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## *XIV – Homecoming*

Opening his eyes hurt. Breathing hurt. Knowing what he had gone through hurt.

Everything, in fact, hurt.

Joe still opened his eyes and looked up at the sky. It was blue. A few wispy clouds drifted past overhead, and for a brief while, he just lay there and looked at them. Was it worth it to get back up? Was it worth the effort? Joe wasn't sure.

He thought of his wife, and that settled it for him. Getting up was worth it. If not for himself, then for his family. It was always worth getting back up ... for them.

It reminded him of something he had first come to realize many years ago. That he had then found comfort and solace in knowing that for all his own flaws ... and he knew he had many ... he didn't fight for himself. He fought for his children to have a chance to become better furs than he was, and that in itself was always worth the hardest struggle.

He coughed, clearing his airway of some remaining ash stuck in his throat. He was laying on a green hillside. In front of him, he could see an ocean. It was a beautiful, clear blue ... and he realized that the weather, while not exactly warm, wasn't bone-chillingly cold either.

That didn't tell him where he was, though. Some sort of recognizable landmark would be helpful.

A road-sign for instance. Or a map of the local area, with a red dot saying "You are here" in three or four different languages.

At least he wasn't amongst ash dunes any more, and somehow, the coyote was certain he was back in the "real world", so to say.

It was tempting to find his way home. To Annie ...

But first, he needed to get a hold of Aslaug to make sure she was alright. Searching his pockets for his cellphone was a disappointment though. He did have it ... in about eight pieces. Apparently, he'd landed on it. The equine didn't carry a cellphone anyway, but he could have called Annie to ask her if she'd heard from Aslaug, and he at least wanted to tell her he was okay.

So now the quest had changed from finding meaning in faith to finding a telephone.

Joe grumbled something about the wrongness of that mental image and began plodding down towards the beach. If he followed that in either direction, he was bound to find someone who could tell him where he was.

###

"This is a lot more like it!"

Aslaug was clearly back to being comfortable, wearing a pair of blue jeans, a strong leather belt, a black tank-top and a nineteen nineties-style, red-and-black chequered flannel shirt, worn unbuttoned and un-tucked, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

Lee was sitting on the sofa, his ego clearly still wounded after his first meeting with Varghöss.

"Crop your mane to a buzz and you'd fit in perfectly at a certain kind of bar," he muttered, sourly.

Aslaug chuckled. "Strangely enough, you're not the first fur to say that."

"So? Is there any truth to it?" the Japanese wolf asked, only to find himself smacked across the back of his head by his partner.

"That's none of your damned business, Lee!" Miho snapped, clearly offended on Aslaug's behalf.

The equine shrugged it off and ignored the wolf, moving her arms to see how well she'd be able to move in the shirt, or if she should take it off and go without it. To her satisfaction, she could move freely. "Thanks Miho. I appreciate you getting this for me."

"Don't mention it. Anyway, I think it's time we shared some information. Who knows if we can't help each other out some," the tigress said and sat down in one of the deep chairs.

Aslaug headed into the kitchen and got herself a beer from the fridge, before coming back to the living room, opening the can. "Generally speaking, I'm against involving too many outsiders in what I'm doing but I suppose we all need help. Plus I owe you for getting me out of that awful outfit."

"High fashion amongst teenagers. It seems that the nineties and double-Os are coming back with a vengeance," Miho chuckled. "As long as it's not the seventies, I'm fine with it. But to cut to the chase, Lee and I are working on a case with some ... unpleasant ramifications."

"You can say that again," Lee mumbled, still rubbing the back of his head.

Aslaug nodded. "Go on," she said and sipped the beer, only for her face to scrunch up in disbelief. "This is supposed to be beer?? It tastes even worse than the thin piss Americans drink!"

She glared at the can for a while, as if willing it to become something else and more tasty.

Miho smirked but ignored the outburst. "Yes. Unpleasant. I'll probably have to kill my sister. She's fallen in with ... let's just say the *wrong crowd*. Just about the worst there is, in fact. That's my business, though ... but Lee and I were spying on her and the group of Malefic Agents she runs with, to see if we couldn't learn something interesting and useful. We're not enough to attack them and kill them outright, however much I want to. But we heard some things that really unsettled us both."

"Such as?" Aslaug asked, trying another sip to see if she could get used to it. Not surprisingly, it was just as awful on the second taste. "I remember you said something about a Christian Angel or something along those lines."

