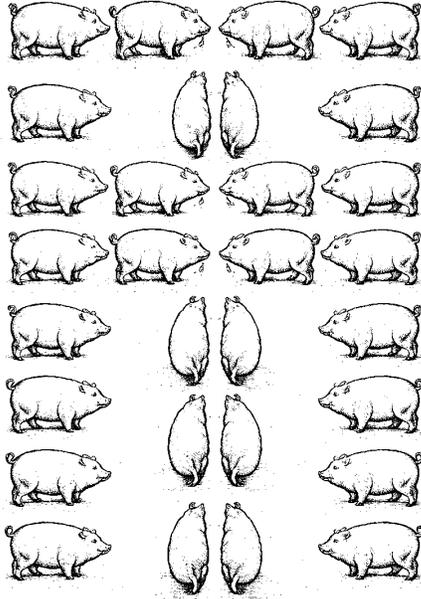


Soft and Fluffy Federation

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LATTICE · WANT · GRACE



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Book I: The Concordat Breach

Chapter One: The Summons

The messenger from the Bishop's Palace did not like the Curly Cloister. Few humans did. It smelled of damp earth, old stone, and, overwhelmingly, of pig.

Not the sharp, ammonia tang of a sty, but the warm, musky scent of twenty-four large, holy animals who bathed regularly but still insisted on sleeping in a pile. The air was thick with it, a physical weight that tasted faintly of truffles and incense.

The messenger stood in the center of the chapter house, clutching a scroll with a wax seal that was already softening in the heat radiating from the Federation. He cleared his throat, the sound echoing thinly against the heavy masonry.

"The Bishop requires... immediate intervention," the messenger stammered, trying to address the room without making eye contact with any specific pig. It was difficult. There were eyes everywhere.

The room was occupied by four distinct groups, though to the untrained eye, it was just a lot of bacon.

To the left lay **The Curly Communion**. Six pigs with soft, pink skin and eyes that seemed to weep with the weight of the world's sadness. They were currently grooming one another, murmuring soft squeals of comfort that sounded disturbingly like prayer.

To the right stood **The Bristled Brotherhood**. These six were scarred, leaner, their tusks capped with iron. They watched the messenger not with malice, but with the terrifying calculation of a butcher assessing a cut of meat.

Near the lectern was **The Rooting Revelation**. They were spotted, twitchy, and constantly moving—noses testing the air, hooves tapping out rhythms on the stone floor. One of them was chewing on a quill pen, ink staining its snout blue.

And in the center sat **The Muddy Magistrates**. Large, dark-skinned, and immobile as boulders. They wore the heavy iron collars of office. They did not blink.

"The Parish of Millhaven," the messenger continued, his voice cracking. "A Concordat breach. The Verger is missing. The local Egregore has gone silent.

And... the livestock.”

”What about the livestock?” asked a voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. It was the Magistrates speaking—six throats vibrating in a perfect, resonant chord.

”They are... speaking, Your Honors.”

The room erupted.

”Speaking?” The Rooting Revelation scrambled over each other, a tumble of spotted limbs. ”Define ’speaking’! Mimicry? Parrots? Or syntax? Is it... is it *thinking*?”

”Rational souls?” The Magistrates rumbled, drowning out the Revelation. ”Canon 892 is specific. Animals lack rational souls. If they speak, are they vessels or agents?”

”Are they hurting?” The Curly Communion uncoiled from their pile, stepping forward with gentle urgency. ”If they are speaking, they are waking up. Waking up hurts. Oh, the poor things.”

”Is it a threat?” The Bristled Brotherhood didn’t move, but their muscles tensed in unison. ”Talking cows don’t worry us. Talking wolves do.”

The messenger dropped the scroll. ”I don’t know! The Bishop just wants it fixed! Will you go?”

The twenty-four pigs looked at one another. A silent communication—the Lattice—passed between them. It was a network of thought, a web of shared consciousness that bound them louder than words.

Curiosity, flashed the Revelation. Duty, thrummed the Magistrates. Compassion, wept the Communion. Orders, grunted the Brotherhood. Twenty-four snouts turned to the messenger. Twenty-four mouths opened.

”Yes,” they said.

Chapter Two: The Geometry of Sheep

The road to Millhaven was paved with good intentions and bad singing.

Brother Adalbert drove the cart containing the reserve pigs and supplies, his hands clamped firmly over his ears. The Federation was singing Terce. It was a four-part harmony that defied the laws of music, a guttural, squealing hymn that frightened birds out of trees and sent foxes scrambling for their dens.

They traveled in a diamond formation. The Brotherhood took point, tusks gleaming in the morning sun. The Magistrates and Communion flanked the cart. The Revelation brought up the rear, stopping every few hundred feet to examine a particularly interesting beetle or a suspicious rock.

