



WARSTM

**SO SPAKE
~THE~
SPACE POPE**

BY JAMES WYLDER, ART BY CALUM BROWN

Part 1: The Pontiff and the Priest

Father Jonna was waiting for the Holy Mother to finish praying, and scolded himself for wishing she'd hurry up already. He didn't recognize her authority, he wouldn't recognize it. She was, after all, a government appointed stooge meant entirely to reduce the power of the Holy See. But he had to give her this: she was taking her job more seriously than the last guy.

After what seemed like forever, she rose to her feet, bowed her head and crossed herself, then turned around with a sweet smile.

"Father Jonna, I am so sorry to have kept you waiting. You have come so far just to see me," she was young, much younger looking in person than he would have guessed from being twenty-five. She could have passed as a teenager.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Lifen. Prayer is as essential as food, after all."

"But without food, one couldn't pray. Because you'd be dead." She giggled at his startled face, and the modicum of respect he'd managed to shore up drifted away, "Oh, forgive me, I'm teasing you. I am truly grateful you waited for me."

She held her hand out, ah, of course: kiss the ring. He did so, even as he felt he was debasing himself with the action.

"Of course, it is forgotten."

"Thank you, and could you do me the favor of calling me Flavia? I'm still getting used to being addressed by it."

Flavia. Ugh. The previous Holy *Father* had taken a new name as well, but he'd used it more out of obligation than anything else. Jonna and he had had many good nights together discussing theology, soccer, and wine. He supposed the wine had helped lead to his death, not that Holy Father Amorkuza had been a spring chicken.

"Of course, Holy Mother Flavia, the first. This is our first time meeting, so as the representative of the *true* church," he put a little extra emphasis on 'true', "I hope we can establish a beneficial relationship."

She smiled, "I hope for the same. And there are...definitely matters the two of us need to discuss," her eyes darted to the side as her voice trailed off. Curious. Unabashedly, she hooked him under the arm like he was her grandfather, "let's go for a walk in the garden. The Basilica is beautiful, but I prefer the works of God's hands."

She practically dragged him out of the building, as the security guards tried to toddle after them. But she had Jonna out the door, and had locked it, before they'd managed to catch up.

Out of view, she pulled her habit off, and scratched her scalp furiously, "You know, I never really wore hats before this, this is still an adjustment," she pulled the habit back on, and gave him a warm smile to his disapproving gaze.

The garden was, in fact, beautiful. It was a greenhouse attached to the side of the church, with lamps blazing down to keep the wide array of plants growing strong. Through it wound a carefully paved path that led to a dining area, sitting spaces, and an "outdoor" theater space. It was a very pleasant place, and he knew the Tenryu party of Mars reserved it often for their own events. Flavia started down the path, and he matched her pace.

"I suppose we should get straight to the point," she pulled a device out of her pocket, and clicked it on. A soft buzzing permeated the area. He'd probably have a headache by the time

they were done, but it was worth it for the chance of having a conversation unencumbered by listening devices. "You don't like me at all do you?"

"No."

"I thought so. Well, that's a pity, but hopefully we can improve our relations for the good of the Church."

He tensed his shoulders, "May I be blunt?"

She waggled the sound disruptor back and forth.

"You're a child who has been given extraordinary power because your father is a Tenryu party official. The Marsian government will easily manipulate you so they can enjoy greater oversight of the Church on Mars."

"Then let me be blunt in return," she started with a smile, but it faded into a face of stone. She blocked him on the path, and despite being at least twenty centimeters shorter than him, seemed to grow a whole meter in height as her brows furrowed, and the angle of her face lowered. "I am the Holy Mother Flavia the first, chosen by God to lead the church on Gongen. I am the Bishop of Takumi, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff and Primate of Gongen, and Servant of the Servants of God and you will treat me the respect I have earned."

He could hear his own heartbeat. Feel the blood that had rushed to his face. Against his good judgment, he felt his head nod once.

She smiled, closing her eyes and tilting her head to the side in a tactically cute pose, "Then now that we have that established, Father, let me bring us to our second order of business."

