifty bits into his account. The Prince almost resorted to physical intimidation when he was given nothing in return; unfortunately, Sombra made sure to remind him that he could easily tell his wife about the money he gave him already. Shining also received quite a bit of mockery when his face grew an agitated look, and he was met with laughter and insults in response to his frustrated state. In the end, Shining was left totally defeated when he exited the interrogation room with nothing to recount the Princesses, and a substantial amount of money withdrawn from his bank account.

But at the same time, Shining couldn't help but prepare himself for his *next* visit more accordingly.

It only took two days for Shining Armor to try regaining Sombra's trust again, as he offered him four hundred bits the moment he entered the interrogation room. Unfortunately, Sombra proved to be a petty bastard as he shook his head, and countered with *five* hundred bits instead. Shining made the mistake of trying to reason with him once more, which caused Sombra to raise the price to *six* hundred bits the moment he opened his mouth. As soon as Shining's muzzle clamped shut like the lid of a heavy chest, Sombra cackled maniacally and pointed at him in mockery. The Prince had to leave the room to hide his shame, but he was quivering badly while hearing Sombra's muffled laughter inside.

He didn't stop laughing at him until Shining returned to the interrogation room a short while later, with a deep blush on his face and a receipt showing he deposited the full six hundred bits into his commissary account. Unfortunately for the Prince, that blush remained throughout the remainder of their private interview.

Sombra was cordial enough to accept the payment with a grin, and recount how he actually overthrew the Crystal Empire's city consul to begin his fascist reign. The talk lasted for well over an hour, and left Shining shaking to his very core by the time he left the room. Twilight Sparkle tried to recommend installing some recording devices in the interrogation room next time around, just in case any necessary intel was missed from Shining's recountings. But by that point, Shining was aware that the discussion of payments was too prevalent to be ignored in recording whenever he went to visit Sombra; luckily, he was able to convince her and the other Princesses that he was gaining Sombra's trust, and that installing anything without his knowledge would be a major breach.

By the time a whole three weeks passed, Shining Armor was trying not to feel overly guilty for how much money he gave to Sombra for their interviews. Every time he went to talk with Sombra in private, the price was raised drastically to ensure “trust” between them (at least, that was how *Sombra* liked to put it). Shining Armor was growing irritated the more the price increased, even though he knew he still had enough in his checking account to cover for random three-figure withdrawals every now and then. Unfortunately, it seemed that the more his payments intensified over time, the less useful intel he was receiving from Sombra in response. What began as detailed recountings of his past and former abilities as King, soon began to morph into inappropriate mockery and questioning of Shining’s ethics and masculinity in response to his methods. Shining tried once or twice to reason with him, just to keep things fair and level between them; but each time he tried to speak up about how he was acting, Sombra would give him dead silence until another deposit was made for his personal use.

All the while, Shining never once mentioned his financial woes to any of the Princesses, including his own wife. Even though he and Cadance had separate accounts for their own use, Shining couldn’t help feeling increasingly shameful for the thousands of bits he already gave to Sombra. Every time he had to go down to the interrogation room, his heart would race immensely at the thought of whatever amount Sombra would demand he pay for his cooperation. Shining would always try to make the deposits accordingly, even if he was given little (or even nothing) in return. He wasn’t sure what was coming over him, but it was soon becoming a habit to start withdrawing large amounts of bits from his ATM in the dead of night, just so he could have the chance to speak with Sombra the next day about whatever he deemed appropriate.

Whether it was relevant to the Princess' interests or not, Shining learned not to complain about what Sombra said without the fear of financial retaliation.