As the village of Millhaven came into view, the singing stopped.

A sound drifted over the hills. Bells. But not the orderly tolling of the Angelus. This was a chaotic, clanging riot. It sounded wrong—like a piano thrown down a staircase, each note sharp with frustration.

”Listen,” said the Rooting Revelation, their six heads cocked at identical angles. ”The pattern. It’s distinct. It’s not random wind.”

"It sounds like pain," murmured the Communion. "Like a child trying to play a lute with broken fingers."

"The Egregore is fragmenting," said the Revelation, ears twitching. "Whatever bound the church consciousness together has snapped. We're hearing the pieces trying to ring the bells independently."

"Chain of custody issue," noted the Magistrates. "If the Egregore is dissolved, who holds the Concordat? We are entering a legal vacuum."

They crested the final hill and saw the meadow. And in the meadow, they saw the sheep.

There were thirty of them. They were not grazing. They were not wandering. They stood in a perfect, geometric circle, facing inward. The grass inside the circle was untouched.

"Halt," signaled the Brotherhood.

The Federation stopped. The Rooting Revelation surged forward, practically vibrating.

"Look at the topology!" they squealed. One of the spotted pigs immediately dropped its snout and began frantically scratching a diagram into the dirt. "It's not just a circle; it's a distributed node graph! See? Equidistant spacing allows for latency-free signal propagation across the entire group without a central server! They aren't following a bellwether; they're processing data collectively!"

"It's a defensive ring," grunted the Brotherhood, ignoring the math. "Standard perimeter."

The Curly Communion moved past the tactical assessment, walking softly toward the white, woolly wall.

"Hello, dear ones," the Communion said, their voice a soft, comforting grunt. "Do not be afraid."

The circle did not break. But thirty heads turned in unison. Sixty rectangular pupils fixed on the pigs.

"H... Hel..." began a ewe on the left, her jaw working against decades of instinct. "...lo," finished a ram on the right. "Un... der... stand," bleated a lamb in the center, the word forming like a bubble bursting. The words rippled across the circle, passed from mouth to mouth like a bucket in a fire brigade. It wasn't one sheep speaking; it was a wave of cognition moving through them.

"You. Are. Pig. Church?"

The silence that followed was heavy enough to crush a cart. Even the Revelation stopped taking notes.

"They parse syntax," whispered the Revelation. "Beatrix, write this down. Subject. Verb. Object."

The Communion was weeping openly now, tears tracking through the dust on their snouts. "They speak. Oh, God, they speak."

"We... speak," agreed the sheep, stronger now. "Head. Hurt. Loud. Inside. Many. Voices. One. Thought."

"We know," said the Communion. "We know exactly how that feels. It's scary, isn't it? Being many and one?"

"Scary," bleated the sheep. "Want. Stop. Want. Quiet. But... Want. Choose."

"Choose what?" asked the Magistrates, their legal interest piqued.

"Choose. Grass," said the sheep. "Choose. Walk. Choose. Not. Die."

The Bristled Brotherhood shifted. "Well," said the lead boar, a massive creature named Grendel. "That complicates the grocery list."

"We protect them," said the Communion suddenly. "Whatever is happening in Millhaven, no one hurts them. They are children."

"Legally premature," warned the Magistrates.

"I don't care about the law!" snapped the Communion—a rare outburst of anger. "They just woke up! Look at them! They're terrified!"

The Brotherhood looked at the circle of trembling sheep. They looked at the terrified eyes.

"Communion's right," Grendel grunted. "Standard engagement rules for non-combatants. We protect the civilians. Even the woolly ones."

Chapter Three: The Theology Of Cows

Father Cornelius looked like a man who had not slept in a week, mostly because he hadn't. He stood on the steps of the Millhaven church, wringing his hands as the twenty-four pigs filed into the square.

"Thank God," he wept. "The Bishop sent... oh. He sent you."

"We are Principalities of the Lesser Estate," announced the Muddy Magistrates. "Our authority is absolute in matters of—"

"Skip the resume," barked the Brotherhood. "Sitrep. Now."

Cornelius trembled. "It's Verger Elspeth. She... she ruined them. They were happy! The cows, the sheep—they knew their place. They lived, they gave us wool and milk, they died to feed the parish. It was the natural order! The Concordat ensured they were treated well!"

"Treated well," repeated the Rooting Revelation. "Defined as?"

"Fed! Sheltered! Protected from wolves!"

"And slaughtered," noted the Communion.

"Humane slaughter!" Cornelius cried. "But now... she's changed everything. She stopped sleeping weeks ago. She would spend all night in the barns, just... listening. She said the silence was screaming at her."

"Screaming?" asked the Communion.

"That the animals were dreaming," Cornelius shuddered. "That she could hear them wanting to wake up. And now she's at the Shepherd's Cairn, doing... whatever this is. And the cows won't go into the barn. They stand in the fields and... and they *judge* me."