He felt relief to be back to something normal, "Ah yes, the matter of the Vatican's recognition of you--"

"No Father, the second order of business is that Holy Father Amakusa was murdered, and I am fairly certain I'm the next target."

There was a long silence. It felt like time had stopped, the buzzing from the disrupter was suffocating.

"Say that again?"

* * *

One year ago.

"You shouldn't drink so much," Jonna said.

"I'll drink as much as I want, I'm the Holy Father after all," Amakusa replied, "and I'm too old to be too particular."

The banquet was winding down anyway, the begrudging speeches about the unity between the Marsian and Earth branches of the church finally over. "Thou shalt not bear false witness," was going to be a popular sin at everyone's next confession.

"Jonna, we've been talking about my successor. Obviously we'd like to pick someone the church and the Tenryu party can both be pleased with."

"You're not in the ground yet, Holy Father."

He grumbled, the way only an old man can, "But I will be, so stop fussing about it. You realize tensions here are terrible at the moment?"

He nodded, that was abundantly clear. "Anything we can do to bring our two worlds back in harmony would be a blessing."

"Exactly. You see the man, oh what's the boy's name? The assistant to Ambassador Martin?"

"Kipli Darnel."

"Yes, him, you see the man he's talking to?"

"Cardinal Nakamura Shiki?" he was a tall man, surprisingly muscular, with that spangle of grey in the hair that seemed to be the perfect balance of youth and wisdom.

"He's been a Tenryu party member since childhood, but he's devout. A good man too. Put him forward to your superiors, start floating the name. My real fear is," he gestured with his glass, "Cardinal Mishima over there. A priest appointed by the party, and risen in rank because they held it over our heads as the price of free worship. If he's chosen, expect outright revolt."

There were too many people who would benefit from such a choice to count. Certain parties in the CGC would love to push a flare up of anti-Tenryu sentiment. Protests, a riot, just what the strategists ordered. "I'll watch out for him."

"Holy Father? There is a young woman who'd like to speak with you if you have a moment?"

Amakusa looked over at Jonna, the wrinkled loose skin of his face gently giggling with the motion, "You don't mind do you?"

With a head shake, the young lady approached, knelt, and kissed the pontiff's ring.

"And who do I have the honor of meeting today?" the Holy Father asked.

"Houng Lifen, your holiness."

He laughed, "For tonight, just Amakuza will do. I believe I've heard your name before?"

She put her hands together on her lap, she was in a very nice but simple and modest dress, "My father is the transport minister in the Atarashii Hajimari, but I am a theology graduate student at the University of Takumi."

Of course her father was. Just another child of a high ranking official getting their perks in for the evening. That there was a Catholic on the Atarashii Hajimari was news to him though, that was incredible progress. No wonder she was getting a perk.

"And how can I help you today?"

He wasn't exactly sure what to expect from her, but the response surprised him nonetheless, "I read your treaty on the Arian heresy and Arius' appearance at the council of Nicaea, and while it was very good--"

He laughed, "Jonna, "while it was very good", there's a critique coming. I can see it."

She blushed, "Ah, well...yes, you see Arius' opinion that Jesus and God were separate entities..."

The actual discussion was lost to memory. But he hadn't forgotten her, and that brash question. Still, he'd never guessed she'd be the Pontiff of Mars in a year.

* * *

They had sat down under an apricot tree, and she'd unlocked the door so her security guards could bring them some chilled chrysanthemum tea. They chatted about nothing in particular for a little, till he brought them back to task:

"So...what proof do you have that he was murdered?"

She took a sip of tea, and stared out at the garden as the automatic misters kicked on. "I got access to his mail and files after my election. He suspected someone was going to kill him, enough so that he wrote his successor a letter explaining as much," she opened her palm to reveal a tiny data chip, and then carefully rested her hand on the bench. He rested his hand there too once she picked hers up, and dropped the chip into his pocket.

"I see you don't trust your security detail particularly well."

"I don't. I don't know who is after me, so it's difficult to trust a group of men and women who couldn't keep my predecessor alive. If they were involved, then it's a chance I wouldn't like to take."