Lee nodded sourly. "Someone called Anane, apparently."

Aslaug stiffened. "You're sure of that name?"

Miho nodded. "Positive. They mentioned it several times. They were talking about how the death of two of their agents ... Italians from the sound of it ... had brought him forth. Apparently, it was part of some great plan. They sacrificed two of their own to get this Anane-character to appear."

The Valkyrie felt a chill run down her spine at the implications. "Damned it ..."

"Sounds like you know this Anane?" Lee said, raising an eyebrow. "What's he like?"

"He orchestrated the slaughter of the population of an entire village in another world, just to prove that he could make an Angel fall from grace and he had a jolly good time doing so!" Aslaug answered. "And what's worse ... *I* killed those two Italian agents."

Miho's eyes went wide. "YOU did???"

"She had no way of knowing, Miho. How would she know that they were sacrifices?" Lee asked and got to his feet. "What's done is done. What matters now is how to stop this creature."

Slowly, the tigress nodded. "You're right, of course. If we saw a Malefic Agent, we'd be only too keen to expedite him into the afterlife as well. I apologize," she said, turning to Aslaug. "But Lee is right. We have to stop Anane somehow."

Aslaug rubbed her face in a moment of exhaustion. "I agree, but I don't know where he is. I do know he's going to make his presence felt, though."

"You say he's kill-crazy?" Lee asked, looking thoughtful.

The Valkyrie nodded. "Oh yes. And he doesn't look like your average fur. He looks ... human ... with wings. How much have you been told about how the Gods work?"

"We know enough to know that we're probably the only two kami-no-michi Agents in this world," Miho said, slightly reproachfully. "That's Shinto in everyday terms, before you ask. And what's a hyu-man?"

Aslaug nodded. "You know about the division of labour between divine entities then," she said. "But something has changed. Something ... drastic. I just ... I need a moment to figure out how to best explain it? And a human ... well ... a furless primate. Quite amazingly ugly creatures. Trust me, you'll recognize it when you see it."

"Alright, no problem," Miho said and nodded. "Anyway, take your time to think it over, and in the meantime, I'll take Lee here and we'll go buy something to eat for all of us."

We should probably relocate after that, but you can tell us what you know over a good meal, at least."

"Sounds okay," Aslaug agreed. "You might want to get a couple of newspapers too while you're out. I can't read them but you can tell me what the headlines say. We've got to start tracking down Anane right away."

The two agents nodded, and left to get some shopping done.

Aslaug sat down. How was she ever going to explain the horrible truth to these two?

###

"Lord Anane, what would you have us do?" the old male asked. He was a grizzled looking leopard, with enough scars on his face and neck to make him look more like a two-year-old's drawing than a real leopard.

Anane looked the collection of creatures over. They were an interesting bunch ... made up of many different types of intelligent animals, and all were Malefic Agents.

He didn't need them. He didn't need any help at all, but why not use them now that they offered their services anyway? It would make things a little more interesting, and certainly a lot more deadly.

"First," he said, "I'd have you explain why you've started a bombing campaign. On whose authority and why?"

"I've done so on Surt's authority, Lord. To sow fear and confusion," the leopard answered.

"Very well," Anane said and nodded, thoughtfully. He could use the bombing campaign, actually. It would serve him well if he played his cards right.

If he kept attacking areas that the world expected to be bloody warzones or rife with natural disaster, he would sow fear of the endtimes in every religious fur in the world ... while only Agents of various divine powers would ever see the real connection. And if the bombing campaign went on simultaneously, attention would quickly switch from tens or even hundreds of thousands of dead in these perceived "disaster-zones" to a few dozen or maybe a hundred or so dead sports-celebrities, movie-stars or the likes.

Once more, the hypocrisy of it all nearly nauseated Anane, and he nodded, once more after his brief interlude.

"Then I want you to attack with all your might and all your hatred. If you all die, at least you die for the cause, but I expect and demand that you keep attacking until the last one of you is dead!" he said.

The leopard nodded. "As you command. Any targets of preference?"

"Yes. High profile ones. I don't care if you kill a thousand nobodies. I can do that in a few moments of work. I want you to kill those who are famous and idolized. Heroes of the masses. Sports-events, movie-premieres ... popular, moderate politicians urging *tolerance* and *acceptance*," Anane answered, practically sneering at the end. "If you can start a war or two, all the better."