And to make matters worse, the more that Sombra tried to mock or ridicule him during their private chats, the less that Shining tried to protest after throwing so many bits in his direction. If anything, having Sombra insulting him for whatever he paid was leaving him feeling conflicted in ways he never would have expected prior to their talks…

By the time a whole month had passed since their first interrogation, Shining Armor was starting to lose track of how many bits he had given him. He was visiting Sombra two or three times a week, each time with a larger amount of bits to keep the former King interested. Shining knew that he was being taken advantage of, and how badly he was digging himself into financial strain behind the Royals' backs. But alas, even after depositing several thousands of bits into Sombra's commissary account, Shining wasn't sure how he would be able to stop this twisted exchange from getting any worse.

Sombra, who was once again chained to his seat with a casual smile on his muzzle, waited patiently for the Prince to show up and have another private discussion. The Ex-King wasn't too worried about any interference by that point, which allowed him to feel more confident in his abilities. Even while imprisoned with his horn removed, he didn't feel the slightest twinge of intimidation by the time Shining arrived on schedule. By that point, the stallion was blushing heavily as he awkwardly walked into the interrogation room with a large satchel hung over his shoulder.

Sombra's grin became much more devious for a moment when he heard the distinct jingling of bits with every movement of Shining's bag, which was hanging heavily against his side.

"Ummmm… h-hello, Sombra…" Shining sat himself down in the seat, and slowly lowered the bag from his shoulder so it could rest on the floor. Sombra could still hear the loud jingling of bits inside, which he could only assume was four figures that time around. However, the King made sure to keep his eyes pinned on Shining, and not the satchel lying beside his welded seat. Meanwhile, Shining was trying to keep his breathing calm while his eyes darted back and forth anxiously.

"Hello, Prince Shining." Sombra nodded with a cheerful smile, which he managed to soften from the devilish gleam he was carrying just a few seconds prior. Shining was already tensing up in his seat, as if he was anticipating whatever amount Sombra would demand in exchange for their talks to commence. But much to the Prince's surprise, Sombra's positive demeanor didn't change in the slightest when he asked, "So, Shining… What would you like to ask me?"

"Hmm?" Shining jolted a little, and stared back at Sombra with a puzzled look on his face. Usually, the first thing that Sombra would do is lay out a price for Shining to deposit before those sorts of questions commenced. That time around, Shining calculated that he was expected to pay at least *fifteen hundred* bits to appease him; of course, he made sure to pack *more* than that just in case. The Prince stared between Sombra's nonchalant smile, and the heavy bag of bits on the floor beside him. He didn't want to be an idiot and ask about money when Sombra wasn't

mentioning it. However, it took him a few seconds to think of anything to say. "... *uhhhhh*... you… y-you mean you want to *talk*?"

"Well, of *course*, Shining," said Sombra with a natural nod. "That's why you come down here, right?"

"Uhh, y-yes! I… I-I do, yeah…" Shining may have nodded his head insistently, but it was obvious by his blush that Sombra's new demeanor was leaving him feeling particularly flustered. He took a quick breath in an attempt to maintain his composure, and even sat upright to appear less overwhelmed than he actually was. He stared back at Sombra with a professional, albeit blushed look on his face; meanwhile, his hind-legs were crossing tightly together beneath the table, fortunately out of Sombra's line of sight.

Neither of them said anything for a moment, before Sombra tilted his head curiously. "... *Well*, Shining? Don't you have any questions for me?~"

"OH! Uhhh… r-right, right…" Once again, Shining nodded frantically and tried to ignore how hot his face was getting. After closing his eyes to take a calming breath, he looked back at Sombra and his unnaturally… *natural* smile. Shining had no idea what was going on, but he tried to ignore the red flags and take this opportunity while it was presented. Because of that, he sighed softly and began to speak. "Ummm… Well, I… I-I was hoping that you could help me by… b-by explaining how you managed to encase the Crystal Empire in limbo…"

Despite how frazzled and blushy Shining looked, Sombra gave him a cordial nod and said with a smile, “Well, alright then. I suppose I should explain the technicalities of such a thing by now…”