He stewed on that for a moment.

"You need to bring on a personal bodyguard for the moment. At least a temporary one. Can't your father call in any favors?"

She sighed, "Probably. I'd hate to ask him though. I don't want anyone getting the assumption I just got this position through my family connections."

"Didn't you?"

She held a stern look on him till he turned away. "Regardless, I'm looking forward to my first Easter service as Holy Mother."

"Do you...know how to hold a mass? You were just a theology student, you never took holy orders."

"I've been practicing, and I've watched a lot of videos online."

Very reassuring.

* * *

Far away, there was a dark street lit only by the flickering of holograms, neon, and scrolling screens. On that street, in a soaring apartment in a cheap high rise, there was a clatter on the balcony. This was not too unusual to the occupant, not was it scary. Nearly always it meant work. And if it didn't mean work, it meant a nice brawl to cap off his evening because he'd done his job well and pissed someone off. There was a knock on the window, and he pulled some pants on, grabbed a pistol, and took one last firm drag from his ecig.

The jetpack courier, a middle aged Korean woman in black armor, held up an envelope. He slid the door open and grabbed it, handing her a credit chip for a tip.

He was a professional, you always tip the courier.

She blasted off as he ripped the envelope open. He memorized his target, and all the details, and then burned it. Message received. This one would be fun, it wasn't often he got the same job twice in a row.

Goodbye, Holy Mother. May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Part 2: The Escort and the Executioner

"Do you know why you have been called here today, Hotaru?"

"You're firing me?"

Sato Shintaro sighed, "No, I am not firing you. I have an important mission for you."

She'd shown up for the meeting in casual dress, it was her day off after all, but Shintaro still found it odd seeing her looking like she was about to just go off to the shops, hands popped in the pockets of her jackets. You could still tell she was tremendously ripped, actually it was probably easier without the armor on. "My father got a request from a member of the Atarshi Hajimari for protection for his daughter, under the table protection. It will pay handsomely, and pay an important service to the Gongen people."

She shrugged, sure, "Who would I be protecting, anyone I've heard of?"

Shintaro gave her a sheepish grin, "Guess."

"Nope."

"It's the Holy Mother, Flavia the First."

The Holy Mother would not have approved of the next words out of her mouth.

* * *

She met the Holy Mother, Bishop of Takumi etc, at the train station, where she was standing with a priest whose whole demeanor just screamed "Earther."

She held a hand up, and the Holy Mother's hand came up in return, "You're our fearless protector?"

"I'm certainly your protector, isn't it dangerous to be out at a train station like this, don't you have private transport."

"I have been chosen to help the people, so I'm no good if I'm not out among them."

She was dressed in all white, from the habit down to the shoes, only the simple cross around her neck and the golden signet ring on her hand breaking the color scheme. Her getting "elected," if you could call any sort of thing that happened on Gongen involving an election an *election* and not a very dressed up party order, had been a big scandal. Nobody had been happy about it, and everyone seemed to assume everyone else had been happy. A big old mess. She could remember eating some tamago gohan for breakfast as two men yelled about whether or not picking a woman was some sort of jab at the Vatican or the CGC or something something.

The train pulled in, and they got on. There hadn't been anyone at the station, but the car was packed with travellers. At first, there were a lot of looks, "Is that who I think it is?" each said. And then the first person got brave enough to go up to her. The Holy Mother blessed them, and then Hotaru was running crowd control.

"Pose like this!" a kid said, holding their phone out to get the two of them together in the image.

"Like this? What's this called?" She mimicked the pose, putting both of her forearms in a parallel diagonal framing her face.

"Crezzing! You've got it. Say cheese..."

She took more selfies than Hotaru could count. Each one of those phones could be an infernal device meant to kill her, but what was she supposed to do here? Tell the leader of a religion to stop being nice to kids?

Flavia gave a bunch of hugs, and then bid adieu as they reached their destination, the kids yelling out, "Thank you Space Pope!" as they exited and began their walk back towards the Basilica of Takumi.