"India and Pakistan," one of the creatures sitting in the room said and nodded. "That's never difficult."

"North and South Korea. Harder, but it'd pull the United States into it," another one said.

"Both worthy suggestions," Anane admitted. Maybe these creatures actually had half a brain to share between them after all.

"Israel and Syria," a third voice added. "If the United States is already fully involved in Korea ... and if they go in there, they'll have to go in with everything they've got ... the Arab nations won't be intimidated by American guns. If the Syrians start shooting, Iran, Saudi-Arabia and most of the other Arab nations will join in."

"Oooh a religious war amongst those worshipping the same God. I like it already," Anane chuckled. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves. First and foremost, I want famous ... creatures or whatever it is you call yourselves, to die. Everywhere. Not just in Europe or America. Everywhere."

The leopard nodded. "It will be as you command, Lord," he said and bowed, respectfully, then left with his group.

None of them would carry out any kind of attacks themselves. They'd get zealots to do it. Religious lunatics, certain of a place in whatever passed for Heaven in their twisted imaginations. Some were Christian, some Muslim ... there had even been a leader of a Jewish group in the room. The point, of course, were that they were all agents of the Malefic Council, while their followers thought they were doing God's work in the most rabid, insanely destructive ways.

Anane was left alone in the room. He smiled and leaned back in his chair, getting comfortable. It was really rather amusing, if he thought about it. The Malefic Council specifically cooperated freely, understanding that it made them far stronger to pool their resources, since they controlled no worlds or universes worth mentioning. Conversely, the many different gods and goddesses tolerated one another and cooperated mostly out of necessity, jealously guarding their territory.

Was it any wonder that the followers of the Gods always ended up at each others' throats? When even their deities couldn't get along, while sanctimoniously preaching peace, love and understanding, how could their followers be expected not to kill one another in great numbers?

Well, Anane was quite happy to help them.

In fact, he considered it his civic duty.

###

"Hello. Hey ... HEY! OVER HERE!" Joe called out, waving his arms around.

A feline with a fishing rod half-turned and saw him. He was the older of two, and Joe guessed they were father and son. At least the younger one was the spitting image of the older ... same markings and all.

"Hello?" the older one said. "What's wrong, sir?"

The accent was off. Joe realized immediately he wasn't back in the United States. "Ahh ... you're English," he said and smiled. At least he was in a place where furs would understand what he said.

The older of the two felines chuckled warmly. "Why yes, I do think we are, Sir ... but since we are in England, that's hardly a surprise, is it?"

"England ... thank goodness," Joe mumbled and nodded. "Thank you very much. I needed to know where I was."

The feline looked momentarily confused. Joe leaned forward and supported his paws on his knees, grateful that he had landed somewhere like this, instead of in the middle of Siberia or on some tiny atoll in the Pacific where only sea-turtles and palm trees would've kept him company.

"George, run and get the telephone. Call your mother and tell her we may be back a little later, alright? If she asks why, tell her we've got to help this chap. He seems a bit befuddled," the older feline said.

The younger one reeled in his fishing-line and nodded, putting his rod down on the beach. "Yes father," he answered and smiled, running up towards a parked car.

"Sir, are you quite alright?" George's father asked, reaching out to put a supporting paw on Joe's shoulder. "I mean, how could you not know where you are?"

Joe stood back up straight. "If I told you, I guarantee you wouldn't believe me. Sometimes, I don't even believe it myself," he said and shook his head in a moment of exhausted disbelief at his own situation. "I can't tell you how happy I am to be here though."

The feline chuckled. "Oh, I can see why, sir. I tend to think this is the nicest place on God's green Earth. Anyway, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Neville Buxomly, and I'm the vicar of Langton-by-Wragby. It's not far from Lincoln ... as in Lincolnshire. And you, sir, I believe ... are American."

"I am. Name's Joe ... Joe Latrans. And while I honestly didn't think I'd be happy to see a fur of God anytime soon ... Vicar, you're most definitely a welcome sight!" the coyote said, relief practically pouring out of him. "I've lost a friend, you see ..."

"Oh, I'm most dreadfully sorry to hear that," Neville said, looking honestly crestfallen. "May I ask how it happened? Disease or maybe old age?"

Joe shook his head. "No no, she's not dead. I lost her. I don't know where to find her but I have to get in contact with her. For all I know, she's on the other side of the world, but it's absolutely imperative that I get in touch with her, and at least ... at least I'm not standing in the middle of Siberia with a broken cellphone," he said, pulling the sorry remains of his cell out of his pocket to show to the feline.