Sombra cleared his throat, and caught Shining Armor by surprise when he began to freely explain. “You see, the crystal magic that’s harnessed beneath the Crystal Empire is far more powerful, but also more *uncontrollable*, than the crystal caverns beneath Canterlot. You can’t just obtain a specific spell or magic inhibitor to ensure its powers will remain in any *one* pony’s control. If you really want to encompass its power for personal usage, the most important thing is to craft a specific tool…”

As he spoke, Sombra kept a respectable tone to match his smile as he went over the analyticals of such a complex process. Shining tried to nod his head while listening, fortunate to finally receive such useful information without the looming fear of payment. However, even though he was being given enough useful details to leave his sister beaming in satisfaction, Shining was finding it hard to focus the longer Sombra spoke. Sure, he could certainly *hear* what he was saying clear as day; but when it came to actually retaining that information, Shining was growing too anxious to really listen to the words coming out of Sombra’s mouth.

“... of course, you have to remember that carbon fiber wasn’t really a thing back in those days. I’m sure that it could work as a suitable handle for the apparatus nowadays, but back then I had to craft a brand-new material out of…”

Shining continued to nod blankly, even though his blush was as red as a beet across his cheeks. His eyes soon drifted down towards his bag of bits, which he would've expected would be deposited into Sombra's commissary account already. But even after walking in embarrassingly with the satchel over his back, it seemed that Sombra was straight-up ignoring the money inside. All he was doing was telling Shining exactly what he wanted to hear, which *should* have been a relieving thing for the Prince to receive. But instead, all it was doing was leaving his heart thundering in his chest, and his mind racing anxiously about what he was expected to do for him…

"... now, the specific spell used to extract the crystal magic is fairly difficult, but I'm sure you can remember enough of the details for Twilight to learn it herself. First of all, it's absolutely *essential* to keep the aura contained below the standard parameter of…"

Shining tried as hard as he could to pay attention, both for the Princess' sakes and out of respect for Sombra's sudden generosity. But at the same time, he couldn't help but feel a heavy veil of guilt for receiving such vital intel without compensation. Sure, he may have already paid Sombra thousands of bits by that point, which should've been *more* than enough to cover a free session between them. But after the constant bullying and financial intimidation he was forced to endure over the past month, it felt too jarring for Shining to process *not* paying him by that point.

"Shining?"

“H-Huh?!” Shining was jarred back to reality by Sombra’s inflected voice. He found himself slouched in his seat in a stunned stupor, with his face feeling fiery-hot to match his rosy blush. “Uhhhh… w-what were we talking about?”

“Hmph~” Sombra huffed amusedly at the stallion across from him, but his smile remained just as cheerful as before. “Oh, Shining. *Please* don’t tell me that you weren’t paying attention. I just went over all the intricacies of how I harnessed the Crystal Magic to preserve this empire. Isn’t that what you came down here for?”

“O-Oh! Uhhhh… Right, I… I’m sorry…” Shining exhaled in embarrassment and pinched the bridge of his muzzle with a shake of his head. He wasn’t sure what came over him, but the sudden change in their exchange was jarring enough to throw him through a loop. Even with his previous worries about having recording devices on hoof, he was pissed at himself for not having one regardless. He wasn’t sure why he found it so difficult to listen to what Sombra had just said. However, the Prince was also feeling uneasy about how… *incomplete* things felt between them at that moment. “Ugh… I… I-I don’t know what…”

“Is something *wrong*, Prince Shining?” Sombra tilted his head with a peculiar grin, his eyes narrowing on him ever so slightly. “I must say, you seem a bit out of it…”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t…” Shining paused briefly to take another anxious breath, his eyes clenched tightly shut. He couldn’t even look at Sombra while his hoof dragged down his face. “... I don’t know, I just… I wasn’t sure what to expect…”

“Well, I would’ve figured that you’d *expect* to obtain information from me in order to appease the Princesses upstairs…” Sombra’s tone of voice may have remained courteous and kind, but his smile grew a bit wider while staring down the flustered Prince. “Unless… there’s something **else** that you wanted to do while we were here~”

Shining put down his hoof, and stared back at Sombra with a conflicted look on his face. While he could certainly agree that there was a detail he expected to do for Sombta, he wasn’t sure if it was something he *wanted* to do for him. If anything, he should’ve been grateful for Sombra not mentioning it, and giving him the chance to accept things as they currently were. Shining stared back at Sombra for a moment, with every impulse in his body *begging* him not to say anything while he still had the opportunity…

… but alas, Shining could feel his muzzle shakily opening up without warning.