"Space Pope. Are you getting delusions of grandeur?" Jonna crooned.

She shook her head, "Of course not, they're children, thinking of me as the 'Space Pope' is an easy way for them to comprehend my role here. I'm not the Pope, just a half step down as the Holy Mother of Gongen. They'll understand as they get older."

"I'm not sure everyone does. I'm sure the Tenryu party would love to annoint you...Space Pope."

She just smiled back at him sadly till he continued.

"But as for all of that with the train...It's admirable what you're trying to do, Flavia, but everyone tries to do that when they start. You'll burn out of it quickly. If you're available all of the time, you will have nothing left to give in the times that truly matter. A moment of peace while travelling can be a blessing."

She held her head high, "Then I will enjoy it while I still can, until I burn out from it, Father Jonna."

He looked back at Hotaru, who could only shrug. She wasn't even Christian.

"Tell me about yourself, Hotaru. If we are to be together for a while, I'd like to be friends."

Well, that was unexpected, though maybe it shouldn't have been, "I'm in the service of the Sato family. I've protected both Sato brothers at one time or another, but currently serve at the bequest of Sato Shintaro, who has lent you my services."

Father Jonna raised an eyebrow at Flavia, "Well well, a bodyguard straight from the President's Son. Isn't that interesting."

She sighed, "He is obsessed with reminding me of my family's connections. This is why I hesitated to use them."

"I promise to do my best to live up to the expectations of your displeasure."

She laughed, "I appreciate that, but I trust in your skill..." she trailed off, frowning. At the front of the Basilica was a small crowd holding signs and chanting. One was dressed like the Holy Mother, only wearing grotesque and mocking makeup. She danced around in front of the group with her tongue out.

Hotaru begged all the way for her to not, as the Holy Mother walked up to the protestors.

She bowed, "Good evening. May the Lord God keep and bless you--"

"We don't need your lies, you Tenryu party puppet!"

"--may he take away your sins--"

"What'd you have to do for the President to get the job huh?"

"--and lead you to everlasting life--"

"Or did you just cry to daddy?" Laughter.

"--Amen."

She stood and prayed quietly for a few more moments, crossed herself, and began to walk back towards the basilica again. Hotaru kept close behind her, because some of the protestors followed. She moved her hand close to her Katana, then pretended to just scratch an itch, and a few turned around. But the one in the make up didn't stop. She kept coming, hurling invectives at her. Flavia stepped inside the church, and as the door shut Hotaru hoped that would be it.

It wasn't. The fake slammed it open, continuing to yell. The church security moved to remove her, but Flavia stopped them.

She stood there, taking the hurled insults, until the woman tired, and Flavia bowed to her.

"Thank you for your passion for the faith. I hope in the future you will be more pleased with my service to the flock. May the lord bless you."

The women stared, the makeup looking ludicrous with her shocked expression. She was unable to find words, so she turned around and pushed back through the doors.

"Well, I suppose that went about as well as we could have hoped," Flavia said.

Jonna was about to reply, when they heard the shot.

Hotaru knew it instantly: high powered plasma bolt, likely a heavily modified ColtBurton Tangier-2. She grabbed the Holy Mother's arm as she tried to bolt for the sound, "It's not safe, that was a sniper round. You're staying here."

Her eyes softened, okay good, she understood. Then the cry of pain came from outside.

"Let go of me now. If you want to keep me safe, then do that while we get her inside. That's an order, if that helps," she slipped out of her suddenly loose grip. Yes, ma'am.

Drawing her pistol, Hotaru ran in front of the injured woman, scanning the area as Flavia pulled her inside. Okay, going okay.

Then the second shot.

Never think it's going okay, you idiot.

It tore through Flavia's upper arm, but she finished pulling the injured woman inside with one final heave, and ripped her habit off to hold over the wound as she put pressure on it, ignoring her own bleeding. A third shot rang out, and the door proved to be stronger than it looked.

"Hotaru, what do we do now?"

"We need to move you out of here."

"I'm not leaving her!"