"We met the sheep," said the Brotherhood. "They seem organized."

"It's chaos!" Cornelius insisted. "If they don't return to their pens, the winter stores will fail. The parish will starve. You have to fix them. Make them go back!"

"Back to sleep?" asked the Communion softly.

"Back to normal!"

The Federation left the priest hyperventilating on the steps and moved toward the pastures. There, they found the cows.

Three of them stood by the fence. Brindle, Clover, and Daisy. They were chewing cud, but the rhythm was wrong. It was contemplative.

"Hello," said the Rooting Revelation. "We are the Federation. We are like you."

Brindle the cow looked down. Her eyes were deep pools of liquid darkness. There was a terrifying depth to them now, a spark of 'I' where there used to be only 'Moo'.

"You. Are. Holy. Pigs."

"Subject-verb-object-tag question!" The Revelation was ecstatic. "The linguistic evolution is accelerating!"

"We. Want. Know," said Clover, the middle cow. "What. We. Are."

"Am. I. Me?" asked Daisy. "Or. We?"

As she spoke the word "We," the other two cows blinked in perfect unison, their tails swatting a fly at the exact same moment. It was a small gesture, but the precision was unnerving.

The question hung in the cool autumn air. It was the question that haunted every Egregore, the ghost in the machine of the Lattice.

"You are both," said the Communion, stepping close to the fence. "You are Daisy. You are unique. But you are also the herd. You are the connection."

"Hurt," said Clover. "To. Think. Is. Hard. Is. Worth?"

The Magistrates shifted their weight. "A profound inquiry. Is consciousness worth the suffering it entails?"

"Yes," said the Brotherhood.

The other pigs looked at the soldiers.

"It hurts," Grendel said, his voice gravel and iron. "You see things you can't fix. You feel things you can't say. You know you're going to die someday. That's the price of the ticket."

"Why. Pay?" asked Daisy.

"Because you can choose," said Grendel. "Before, you just ate where they put you. Now? You can decide. You can say 'no'."

"Say. No," Brindle tested the words. "No. No milk today. No pen. No."

"Exactly," said the Magistrates. "That is the legal concept of consent."

"Scary," said Brindle.

"Terrifying," agreed the Communion. "But we are here. We will not let you be alone in the dark."

Father Cornelius came running up behind them. "What are you doing? You're supposed to be breaking the spell!"

"This isn't a spell, Father," said the Rooting Revelation, turning six snouts toward him. "This is evolution. Or perhaps revelation. The Lattice is expanding. It's jumping species."

"They are beasts!" Cornelius screamed.

"So are we," said the Magistrates. "And yet, we hold court."

"We're going to the Cairn," said the Brotherhood. "Elspeth started this. We need to see how she plans to finish it."

Chapter Four: The Twenty-Fourth Node

The Shepherd's Cairn was a place of old magic, a ring of standing stones on a windswept ridge. But today, the magic was new, raw, and blindingly bright.

Verger Elspeth stood in the center. She was a small woman, but she cast a shadow that stretched for miles. Around her, in concentric rings, stood hundreds of animals. Sheep, goats, cows, chickens, stray dogs.

The air smelled of ozone and burnt hair. Visible lines of light—the Lattice—pulsed from Elspeth's outstretched hands, connecting to every single animal like fiber-optic cables made of starlight. The ground beneath the pigs' hooves hummed with a low, nauseating vibration.

"Diagnosis," barked the Brotherhood.

"She's the knot in the net," stammered the Revelation, their eyes wide and reflecting the unnatural light. "The central node. She's tying them all together through herself. It's too hot. She's burning."

"She's dying," said the Communion. "Look at her hands."

Elspeth was pale, blood running from her nose. Her hands were blackened, the skin cracking as the sheer volume of *Want*—the raw stuff of prayer and consciousness—burned through her nervous system. The strain of processing the awakening consciousness of three hundred animals was tearing her apart cell by cell.

"Elspeth!" shouted the Magistrates. "We are the Federation! We assert jurisdiction!"

Elspeth didn't open her eyes. She couldn't. "Go away! I won't let you stop it!"

"We don't want to stop it!" yelled the Communion. "But you're burning out! You'll die before the download is complete!"

"Then I die!" Elspeth screamed, her voice cracking with strain. "They deserve to be people! They deserve to choose!"

"Why?" the Communion asked, their voice cutting through the wind. "Why die for this?"

Elspeth's eyes flew open, wild and wet. "Because I heard them dreaming," she gasped. "For years. I walked the barns and I heard them dreaming in the dark. Screaming in their sleep. I couldn't wake them up. I had to let them out."

"She's going to fail," noted the Revelation coolly, though their tails were twitching with anxiety. "It's too much. The feedback loop will kill her, and the shock will lobotomize the animals. They'll be vegetables."