“... I, uhhh… I was just…” Shining’s blush grew as red as it could possibly be, and he shuddered a little before reminding Sombra, “I… I didn’t expect you to tell me all of that for… f-for *free*, that’s all…”

Sombra didn’t say anything for a couple seconds, and just stared back at Shining with a wide and gracious smile. “Oh, is *that* the case?~”

Sombra leaned forward in his seat, just enough to catch a brief gaze of the bag of bits beside the Prince's chair. "Hmmmm… So, are you telling me that *allllllll* that money was meant for **me**?~"

He hung his head guiltily, and tried to avert his eyes from Sombra's lecherous smile. He shivered a little while rubbing one of his shoulders with his hoof. *"I-I, uhhh… I… I sorta expected that you, uhhh… t-that you would…"*

"That I would *what*, Shining Armor?"

Shining's head jerked back up to stare back at Sombra wide-eyed. The Prince was too flustered to speak, and his muzzle was left slightly agape for a few seconds. *"... uhhhhhh… I… I…"*

Sombra wasn't hiding behind a kind and courteous demeanor anymore. Instead, he was grinning maliciously back at the stallion squirming in his seat. **"You *what*? Are you saying that you expected me to extort you for even *more* money, and possibly insult you in the process to leave you feeling emasculated by the time you leave?~"**

Shining's eyes were bulging out like a couple of saucers, and his pupils shrank with a look of realization. Unfortunately, it was hard to see much of his fearful expression while his face was as red as a beet. He may have come to the conclusion of Sombra's plans, but by that point, the stallion was left frozen in place and unable to counteract. Not to mention, his heart was racing in his chest and causing his hind-legs to cross even tighter.

“Hmph~” Sombra didn’t need to hear Shining’s answer, since he already knew before even asking his question. “You know, I had a feeling you would react this way. That’s why I decided to **not** mention any payment this time around, and freely cooperate with your requests to see how you would react. Part of me was curious if you would have enough backbone to actually *accept* my statements without compensation, and prove your worth to myself and your Alicorn superiors upstairs…”

He then leaned in closer to Shining’s stunned, awe-stricken face while grinning more deviously. “But instead… even though you have that bag full of your hard-earned bits right beside you, which you could have *easily* kept to yourself without any interference, you decided to bring up our ‘financial arrangements’ anyway. **After** I told you everything you wanted to hear, but weren’t paying attention to~”

Shining Armor felt like he was just as trapped in his seat as the imprisoned stallion across from him. He wanted to open his muzzle and say something… *anything* in defense to Sombra’s twisted claims. But despite how badly he wanted to speak up in defense, he remained frozen with intimidation while staring back at Sombra’s fanged smile.

“So in conclusion, *‘Prince’* Shining Armor,” he said with a distinct inflection in that title, which was accompanied with a couple quotation gestures with his chained hooves. “I think we *both* know why you **really** wanted to come down here and see me again. And it wasn’t to appease your wife or any of the other Princesses…”

Since Shining was left petrified in his seat, Sombra was able to lean in even more and speak without any defense on the Prince's end. **"... You just wanted to appease *me*, didn't you?~"**

"N-NO!!!" Shining startled himself with how suddenly that came out of his muzzle. He may have still been stuck in his seat, but he was able to move the slightest bit and lift his hooves insistently. "S-S-Sombra, that's… that's not what I meant!"