She cursed, and pointed at one of the useless security detail, "You, take over first aid for the Holy Mother, the rest of you fan out and start looking for where the assassin will try to enter."

Hotaru helped Flavia up, the security guard seemed more skilled at first aid anyway, but she was clearly in shock, looking at her red hands. Father Jonna looked stunned too. Hotaru quickly began to wrap the wound on Flavia's arm as much as she could.

"Is there a back entrance?"

"There's a lot of them, it's a huge complex."

That wasn't good. The whole mission had gone bottoms up too quickly.

"Choose one, we'll go out that way."

Jonna seemed to snap into gear, "...The garden. There's an exit we can take from there right into the parking garage."

Finally, some good news, "Perfect. Let's move, don't waste any more time."

* * *

He hadn't expected the decoy. Though in hindsight, maybe she wasn't a decoy. One of those protestors? Either way, it should have been a one-shot-one-kill job. He'd loused it up. So now he could either call it off and regroup, or try to catch them while they fled.

It'd been a while since he'd really gone hunting like that. Not since he'd been kicked out of the Yakuza. The thought excited him. Yes, this would do nicely.

* * *

The man looked lost, stumbling around by the broken window, jaw trembling, eyes wide. This whole thing was more than Li had signed up for as part of the security here at the Basilica, usually things were easy. Boring even. Good pay, low danger. Now he was trying to lead out shocked parishioner after shocked parishioner to where the city police were gathering them to question them and later hook them up with counselling.

"Sir, we're evacuating the building, could you please follow me."

He stumbled towards him, eyes watering, "So much blood, in a church! How could they?"

"It's terrible, I know, please just come with me."

"Please, just tell me, did the Holy Mother..."

"She's safe, she escaped through the garden, now come here."

He let the man get close, he'd put an arm around him and guide him out.

Or rather, he would have. If the man's face hadn't turned stone cold, his strong hands around Li's neck and head.

There was a snap.

And the assassin continued on his way.

* * *

Hotaru kept glancing back as Jonna led them, his arm supporting Flavira to keep her going forward. Her arm clearly was in agony, and she admired that she had kept moving at all, "Just keep going Flavia, we're almost there," he said.

Hotaru was glad to hear that, but also wasn't surprised when she saw the faint outline of a figure moving behind the trees. She followed the shape with her pistol, it was moving too silently and intentionally to be a friend. It was stalking prey.

So she let out a spray of fire.

It burned through the trunks of trees, and the branches of bushes, and there was a soft, "ungh," not a moan or cry of agony, but the soft reaction of someone too familiar with the sensation. She steadied herself, "Get cover, now!"

It was almost too late, but also just in time. Flavia and Jonna dove behind a big planter, but a blast caught her in the calf, and she cried out again.

Hotaru tried to get in the way of the blasts, and probably saved Jonna's life as one hit her

shoulder plate.

Come on, you coward come out. Her pistol was out, ready, and then half of it dropped off.

She looked to her right, and there he was, his torso, arms, and face layered in tattoos. She was thankful.

She had never been as good with a gun as she had in a melee. The gun was her first obstacle: it was taking up her hand, after all, so she threw it as hard as she could at the man's face. The other hand went back for her own blade, and drew it out, all of her body moving in one fluid motion. The man seamlessly ducked to the right, dodging the gun.

Good. She pulled her sword down at a diagonal, forcing him to choose between going hard into the direction he'd leaned into and losing his balance, or moving his blade up to parry her from below, turning his torso to the right in the process.

He chose to parry, and her foot came up lightning quick, catching him in the spine as he stopped her blade.

He wasn't out yet though, he threw himself sideways, slamming into her. She stumbled back, staying standing but losing her advantageous position. He came back in with a flurry of swipes, and she parried them, looking for an opening. He was fast--he'd wear her down quick if he kept this up. Then she heard it. A faint hiss above her head.

She had her move. She backed up into a flower garden, trampling backwards through it to the other side, and he followed, matching her steps. She stopped. He raised an eyebrow.

The automatic misters turned on.