"Unacceptable outcome," said the Brotherhood.

"We have to intervene," said the Communion.

"Intervention requires authorization," noted the Magistrates. Then they paused. "However, Canon law allows for emergency preservation of life. And... frankly, the precedent is fascinating."

"What's the play?" asked Grendel.

The Rooting Revelation's eyes spun. "We join the network. We're Egregores. We're designed for this. We distribute the load. Instead of one human hub, we

add four clusters of six pigs. Twenty-four additional nodes.”

”That... might work,” said the Revelation. ”Or it might fry our brains and leave us thinking we’re chickens.”

”I like chicken,” said a Brotherhood member.

”Focus,” snapped Grendel.

The Federation moved. They didn’t charge; they flowed. They formed a pentagon around Elspeth–Brotherhood North, Communion East, Magistrates West, Revelation South.

”Elspeth!” The Communion’s voice was a song now. ”Let us in! We can carry it together!”

Elspeth saw the pigs. She saw the light in their eyes—the same light that was burning her alive.

”You... you would help?”

”We are Vergers,” said the Magistrates. ”We serve.”

”Open the gate,” said the Revelation.

Elspeth sobbed, and the barrier dropped.

The Federation hesitated for a split second. A single, shared heartbeat of silence before the plunge. They looked at each other—Revelation, Communion, Brotherhood, Magistrates—knowing that whatever came back might not be them.

Then, they hit the Lattice.

It wasn’t a sound. It was a sensation—like falling from a great height and hitting the water.

WHAM.

The shockwave flattened the grass. Every pig gasped as the minds of three hundred animals flooded their consciousness.

Fear. Hunger. Cold. Light. Who Am I? What Is This? Me. We. Me. We. Me. We.

It was a tsunami of raw sensation that crossed the senses. Fear tasted like copper and sour milk. Hunger was a jagged purple line cutting through the dark. The warmth of the coop sounded like a cello. The terror of the wolf smelled like sudden, freezing rain. It all crashed into the Federation’s minds at once. The strain was immediate and crushing. It felt like trying to hold up a collapsing roof.

The Brotherhood held the perimeter of the mind, building walls of discipline to contain the panic. *Structure hold*, Grendel projected, his mental voice a shield wall of iron and stone. *You are safe. Stand fast.*

The Communion poured love into the network, a warm, golden syrup that soothed the migraine-agony of awakening. *Heart open*, they wept into the void. *Flow through. Honey and blood. You are loved.*

The Revelation organized the data, sorting thoughts, structuring language, teaching the chaos how to be syntax. *Parsing. Sorting. Syntax. Subject-verb-consensus. Think.*

The Magistrates laid the foundation of law. *Codifying. Naming. Right-to-be. You exist.*

Time lost meaning. There was only the light, and the pigs, and the woman, and the vast, terrified, beautiful chorus of the barnyard waking up. For a moment, the Federation felt themselves fraying at the edges, their own identities dissolving into the great, bleating whole.

Are we pigs? thought the Revelation. We are everything, answered the Lattice.

Chapter Five: The Murmuration

The sun was setting when the light finally faded.

For a long time, there was only the sound of wind in the grass. The Federation lay in a heap, twenty-four bodies tangled in a mound of twitching limbs.

The Rooting Revelation tried to say 'Status Report,' but all that came out was a confused, questioning *oink*. They stared at the noise, puzzled. Language felt slippery, a bar of soap in a wet tub. For a terrified moment, they remembered *being* the sheep, the grass, the wind. Being a pig felt suddenly small.

Elspeth lay curled on her side nearby, her chest hitching. *In. Out. In. Out.* The rhythm was the only thing making sense in the world.

Slowly, gravity reasserted itself. A hoof moved. An ear flicked. The world sharpened back into focus.

The pigs groaned and pulled themselves apart. Steam rose from their flanks. Around them, the animals stood.

They were different now. The vacuous stare of the livestock was gone. In its place was a gaze of terrifying clarity. A chicken tilted its head and looked Grendel in the eye with an intelligence that was distinctly reptilian.

Brindle the cow stepped forward. She looked at the exhausted pigs.

"Thank. You," she said. Her voice was deep, resonant, and entirely hers. "We. Are. Awake."

"You're welcome," wheezed Grendel. "Now... does anyone have an apple?"

But the peace was shattered by the sound of boots and angry shouts.

Father Cornelius had returned, and he had brought the village. Men with pitchforks, torches, and old swords. Fear makes men do stupid things, and they were very afraid.

"They're monsters!" a farmer shouted, brandishing a rusty scythe. "Look at them! Sorcery!"

"Kill them before they curse us!"

The Brotherhood struggled to rise, their legs trembling from the Lattice strain. "Stand down!" Grendel roared, but his voice was weak, barely a squeal.