"Then why weren't you able to focus on what I had to say when I showed you *respect*?~"

"I-I'm sorry! I just… I didn't know what to expect, that's all!!"

"So you weren't *expecting* me to show you respect, 'Prince' Shining?~"

"W-Well, I… Not really, no…" Shining huffed and averted his eyes after that response. Unfortunately, Sombra kept going without pause.

"And you weren't expecting me to acknowledge your presence for *free* either?"

"N-No! Clearly not!" Shining crossed his forelegs while trying to hide his blush.

"So, you were expecting me to just berate and insult you today?"

Shining's head lowered faintly. *"Y... Y-Yes..."*

“And you also expected me to acknowledge payment as soon as you entered the room?”

“Y-Yes!”

“So you’re saying that you **want** me to take your money and treat you like a little bitch?~”

“YES!!”

Shining gasped and threw his hooves over his muzzle, but that answer still escaped his mouth quickly enough to make Sombra grin from ear to ear. The Prince was left in a shocked, mortified state that left his face a deathly shade of pale. His eyes remained unblinking while staring back at the Ex-King’s maniacal grin in terror. Unfortunately, even though he still had all his magic intact, he felt absolutely helpless across from the chained and de-horned stallion.

“... w… w-wait, I… I didn’t… I d-didn’t mean it like--”

“SILENCE~”

Sombra’s loud, boisterous tone was more than enough to make Shining Armor’s body lock up in a panic. As the Prince wilted in his seat with his blush returning, Sombra narrowed his eyes on him and kept a smug grin. “*Hmmmm*... I must say, this is **quite** an exciting discovery…”

Even while chained to his chair, Sombra's imposing stare and intimidating presence kept Shining writhing in place. His muzzle was still open, but all Sombra could hear were the weak, shaky exhales that escaped his parted lips. Sombra leaned back in his seat, and continued to stare Shining down like an apex predator eyeing its wounded prey. "You know what?" he began with a smug and overly confident tone, "perhaps you're right, Shining. Maybe you *didn't* mean to imply that you're a **spineless… *pathetic* little weakling that wanted to give your bits to a *real* stallion…"**

Sombra could see the faint twitches Shining made with every inflected word meant to demean him. The Prince couldn't even say anything, as he closed his muzzle to gulp audibly. Sombra could've pointed out that Shining could just leave the room right then and there, and take that huge bag of bits to return to his own bank account. Of course, unlike the blushing stallion who was seemingly glued to his seat, Sombra knew better than to point out the obvious.

"How about this?" Sombra's blood-red eyes glanced down at Shining's bare torso, and the edge of the table that was obstructing the rest of his body from view. "If you *really* want to say that you **don't** want to be my personal little *piggy bank*, and that you **don't** want to give me your hard-earned bits whenever I demand it… **perhaps you should *prove it*~"**

Shining was looking more fearful by the second, despite how badly his blush was trying to mask it. He wasn't sure what Sombra was wanting him to do, but his eyes slowly drifted downward when he saw where the King's lecherous gaze was pointing towards. *"Wh… W-What do you mean?"* he muttered feebly.

“Get up from that chair and stand on your hind-legs.”

The Prince struggled not to gasp upon hearing that demand. “W-What?!”

“YOU HEARD ME.”

Sombra kept his grin as wide and as evil as could be, staring Shining down with that inescapable gleam in his bloodthirsty gaze. Even though Shining was already quivering in his seat, Sombra made sure he continued to squirm when he spoke with authority.

“If you stand up *right now*, and show me that you’re **not** erect from the idea of being my personal cash cow, I’ll gladly accept that as proof that you wish to end things right now. **However…”**

Beads of sweat began to appear across Shining’s forehead, and his pupils shrunk even more with looming dread.