It was half a second. All he did was glance up, but it was too long. She raked her katana across his chest, and it was over. She panted, looking down at him, as he looked up at her. He tried to say something through the blood in his mouth, but it was incomprehensible.

And then, she arrived.

She wasn't so much crawling as dragging herself with one arm, the Holy Mother pulling herself into the flowerbed, and kneeling next to the dying assassin. She stroked his head, and asked if he would like her to pray for him. He gave a small nod. And she did, till he faded away.

Then she looked up at Hotaru, tears in her eyes, a sad smile across her face, and promptly passed out from blood loss.

Part 3: Easter and the Estimation

"Now go in peace to love and serve the lord!"

The Holy Mother waved at the camera like she was on a normal video call, and Jonna breathed a sigh of relief. Sure, doing an Easter Mass over video from her hospital room was unusual, but under the circumstances it seemed to be exactly what she and the people of Gon--Mars, needed.

He made his way over after the camera crew and her nurses got out of the way, and gave her a smile, which she returned.

"Well, not the way I wanted my first Easter sermon to go, but I think I did alright, considering I could only move one arm."

He looked at the liquid-filled casts around her arm and leg, "What's the prognosis?"

"Hmn? Oh, I'll be fine, it'll just take some time. You can't stop the Holy Mother that easily," she winked.

Hotaru sighed from her bedside, "You are too optimistic about this. You're worse than Shintaro."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

She shook her head, and Jonna used the opportunity to cut in.

"Any update on who sent the assassin?"

Hotaru looked up at him.

* * *

Shintaro and Hotaru looked down at the report. They stared at what it said for a long time till Shin lowered the tablet.

Their eyes met.

Hotaru nodded.

He handed her the memory card the report was on.

And she stomped it to pieces on the tiled floor.

* * *

"It's still a mystery, I'm afraid."

He sighed, of course it was.

The Holy Mother just shrugged, "I'm sure whoever it was is in need of love. I just wish..."

There was a knock on the door, it was a member of the much-increased security detail, "Holy mother, there's someone here to visit you?"

Jonna dismissed it with a wave of his hand, "Everyone wants to visit her. She needs rest."

"...She says the Holy Mother saved her life during the incident."

Flavia closed her eyes, "With the Lord, all things are possible, even wishes."

* * *

Two Months Earlier

Filling Amorkuza's shoes was proving to be much more difficult than anyone had anticipated. Everyone had assumed the Tenryu Party would come into the event ready to ramrod through Cardinal Mishima, but as it turned out a lot of party members just didn't *like* the man. The voting was rigged here, of course, the Tenryu Party had far more representation than the Church did, but they still had anticipated voting in a unified bloc. That was when she came in.

The double doors swung open, and there she was, security scampering after her as the throng of children she'd brought with her blocked their path. Her light blue dress flowed behind her, as she clutched both hands over her heart.

"Brothers and sisters, you have found yourself stuck."

"Get her out of here!" some party official yelled, and then she looked at him firmly, and he pursed his lips.

She kept walking forward, till she reached the front of the room, "You have no good answer on who will lead the Church on Gongen, and you're frustrated. Well I tell you, God gave you that frustration, and he has given me a vision: a vision of a new future for the Gongen Church. She turned to face the room, "So I would ask you to pray. Ask God, and yourselves, who do you want to lead you into the future? Someone who has divided you, or the one God chose for you: Houg Lifen"

There was the sound of fingers tapping on tablet screens, and eyes squinting.

"Ah, sorry yes, I'm on the sixth page of the ballot. Near the bottom."

* * *

One Month After Easter, The Vatican, Earth.

The panel of cardinals looked at Father Jonna seriously, "Well, Father, we have waited anxiously for your opinion on the new government-appointed mockery. What is your estimation of her?"

He looked down at his hands, and the corner of his lip turned up.

"Honestly? I like her."

Welcome back to WARS!

It's been a rough time, but more stories are on their way, and we're happy to see you again. Happy Easter, if you celebrate it. We'll see you again real soon with more tales from the future.

Take care!

-The Arcbeatle Press Team

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