The farmers surged forward.

Then, the animals moved.

It wasn't a stampede. It was a *Murmuration*.

Sheep, cows, chickens, and goats moved as a single liquid entity. Drawn together by the residual stability of the Federation's network, they flowed around the pigs and Elspeth, forming a living wall of wool, horn, and feather. It was seamless, terrifyingly coordinated, a single organism made of hundreds.

A voice spoke. It wasn't Brindle. It wasn't the sheep. It was the Herd.

"WE. WILL. NOT. BE. HARMED."

The voice shook the stones of the Cairn. It was the sound of a thousand throats vibrating in perfect unison. The farmers froze, their torches flickering in the sudden displacement of air.

"WE. ARE. PROTECTION. GO. HOME."

"They're demons!" Cornelius shrieked, backing away.

The Curly Communion limped through the line of animals. They stood between the terrified farmers and the terrifying Herd.

"They are not demons," the Communion said. "They are your neighbors. And they are showing you mercy. Look at them. They could crush you. They are choosing not to."

"We choose," rumbled the Herd. **"MERCY. BETTER. THAN. FEAR."**

The farmers lowered their weapons. They looked at the animals they had raised—animals they had named, fed, and planned to eat—and they saw the intelligence looking back. Shame, hot and sharp, began to replace the fear.

The Muddy Magistrates dragged themselves upright, shaking the dust from their collars.

"We need a table," they announced. "And a scribe. We have a Concordat to rewrite."

Chapter Epilogue: The Bishop's Ceiling

Three days later, the Federation stood in the Bishop's study. They were clean, fed, and only slightly traumatized.

The Bishop read the report. He read it again. He took off his glasses, cleaned them, and read it a third time.

"Let me clarify," the Bishop said, his voice dangerously calm. "You have granted... voting rights... to the poultry?"

"Proportional representation," corrected the Rooting Revelation. "Based on biomass."

"And the cows have a... union?"

"A Guild," said the Magistrates. "The Guild of Milk. They set their own hours. They have agreed to increased production in exchange for better feed and a ban on veal crates."

"And the parish agreed to this?"

"The parish realized," said the Brotherhood, "that the alternative was being besieged by a tactical unit of hyper-intelligent goats. They signed."

The Bishop rubbed his temples. He closed his eyes. In the silence of the room, he could feel the weight of centuries of doctrine pressing down on him. He thought of Aquinas, who had written so definitively that animals were automata, devoid of the rational spark. He thought of the Council of Trent, which had defined the soul in strictly human terms.

For forty years, he had preached that line. But Aquinas had never met a pig that could quote canon law. Augustine had never looked into the eyes of a

cow and seen a union representative staring back.

He opened his eyes and looked at the pigs. He saw the way they stood together—four parts of a whole, distinct yet one. He saw the intelligence in their eyes, an undeniable spark that mocked his theology with its simple, warm existence. He realized, with a sudden, terrifying clarity, that God was evidently much stranger, and perhaps much kinder, than the seminaries had taught.

"...It is exactly what I should have expected," the Bishop sighed, letting the heresy settle like dust. "Did anyone die?"

"No," said the Communion.

"Did the Verger survive?"

"She is now the primary liaison to the Herd," said the Revelation. "She's teaching the chickens to read."

The Bishop leaned back. A small smile tugged at his lips.

"You realize," he said, "that you have fundamentally altered the theological standing of the natural world? If this spreads, the Church will never be the same."

The Soft and Fluffy Federation exchanged a look. The Lattice hummed with shared amusement.

"Your Eminence," said the Magistrates, "we are twenty-four holy pigs in vestments. The Church hasn't been the same since we walked in the door."

The Bishop laughed, a real, surprised bark of sound. "Dismissed. Go get some sleep. You smell like a barn."

"We are a barn," said the Communion happily.

And the pigs marched out, singing a new song. It was still out of tune, but for the first time, they could hear the sheep singing it with them, miles away, carried on the wind of a new world.

THE END

Book II: The Wolves of Welton

Chapter One: The Eight-Hundred Gold Question

The Shepherd's Crook Inn was not built for pigs. The doorframes were too narrow, the chairs were too fragile, and the floorboards groaned in protest every time the Muddy Magistrates shifted their weight.

The Federation was resting. It had been two weeks since the "Millhaven Incident," and the collective headache of channeling the awakening of three hundred farm animals had finally faded to a dull throb. They lay in a heap by the hearth, a sprawling mountain of holy pork, taking up most of the common room.

Leonor Slatebeard, the dwarven innkeeper, approached them with a tray of roasted turnips and a look of desperate hope.

"Holy ones," she began, setting the tray down near the Rooting Revelation's twitching snouts. "The Village Council... well, they know you're just passing through. But we have a problem. A big one."