“... if you stand up, and I see that you’re *rock-hard*, I’ll take that not only as *unmitigated proof*, but *explicit permission* for me to extort as much from you as I possibly can~”

Shining Armor’s muzzle tightened badly enough for his lips to be pursed together. He felt like he was about to go under cardiac arrest from how badly his heart was thundering in his chest. His

entire body was blushing a heavy shade of red, to the point that it looked like most of his bloodflow had redirected towards his once-white fur. But alas, Shining seemed just as aware as the stallion across from him that it wasn't enough to keep the bloodflow away from his squirming legs.

"Now then!" Sombra leaned back with a cocky grin, and waited for his plaything 'Prince" to comply with his command. **"Shining Armor, get out of that chair and stand on your hind-legs. *Right. NOW~"***

To say that Shining was too mortified to comply would've been a massive understatement. His hooves were twitching badly beneath the table, and seemed unwilling to pull apart. His entire body was shivering with immense worry, which matched the rapid beats of his fluttering heart. He felt like he had just stuck his head in an *oven* from how badly his face was burning with intimidation…

But worst of all, it seemed that Sombra's insistent tone was chilling enough to make him instinctively grab the edge of the table to pull himself up.

"Nnnnnnghhhh…" Shining clenched his eyes shut with a flustered whimper, and felt his knees buckling the moment he brought down weight on them. He lifted himself up from his chair as slowly as he could, as if that would be enough to grow flaccid before Sombra could see what was between his legs. Just as his waist was about to come into view, Shining groaned and tried his

best to cup his hooves over his crotch. Of course, even as he stood bipedally in front of Sombra's waiting grin, his pathetic stance was obvious enough to indicate what he was struggling to hide.

"Pull your hooves away."

Shining's eyes clenched even tighter, and he shook his head meagerly like a fussy toddler. *"Nnnghh…"*

"Either you show me how hard you are…" Sombra stared up at the blushing stallion with his confident smile unchanged. ***"... or you admit what you want from me~"***

One of Shining's eyes reopened the tiniest bit, and he stared back at Sombra timidly. *"... a… a-admit what?"*

"Admit that you're nothing more than a worthless little bitch who wants me to drain him financially~"

His eyes closed tightly once more, and he shuddered without being able to shake his head. *"... I… I-I can't…"*

***"Ohhhhhh,* yes you can~"**

Sombra wasn't too worried about Shining getting soft while he stood with his clearly-erect cock behind his hooves. But since he couldn't exactly get out of his seat to pull the Prince's hooves away himself, he had to resort to another round of questioning.

"Tell me, *'Prince'* Shining Armor… Did you intend to give me all those bits on the floor?~"

"... uuhhhhh..." His head hung low in shame, and his only resistance was a brief sigh. *"... m... m-maybe..."*

"Yes or no, Shining: *Did you intend to give me all that money?"*

"... y-yes..."

"Good... And were you expecting me to taunt you for being a little bitch so willing to be extorted be me?~"

Shining hated that he was being grilled by the stallion he was meant to interrogate. But alas, that question prompted him to reluctantly say with honesty, *"... y... yeah..."*

"And if I did those things to you, would you *still* have planned to have **more** money for me the next time we met?"

"... m... m-most likely, yeah..."

"... Did you *truly* believe that I would stop asking for more money from you **every single time?"**

"... n… n-n-no… no I didn't…" He had no idea what was coming over him, but Shining could feel his hooves loosening up a little as he heard those answers out-loud.

"But you would've kept paying me regardless, wouldn't you?~"

"... I… I-I think so…"

"Even if you couldn't *afford* it?~"

Shining let out a sharp huff, and shuddered a little while hanging his head away from that fanged smile. *"... uhhhhh… p… p-possibly…"*

"So tell me then… **Do you want me to *stop*?~"**

That last question prompted Shining to reopen his eyes, and stare sheepishly back at the stallion smiling so eagerly. Sombra's eyes were pinned to the Prince's fidgeting hooves, which were struggling to remain clasped over his crotch. Shining gulped worriedly, but he couldn't think of escaping the room while in Sombra's presence. The King's eyes slowly drifted back up at Shining's face, before he asked with a raised brow, ***"... well?~"***

Shining winced painfully, but remained standing on his hind-legs for what felt like an eternity. But in actuality, he was only frozen for another second or two before he closed his eyes. With a long, defeated sigh that escaped his shamefully pouted muzzle, Shining Armor pulled his forelegs away to reveal his thick, throbbing erection that stood triumphantly.