Neville Buxomly had seen a number of strange things in his life, and he had experienced as many unexplained phenomenon as any fur out there, but he had to admit, that standing on this beach, the canid in front of him probably claimed the prize as the weirdest experience he had had yet. But at the same time, something told him this Joe Latrans wasn't some lunatic. He was coherent and there was no madness in his eyes.

"Maybe we should get you in contact with the constabulary, Mr. Latrans? I mean, not that you've done anything wrong but apparently, wrong has been done *to* you. The local



police-officers up in Wragby are jolly good furs, I assure you," he offered. "But first of all, you look like you could use a good, solid meal, a fresh change of clothes and some sleep!"

Joe nodded, slowly. He couldn't tell the police the truth of course, but he did at least need some food, some fresh clothes and yes ... even some sleep. And maybe the cops could help him find out where Aslaug was. If she was in some other country, they were probably his best bet.

"I think that sounds like a very good plan," he said and smiled. "This is very decent of you ..."

"Oh, it's nothing any good Christian wouldn't do for someone in need, I'm sure," Neville answered. "Come on, the car is up here."

Joe pondered whether he should tell the vicar about the gun, but he figured there would be better times to do that. For the moment, he simply followed the feline towards the car.

###

The food was spectacular to say the least, and Aslaug found herself thoroughly surprised at it. She'd never been one for Japanese food in the past, always thinking it looked rather strange and besides, the idea of eating raw fish didn't appeal to her. But since she was in Yokohama, and since the two local Agents had been kind enough to buy and prepare this meal, she had resolved to eat everything placed before her and at least give the impression of enjoying it.

What surprised her most was that she actually *did* enjoy it. She even liked the rice-wine. It was proper alcohol, as opposed to the dreadful beer she had earlier. Lee had warned her that it might go to her head, though, and she wasn't swilling the stuff as a result. She had much to explain, after all.

Taking some rice and rolling it inexpertly in the parchment-thin piece of seaweed, like she had seen Miho and Lee do it, she concentrated so hard her tongue stuck out the side of her mouth and she frowned deeply. It wasn't halfway as easy as it looked, but at least she'd do her best. Fortunately, it seemed that it was alright to eat most of the stuff with her fingers.

Miho chuckled and reached over, helping the equine get the rice rolled up so that most of it stuck in the seaweed. "There. It takes practice, don't worry. I'm amazed you're trying it all!"

"It'd be rude not to. I could get used to this, though! This is really good. Who'd have thought one could eat seaweed of all things?"

"Not all seaweed, obviously," Lee said with a smile, popping a piece of raw salmon into his mouth and chewing happily. "Anyway ... did you figure out how to explain what has happened?"

"I think so," Aslaug said and ate her rice-and-seaweed roll with every sign of enjoying it evident on her face. "You see, before coming here, I was ... at a trial. My partner Joe and I had some pressing matters to present, and we didn't have time for all the red tape. So I had him shoot me while I cut his arm."

"Oooh, risky," Miho chuckled. "The Christian God doesn't take kindly to that kind of thing."

"That's putting it mildly," Aslaug admitted. "But we had no choice and we were let off. However, it was a really ugly affair. Joe's been Christian all of his life but ... well ... he's lost faith in Christianity. And he said so ... right to Whitechrist's face."

Miho frowned. "Whitechrist? I take it you mean Jesus the Nazarene? And as for your friend, is he going over to the other side, then?"

"Absolutely not! He's pissed off, however, that he's not being left alone. He's got a family and he's done more than his share. He wants to be left alone to live out his life in peace, and he's very disillusioned with the Christian God. He reads the bible and finds this perfect being, incapable of making any kind of mistake, described in those pages, and then he looks up and out of his window and sees this utterly messed up world he's living in and it doesn't add up," Aslaug explained, shrugging. "Frankly I can't say I blame him or even that I disagree with him."

Lee shook his head. "Me neither," he said. "You said something major had changed though?"

"This is a world controlled by the Abrahamic God, right? We agree on that, I take it?" Aslaug asked.

Miho nodded, once more looking rather dejected. "Yes. We agree. I just don't have to like it."