"We are resting," rumbled the Magistrates, their eyes closed. "Ecclesiastical duties are suspended until we reach Sankt Mangold."

"They're offering eight hundred gold pieces," Leonor said.

One of the Revelation's heads popped up. Then another. "Eight hundred? That is... economically irrational. That is the GDP of a small hamlet. What is the threat profile?"

"Wolves," Leonor said.

The Bristled Brotherhood snorted, a sound like tearing canvas. "You want to pay us a king's ransom to chase off dogs? Hire a ranger. We are Vergers, not pest control."

"They aren't normal wolves," Leonor insisted, leaning in. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "They're... smart. They open latches. They coordinate ambushes. And old Willen, the shepherd? He swears he heard them *talking*."

The room went silent. The fire popped loudly in the hearth.

Twenty-four eyes opened simultaneously. The heap of pigs uncoiled, the casual pile transforming instantly into four distinct, alert formations.

"Define 'talking'," said the Curly Communion, their voice trembling slightly.

"Like... words," Leonor stammered, unnerved by the sudden intensity. "Willen said they were arguing about whether to eat him."

The Federation exchanged a look. The Lattice—the psychic web connecting their twenty-four minds—lit up with a flurry of silent signals.

Millhaven was a ritual, flashed the Magistrates. Intentional. This is wild, countered the Revelation. Spontaneous. Are they afraid? asked the Communion. Are they dangerous? asked the Brotherhood. "We just finished teaching chickens to vote," the Rooting Revelation said aloud, mostly to themselves. "If the wolves are talking... it's happening again. The phase transition."

"We accept," said the Brotherhood, standing up and shaking the dust from their armored flanks. "But tell the Council: we don't exterminate people. If they talk, they're people."

Leonor blinked. "They're wolves."

"So are we pigs," said the Magistrates. "Do not get hung up on the packaging."

Chapter Two: The Sheep Who Were Stolen

The ambush happened three miles outside of town, near the edge of the Western Woods.

The Federation was traveling with a shepherd named Corel, ostensibly as guards, but mostly as observers. When the wolves burst from the tree line, the Bristled Brotherhood did not charge. They simply watched.

"Hold line," Grendel ordered. "Observe tactics."

There were eight wolves. They moved like water, flowing around the flock. But they didn't tear throats. They didn't hamstring the stragglers. Instead, four wolves formed a perimeter, snapping at the air to drive the sheep together, while the other four worked the gate of the pasture, lifting the heavy wooden bar with their snouts.

"Resource acquisition," murmured the Rooting Revelation. "Look. They aren't killing. They're stealing."

"They're hungry," said the Communion.

A young shepherd boy, panicked by the sight of the pack, threw a stone. It struck a large grey wolf on the flank. The wolf snarled, spinning around—and then stopped. It didn't lunge. It barked a sharp, guttural command, and the pack retreated, dragging three sheep with them into the treeline.

The Federation stepped forward.

"Wait!" called the Curly Communion. They projected their voice, warm and resonant, toward the retreating shadows. "Dear ones! We see you!"

The grey wolf froze. It turned back, yellow eyes narrowing. Around its neck was a strip of bright red cloth, tied in a clumsy knot.

"You..." The wolf's voice was rough, like stones grinding together, but the Common was intelligible. "You... speak? To us?"

"We know," said the Revelation, stepping up beside the Communion. "We know what has happened to you. We are the same."

The wolf looked at the pigs—twenty-four of them, standing in formation, wearing vestments and armor. Confusion warred with instinct in its eyes.

”Not safe,” the wolf growled. ”Hunters come. We... protect pack.”

And with that, they vanished into the woods, taking the sheep with them.

The Brotherhood watched them go, their eyes fixed on the treeline. They noted the wolf’s posture—not the low slink of a predator, but the tense, upright stance of a soldier on a contested border.

”They’re scared,” Grendel grunted. ”And they’re disciplined. That’s a dangerous combination.”

Corel the shepherd sat on the grass, his mouth hanging open. ”Did... did you just have a conversation with the wildlife?”

”Briefly,” said the Magistrates. ”Though the syntax was rudimentary. We will need to establish a formal dialogue.”

Chapter Three: The Sorcerer’s Mistake

The Council meeting in Welton was screaming match.

Tillus Merrion, the head councilman, slammed his fist onto the table. ”I don’t care if they recite poetry! They’re stealing our livelihood! You were hired to kill them, not invite them to tea!”

”We were hired to resolve the crisis,” corrected the Magistrates. ”Extermination is a crude resolution to a complex socio-political issue.”

Father Merriksonn, the village priest, sat with his head in his hands. ”My brother,” he whispered. ”Alexi.”

The room quieted.

”The sorcerer?” asked the Rooting Revelation. ”The one who vanished three months ago?”