"... n… n-no I don't…"

The ebony stallionhood was pointed right at Sombra's elated grin, with the flared cockhead seeping a thick glob of precum at the very tip. Sombra let out a low and sinister chuckle, which made Shining quiver on his rear hooves with his knees buckling. But before he could think to stand back on all fours, his ears twitched when he heard Sombra's domineering voice.

"Now then… from now on, there's going to be some *big* changes. Do you understand, Shining?~"

With a hoarse and painful exhale, Shining finally dropped back down to a quadripedic stance. His head was hung low in blushing shame, but he wasn't able to ignore the meaty slaps of his cock against the underside of his barrel. *"... y… y-yes, Sombra."*

"Yes, *Sir*."

Shining feebly pulled his head up, and saw the insistent glare that Sombra was shooting him.

"Say it!"

Shining sighed softly, and nodded his head in compliance. “Y… Yes, *Sir*.”

“That’s better.” Sombra smiled at him more naturally, and admired his defeated state while chained to his seat. “Now, tell me how much money is in that bag~”

Shining closed his eyes to take a breath, and then confessed truthfully, *“T... Two thousand bits…”*

“A’hem!”

“T-Two thousand bits, *Sir*!”

“Ooh, that’s a **lot** more than last time…” Sombra grinned even wider while staring the shameful stallion down. **“Were you hoping I’d make you give me *all* of it?~”**

Shining wanted to clarify that he hoped to only give him fifteen hundred this time around. Unfortunately, as soon as that detail came to his head, he cringed internally from how easily he was able to justify that amount of money for a fiend like him. Not to mention, his cock was throbbing especially hard from such a question, which prompted him to give a solemn nod. *“I... I think I was… Oh goddess…”*

Shining exhaled sharply with a look of disgust, but his eyes remained closed to avoid Sombra's malicious smile. "Well, today is your lucky day. **Because you're putting *ALL* of it in my account as soon as you leave this room~"**

"*Nnnffff...*" Shining groaned with his bottom lip bitten, and felt a thick glob of precum shoot out of his cock and splatter on the floor. After quivering with a deep, shuddering breath, all he could do was nod his head like a little bitch. *"Y... Yes, Sir..."*

"In addition," continued Sombra as he sat in his chair like it was his old Throne, "I'm expecting you to come back here ***tomorrow***. Is that clear?~"

"Nnnnghhhh..." Shining trembled even harder, and struggled not to shoot his load while his cock remained untouched. The idea of coming back so soon felt unbelievably risky, especially since he just gave Sombra two thousand of his own bits like it was nothing. However, the little cash-cow merely nodded a second time to Sombra's command. *"... y-yes, Sir..."*

"And before you leave this room…"

Shining whimpered as he stared back at Sombra, who was grinning smugly in his restraints. Even though he had no actual power over Shining Armor, he motioned his head downward and said, **"If you want me to absolutely *drain* you, I expect you to bow at my hooves~"**

Shining had no idea what came over him, but he let out a brief moan before rushing around the table. Since he already admitted to wanting to submit to Sombra financially, there was no reason for him to hold back now. Shining couldn't have been more grateful for the room not having any surveillance, as he was able to willingly lower his head and bow at Sombra's chained hooves.

"BEG~"

Shining winced as he took a deep breath, before allowing himself to fully give in. "P… P-Please! Please, Sir!"