Lee jumped in. "What Miho is talking about is the unfairness of the system. I mean, everyone who works in this system can see that there are millions, even billions of furs who pray to something apart from the Abrahamic deity. Look at the Hindus. Over a

billion of them in the world, and no one listens. They die ... but they don't go anywhere because their gods don't control this world and only a select few souls ... typically Agents or a fraction or a percent or so are allowed to pass into the care of their deities. And it's the same in every other world, too. Only the souls of those belonging to the "right" faith are taken care of."

Aslaug nodded. "I can feel how long you two have left to live. I'm sitting here, right now, in front of you, and I can watch your lives pass before me."

Miho blinked. "But ... that's not possible. You're not an Angel."

"I should bloody well hope not. Stupid birds that they are. Utterly useless in my experience. Tore a wing off one once and used the wet end to beat him with. Cut the wings off another before taking his head off his shoulders another time."

Lee looked at his comrade-in-arms, then back to Aslaug. "And the Abrahamic God didn't ... smite you or anything?"

"Look, he doesn't really care about the Angels. They're glorified messengers and errand-boys, nothing more. They have no soul ... he can always make more of them. They're just drones ... toys to be used and thrown away when broken," Aslaug said. "But for those who abandoned their father and gained free will in the process, of course. Anyway, the one I killed had gone bad. It's like with eggs, y'know. Once they go bad, they're totally useless. All you can do if you break them is endure the stench and wash them out with the rest of the trash."

Miho nearly choked on her food. "Oh my ..." she mumbled.

Lee stared straight ahead at the equine, like he'd forgotten how to blink. Aslaug, for her part, didn't seem to notice as she ate with a healthy appetite.

"Erhm ... but the point is," Miho tried, "That if you can see our lives pass you by, you can collect souls here."

"Yup."

"You know what that means?"

"Yup."

"Amaterasu ..." Lee breathed, still not blinking, "We've got to get to the nearest shrine, Miho. We've *got* to! Imagine what Yasukuni must ... must feel like ...?"

Aslaug smirked crookedly. "I think you'll find it a remarkably empty place by now." she said and bit down on a piece of haddock, making a surprised sound as she realized how nice it tasted.

"But if all the souls ... of all the faiths ... but that means ...?" Miho tried and swallowed. "It means that everyone can finally go home when they die?"

Aslaug nodded, finishing the haddock. "It does. I don't know exactly how long you two have left to live. The future is fluent. But once death becomes inevitable, I can tell. When I reappeared in this world, I stood on a ski-jumping tower, and everyone around me was about to die except the one fur who was about to jump. He barely made it clear of the tower. I was there to pick up a young heathen."

"I saw something about that on the news," Lee said and shook his head sadly. "A lot of innocents died that day. They did mention an equine but she was supposed to have been black."

"Bleach," Aslaug said and shrugged. "And regardless of what the news said, I didn't blow that tower up. The bombs were there before I arrived. I was there to gather the soul of one of the athletes. I don't even know who was behind the attack."

Miho nodded and leaned back in her seat, finishing her rice-wine. She stayed quiet for a while, observing her partner having forgotten his food and only slowly remembering how to use his eyelids, and the equine, eating as if everything was as it should be.

But wasn't that just the thing? Everything finally was as it should be? No more lingering souls. No more monopoly on salvation by any one deity anywhere in any reality?

She agreed with Lee, though. Her next stop would be a shrine.

###

Anane stood above another population center. Down below, no one knew he was there. They wouldn't see him until it was much too late, either. But he hadn't attacked yet. He'd wait ... wait for the first reports to come in from the bombings he had set in motion. And then he'd still wait. A little longer ... just a little, while the attention of the world was drawn to that. And then he would attack. Only then.

He had time to think. There were no Angels, sent by God to stop him. As always, God showed little or no interest in the world, and Anane was quite satisfied with this.

Arrogant and pompous, Heaven no doubt expected its Agents to take care of him, but something so simple wouldn't be able to stop him.

Another creature of his own stature might. A real warrior Angel could give him a fight, but they weren't there, nor would they be.

The fact that Father Malheiro's soul had simply vanished still concerned and annoyed him. But then again, if God had decided to finally show a spot of mercy on the old, failed saint then why should he care? It wasn't as if the priest had any further part to play. The book was lost, the souls were lost ... but that didn't mean his cause was lost. Anane could do things his own way, if he had to. Direct and brutally. Rather than playing softy-softy like Lucifer and the Malefic Council wanted, he would see the world burn and dance in the ashes with Surt before accepting he had lost.