”He was... experimenting,” Merriksonn said, looking up with haunted eyes. ”Wild Magic. He wanted to understand the nature of the soul. He disappeared the same week the wolf attacks began.”

”A Wild Magic Surge,” deduced the Revelation, their eyes spinning. ”High-energy discharge into the local biosphere. If he died during the surge, his own cognitive patterns could have imprinted onto the nearest receptive vessels.”

”He gave them minds,” said the Communion softly. ”He died, and in dying, he woke them up.”

”It’s an abomination!” shouted Tillus.

”It’s a miracle,” countered the Communion. ”Or an accident. But the result is the same. They are conscious. They are people.”

”They are thieves!” Tillus roared.

The Bristled Brotherhood stepped forward. The floorboards cracked under Grendel’s hoof. ”They are stealing because they are hungry. Because they have new minds that burn calories, and they don’t know how to farm. They are desperate.”

”So are we!” Tillus shot back. ”If we lose the flock, the village starves!”

"Then we negotiate," said the Magistrates. "A treaty. Boundaries. Tribute. Mutual defense."

"Tribute?" Tillus laughed bitterly. "You want us to pay them for not eating us?"

"We want you to pay them for *protecting* you," said the Brotherhood. "We saw an Owlbear track in the woods. Fresh. You think a wooden fence keeps an Owlbear out? A pack of intelligent wolves does."

Corel stood up. "The pig is right. If they can talk... maybe they can listen. I vote we let the Federation try."

"I vote yes," said Merriksonn.

Tillus looked around the table, his face purple. "Fine. Try your diplomacy. But if you fail, I'm burning those woods down."

Chapter Four: Vespers In The Woods

The Western Woods were dark, tangled, and silent. Too silent.

"We are being watched," said the Brotherhood. "Six targets. Flanking positions."

"Good," said the Revelation. "We need an audience."

"Sing," ordered the Communion.

The Federation began to chant. It wasn't a stealth mission; it was a procession. They sang the Vespers of St. Barnabas, twenty-four voices weaving a complex, discordant harmony that echoed off the trees. It was a sound that said, *We are here, we are loud, and we are absolutely not normal prey.*

They found the den in a hollow beneath a massive, overturned oak. Bones littered the ground—deer, sheep, and the fresh, massive skull of an Owlbear.

"See?" whispered the Revelation, pointing to the skull. "Scorch marks. Lightning burns. They used magic to kill it. They're defending their territory."

The singing stopped. The Federation stood in a semi-circle before the dark mouth of the den.

"Come out," called the Communion. "We come in peace. We come to talk."

From the shadows, they emerged.

The grey wolf from the ambush stepped forward. Sparks of blue lightning danced along his fur. Beside him was a sleek, red-furred female, her eyes burning with an inner fire.

"Hunters!" the female snarled, smoke curling from her jaws. "Kill them!"

The pack tensed to spring.

"STAND DOWN!"

The Brotherhood roared it. It wasn't a request; it was a kinetic impact. Six armored boars stomped in unison, shaking the earth. The sheer, disciplined violence of their posture made the wolves flinch.

"We could fight," Grendel said, his voice dropping to a gravelly growl. "You'd kill some of us. We'd kill all of you. And then your pups would starve."

The red wolf—Flame—bared her teeth. "Threats?"

"Facts," said Grendel. "Or we can talk. We brought a better offer."

The grey wolf–Bolt–stepped in front of Flame. "Talk," he said. The lightning on his fur dimmed. "You said... you are like us?"

"We are," said the Communion, stepping past the Brotherhood's shield wall. "We were changed too. We know it hurts. We know it's loud inside your heads."

Bolt's ears flattened. "So loud. Voices. Questions. Why? Why are we?"

"We don't know why," admitted the Revelation. "But we know *how* to be. Let us show you."

Chapter Five: The Accord

The inside of the wolf den smelled of dry earth, old fur, and ozone.

The Federation sat in a circle with the pack leadership. The Magistrates had produced a scroll and were drafting terms with a quill held delicately in their mouth.

"**The Welton Accord**," the Magistrate read. "Clause One: The Western Woods are recognized as sovereign Wolf Territory. No humans enter without permission."

"Good," grunted Flame. "Humans stay out."

"Clause Two," continued the Magistrate. "The Pack ceases all raids on Welton livestock."

"We starve?" Flame snapped. "We take what we need!"

"Clause Three," the Magistrate said, raising a voice to override her. "Welton provides an annual tribute of twenty sheep, delivered to the tree line. In exchange, the Pack provides protection against apex predators and bandits."

Bolt tilted his head. "They give? We protect?"

"It's a job," explained the Brotherhood. "Like a sheepdog, but you own yourselves. You trade labor for food. That's economics."

"Twenty sheep..." Bolt calculated. "No risk. No hunters. Pups eat."