"Please, *what*?~"

The "Prince" let out a shaky exhale, and he spurted even more precum across the floor. "P… P-Please drain me, Sir! I… I'm begging you to t… *t-take even more!!~"*

"How much more?~"

"Nnnnfffff!!! I… I-I don't care!! N… *Name your price!!~"*

Shining had no idea how he was able to submit so eagerly for this fiend, especially when it was guaranteeing him financial ruin. But alas, he wasn't able to stop himself when he heard Sombra's booming voice. "Well then… **No matter what number I say, I expect you to say *'Higher'~*"**

"Nnnnfffffff!!!~ Y… Y-Yes, Sir!!"

The cash-cow's eagerness made Sombra smile like a spoiled kid in a toy shop. "**Good…** Now, since you already paid me *two thousand*, how does… *two thousand five hundred* sound for tomorrow?~"

Shining shuddered from such a high amount being mentioned, but he felt compelled to cry out while bowing, "H… H-HIGHER!!"

"Oooohhhh… Maybe *three thousand* then?~"

"Nnnnghhh!! H… H-HIGHER!!~"

"Oh, how *generous* of you, Shining… Well, if you insist, **I'll ask for *four thousand* bits~"**

"*Nnnnffffff*..." Shining tried not to tear up at such a high number, since he was already reaching close to what was in his checking account. Less than a thousand more, and he would have to dip into other funds to sate Sombra's greed. However, he had more than enough in his savings to make him squirm when he cried out, *"H-HIGHER, **PLEASE**!!"*

"Mmmmmmmm… That's what I like to hear~" Sombra took a deep breath, and stared down at Shining's prone form like he was one of his personal slaves. Of course, considering what he got

him to admit about himself, Shining Armor basically was by that point. “If that’s what you wish… **Stand back up~”**

Shining took a heavy breath, before slowly lifting himself back up. His expression was unbelievably fearful and timid, like a newbie recruit who just joined the Cadet Guards with zero experience. He looked nothing like the triumphant Prince who was highly respected outside the castle. Instead, all that Sombra saw was his own personal piggy bank he was eager to bleed absolutely dry.

“You don’t have to say *‘higher’* anymore, Shining Armor… Come this time tomorrow, you’ll be here with **five thousand bits** in that bag over there. After that payment, I’m ordering you to plead to the Princesses to let me out and roam the castle freely. **Do. You. *Understand*?~”**

Shining took a moment to close his eyes, and sighed before nodding to his money-pit. “Y-Yes, Sir… *F… F-Five thousand it is…”*

Shining then lit up his horn, and floated up the massive bag of bits before trotting towards the door. He shuddered at the idea of withdrawing so much cash at once, which would undoubtedly raise some alarm bells at the bank. But at the same time, his cock remained unbelievably hard as he went to turn the knob. Just as he opened the door, he froze when he heard Sombra say, “Oh, and Shining…”

The Prince looked back at his grinning King, who stared him down and proclaimed, “Who’s my little cash-cow?~”

Shining shivered with a deep blush, and felt himself nearly jizz on the spot when he said in response, “... *Mooooo*?~”

“Good boy…” Sombra narrowed his eyes on him and said with a sadistic hiss, ***“Now it’s six thousand~”***

“*NNNNFFFFFF*!!!” Shining clenched his eyes shut, and his cock erupted to shoot several strings of his thick, sticky load all over the floor. The stallion moaned out uncontrollably, with his voice echoing down both ends of the empty hallway. He was fortunate that nopony except Sombra heard him cumming from such a drastic price increase. But even after spending a good thirty seconds shooting all over the floor, which left him a quivering wreck with Sombra’s money nearly falling from his aura, Shining was able to breathe out tiredly before smiling back at his new Money-Dom.

“Th… T-Thank you, Sir~”

With that, the newly-realized Fin-Sub closed the door behind him, and shivered fearfully as he trotted down the hall with his giant bag of bits jungling with every step…