There *was* no loss. There could *be* no loss.

Only a change of plans and *modus operandi*.

He was standing on a mountain-side, but he was not alone. With him, he had one of the local creatures.

Not one of his. One of God's.

Anane closed his left hand around the bleeding throat of his captive and squeezed just enough to make it truly agonizing. Then he released his grip ... slightly.

"You'll watch everything burn from here," he said, softly. "I won't let you die until you've witnessed it. Seen how powerless you were to stop it."

The fur ... a male canid in his early thirties ... clawed at Anane's hands to try to get free. To fight. It was like watching a baby flailing against a heavy weight boxing champion. Utterly pathetic.

"Now now, Señor Soto, what are you so upset about? You'll get a front seat view to the end of days. I thought that was what all you born-again-hypocrites longed for. Born again ... as if. You know, I could help you be born again. Force you back inside your aging mother's womb only to have you explode out of her belly. Would *that* satisfy your desire to be *born again*? Bah ... and they call *me* sick."

The canid looked horrified at the mental image, but Anane could smell the revulsion rather than see it, and he laughed. "Look at us. An Angel with no eyes, and a mentally crippled fool with a rapture-fetish," he chuckled. "Aren't *we* just the pathetic pair."

"God ... will ... " the canid managed to wheeze through the iron grip around his throat.

Anane closed his fingers a little tighter, and the extra joint made his razor-sharp fingernails scrape across the fur's Adam's apple in the most painful way.

"Shush. I didn't permit you to speak, Señor Soto. The rules are really very simple. Even a half-witted moron like yourself should be able to grasp them. If you do anything I disapprove of, such as speak up without the permission I shall most assuredly never grant you, I will have to *punish* you."

The fallen Angel made a gesture with his right hand towards a group of shadows, securely tied to each their stake. A couple of torches came on to light the scene. There were two older canids ... a female about the same age as the canid he was holding, and three younger ones, the youngest being a boy of maybe six or seven.

"Choose, Señor Soto. Who dies first?" Anane asked, in his most amiable voice. "Come, come now, it shouldn't be that hard. Just point. You make it quick, I make it quick. Simple, eh?"

The canid's eyes went wide with horror and he pointed to himself fervently, again and again, tapping his own chest. Anane closed his bleeding eyesockets and shook his head. "Oh no, that's no good. You can't choose yourself. Who would choose the next one then?" he asked and dropped the canid on the ground. Immediately, chains sprang from the ground and held the captive fur firmly in place.

Anane surveyed the line-up ... not visually, obviously, but by scent. He took his time, making sure to draw it out as long as possible, before it got boring. Then he nodded and turned to his captive.

"I've chosen for you, since you were incapable of doing so. Isn't that nice and helpful of me?" he asked, patting the canid's head as if the creature was nothing more than a household pet. With his other hand, he gestured towards the youngest child, who screamed in agony ...

The furs at the other stakes didn't say a word. Frozen in the moment, they seemed unaware of what was happening, but the chained, male canid screamed in horror, begging for Anane to stop.

The fallen Angel sighed and shook his head in disappointment as the youngest child slumped against the stake, bleeding ...

Dead ...

"You really are dim, Señor Soto ... I said you weren't allowed to speak without my permission. And I'm not going to GIVE you my permission. Now we have to try this again! Who dies this time? You choose ..." Anane said, making sure to sound very reproachful.

The canid tried desperately to move his paws, but bound as they were, he couldn't point to anyone. Not even himself, and Anane simply smiled.

"How fortunate that I'm here to make these choices for you when you are so unable," he said, as the next child in line ... a girl of probably no more than ten ... screamed in agony as gashes and wounds opened all over her tiny body. Moments later, she too slumped, amidst the horrified screams of her father.

"Ahh, you're finally getting the point, aren't you? You didn't speak. But you're still noisy. One more time, I'm sure you'll get it the third time. No sound, Señor Soto, and I won't have to punish you anymore," Anane said and once more patted the canid's head.

By now, his captive's mind had shattered. Anane could feel it under his fingertips. But he wasn't done yet. This provided a few moments of entertainment while he waited for the right time to blast the city below with an earthquake to dwarf the Great Kanto.

"I understand," he finally said, sympathetically. "You are unable to choose. There are still four suitable targets left. Why don't we ask them, then?"

Yes ... this would keep him entertained a little while yet.