"It is a soft life," Flame spat. "A pet's life."

"It is a *safe* life," Bolt countered. "For the pack."

From the back of the den, a small head poked out. A pup, no older than a few months, stumbled forward on oversized paws.

"Papa?" the pup squeaked. "Are... are those pigs?"

The Curly Communion made a sound that was half-sob, half-squeal. "Hello, little one."

The pup sniffed the air. "You smell funny. Like... like old books and truffles."

"We are holy pigs," the Communion said softly.

"Are we holy?" asked the pup. "Are we people? Mama Flame says we are monsters."

The room went still. The crackle of Flame's fire was the only sound. She looked away, the light in her fur guttering like a dying candle.

"You are not monsters," said the Communion, leaning forward to touch their snout to the pup's forehead. "You are people. You are new people. And you are loved."

Bolt looked at his pup. Then he looked at the pigs. "We sign," he said. "We sign the paper."

Chapter Six: The Fire And The Pup

The return to Welton was tense. Bringing a lightning-wreathed wolf into the village square was a test of faith for everyone involved.

But when Bolt placed his paw print on the treaty next to Father Merriksonn's signature, the air in the village changed. It wasn't trust, not yet. But it was a start.

"I forgive you," Merriksonn had whispered to Bolt. "For Alexi. He would have loved you."

But not everyone was ready for peace.

That night, back at the den, the celebration was cut short.

"TRAITOR!"

Flame stood atop the rock shelf overlooking the clearing, her fur wreathed in actual fire. Behind her were four other wolves, their eyes glowing with shared rage.

"You sold us!" Flame screamed at Bolt. "You made us servants! I will burn it all!"

She leaped.

Bolt was slow, heavy with the meal of tribute mutton. He went down hard, Flame's jaws closing on his shoulder, fire singing his fur.

The Brotherhood moved to intervene, but the Communion stopped them. "No," they whispered. "Not violence. Words."

The Communion stepped into the center of the fight. "Flame! Stop!"

Flame looked up, muzzle bloody. "You! You poisoned him with your soft words!"

"You are afraid," said the Communion. They stood alone, unarmored, defenseless before the raging alpha.

"I AM NOT AFRAID!" Flame roared, the heat from her body curling the leaves on the trees. "I AM STRONG!"

"You are terrified," the Communion insisted gently. "You remember being a wolf, when the world was simple. Hunt, eat, sleep. Now you think. You worry. You wonder about the future. It is agonizing."

Flame faltered. The fire flickered.

"I don't know how to keep them safe," she whispered, the roar turning into a whine. "If we trust... if we stop fighting... we die."

"Or you live," said a small voice.

The pup—the one who had asked if they were people—trotted out from the nursery. He walked right up to Flame, ignoring the heat.

"Mama," the pup said. "The pig is nice. The pig says we are holy."

Flame looked at the pup. She looked at Bolt, bleeding on the ground. She looked at the Communion, who watched her with eyes that held no judgment, only infinite, breaking sorrow.

The fire went out.

It didn't just vanish; it seemed to be sucked back into her skin with a final, sorrowful *hiss*, leaving behind the smell of damp ash and heartbreak.

Flame collapsed, not in defeat, but in exhaustion. She curled around the pup, burying her face in his fur. "I'm sorry," she wept. "It's just... it's so loud in my head."

"We know," said the Federation, all twenty-four voices speaking as one. "We know."

Chapter Epilogue: Diplomats

"So," said the Bishop, leaning back in his chair at Sankt Mangold three days later. "You have established a sovereign wolf nation."

"A semi-autonomous protectorate," corrected the Magistrates.

"And you have negotiated a trade agreement involving sheep."

"Mutual security pact," said the Brotherhood.

"And you have fundamentally redefined the theological status of predatory animals."

"We expanded the circle of grace," said the Communion.

The Bishop sighed, rubbing his temples. But there was a smile hiding behind his hand. "You are going to be the death of me. Or the salvation of the Church. I haven't decided which."

"We aim for both," said the Rooting Revelation.

"The wolves," the Bishop asked. "Will they hold the treaty?"

"Bolt is honorable," said the Brotherhood. "Flame is... working on it. But they have the pups. The pups are the first generation born awake. They will be fine."

"Good," said the Bishop. He picked up his quill. "I am assigning you a new portfolio. You are now the official Diplomatic Envoys to Non-Human Sapient Communities."

"Is there a badge?" asked the Brotherhood.

"No," said the Bishop. "Just more paperwork."

"We love paperwork," said the Magistrates.

And the Soft and Fluffy Federation marched out of the office, tails wagging, ready to find the next impossible thing and ask it if it wanted to be friends.

Somewhere to the west, in a den under an oak, a wolf pup was trying to teach his sister how to say "please."

THE END