

## The Councilwoman

By Sophia Salamon

The day started out like any other. The Councilwoman rose at 7:00 AM in her small cottage and walked the lonely roads through the village. Although the sun was shining, today its warmth sent a chill down her spine. The silence unnerved her, but she was used to it, as nobody would dare rise without her permission. She allowed herself a small smile that didn't reach her eyes as the sea breeze filled her senses. What a lovely place to live in, neat and orderly. Everyone simply did what they were supposed to, when they were supposed to.

The Councilwoman entered the Hall at 7:25, her long black robes sweeping the dusty stairs. With a sense of purpose, she walked the familiar route to the large wooden chair (some might call it a throne) at the back of the spacious room. In front of her lay two stamps and a red ink pad on a carved mahogany desk. Ignoring her desk for the moment, the Councilwoman instead veered to the left, where a large golden framed mirror awaited her. With an air of reverence, she reached down with her right hand to pick up a curly white wig that rested on the dusty wooden floor, akin to the ones worn by the judges of old. The Councilwoman carefully lifted the wig onto her chin-length hair, obscuring its natural light brown waves. Throughout this ritual, she never broke eye contact with herself in the mirror. She felt powerful as she looked at her reflection, standing there proudly in her official robes and official hair.

At precisely 7:30, now sitting in her chair, the Councilwoman reached out her pale, slender hand to bang the large gong resting next to her with a felt-tipped mallet. The sound reverberated throughout the Hall and the Councilwoman sighed contently. After a few long minutes, there was a pounding at the large wooden door of the Hall. The Councilwoman finally gave the villagers permission to enter and the flood of people started pouring in. The Councilwoman smiled in a satisfied way as she looked down at her citizens.

“One at a time!” she roared over the chatter of the crowd. “Line up, let the eldest go first! You should know the drill by now!”

The people looked up, startled, as if they had forgotten she was there. They quickly arranged themselves into a line that went all the way out of the Hall and around the corner. A withered old man was at the front and he stepped forward to speak in a wispy voice.

“Your Honour, permission to buy a cow from my neighbour?” he asked tiredly, looking down at the floor. The Councilwoman felt a strong sense of satisfaction. It felt good to be respected. She quickly made her ruling, but she let him wait a few seconds before granting her permission.

“Very well, approved. Your arm?”

The man held out his thin arm, his knobby fingers shaking slightly. The Councilwoman pressed her stamp onto his arm and it came away, leaving behind a red message: "APPROVED".

"Next!"

A sturdy old lady came stumbling forward, clutching a small girl's hand. The girl was staring blatantly at the Councilwoman, which irked her to no end. She thought that she would never cease to be irritated by the young ones. They were too curious, too bold, like persistently buzzing mosquitoes that she could not escape.

"Your Honour, permission to send my granddaughter to school with rain boots instead of regular shoes today?" she asked confidently.

"Well, is it going to rain today?" the Councilwoman asked listlessly.

"Your Honour?" stammered the old lady, her eyes widening. She clearly wasn't expecting to be questioned on such a simple request.

"It's a simple question. What's in the weather forecast today? Is it going to rain?"

"N-no, Your Honour, not in the weather forecast. But I know it's going to rain. I can feel it in my bones!" the old lady said, regaining some of her confidence. It gave the Councilwoman great pleasure to deliver her verdict to this disagreeable woman and her ungrateful child.

"Denied! Arm!"

With darkening eyes, the old lady rolled up her sleeve and thrust her arm towards the desk. The Councilwoman pressed the "DENIED" stamp down carelessly, smudging red ink all over the woman's arm. Scowling, the old lady dragged her wide-eyed granddaughter out the door and the Councilwoman felt a pang of annoyance. Useless decisions like that were starting to wear her down. Of course, it was she who had established the rule that she would make all the decisions, but she preferred not to dwell on that.

The day went on like that, with the villagers asking the Councilwoman to deny or grant their requests and her doing so with increasing irritation. One would think that she would get used to the monotonous responsibility, but evidently, she had not.

At last, the day drew to a close. At 7:57 PM, the line of people had dwindled to just a handful of people and consisted of just the youngest villagers. After denying a little boy's request to adopt a sea lion pup, the Councilwoman faced the last person in line. Expecting a child, she was surprised to see an old man with dark skin and soft brown eyes. He was short and thin with a fine crop of almost completely grey hair.

"Sir," she said tiredly, "The hours for seniors ended at noon. Your request will have to wait until tomorrow."

This was not uncommon, a few elderly stragglers trying to force her to make a late decision. The Councilwoman had learned long ago that it was easier to just deny them straight away rather than reason with them.

“Ah,” said the man in a soft, deep voice. “But what if I don’t have a request?”

The Councilwoman sharpened her gaze onto the man and for the first time realized what he was wearing. His thin frame was swallowed by a baggy sky blue tunic, unusually colourful for the village. A careful pattern of golden thread was embroidered along the hem, forming an intricate motif of flowers and leaves.

“No request?”

The Councilwoman’s voice came out hoarse and rather high, and she immediately cleared her throat uncomfortably. The man’s eyes twinkled slyly, and she had the odd feeling that he was silently laughing at her.

“Nope,” he said simply. “No request.”

The Councilwoman felt her neck prickle with sweat. She wasn’t used to conversation beyond “approved” or “denied”. *I’ll just have to humour him*, she thought sourly.

“Then-” There it was again. Her voice came out high-pitched and squeaky. She coughed, swallowed hard, and tried again.

“Then why are you here?”

The man’s chocolate coloured eyes, set deep into his wrinkled face, seemed to shimmer and the Councilwoman found herself leaning forward to catch his whispered answer.

“To see you, Audra. To see what you have become.”

The Councilwoman reeled back, shock apparent on her normally expressionless face. She now registered who he was, and she cursed herself for not seeing it earlier. She wasn’t prepared to see him like this, no longer as young and energetic. He seemed to have aged a thousand years since she had seen him last. When she spoke again, her icy words cut through the air like a thrown dagger.

“Atticus! You’ve gotten old,” she spat, almost surprised at the poisonous hate in her own voice. “How did you know where to find me?” she asked with a humourless laugh.

“It was easy, Audra,” Atticus said sadly. “I just followed the trail of destruction.”

The Councilwoman felt a flare of anger pierce her chest, sharp and painful. How *dare* he just walk in and be so irreverent to her, the Councilwoman, sitting on her magnificent throne, toiling day after day for her loyal subjects!

“This is not destruction! It’s simply good, safe governance, which is more than you could provide. People need to be contained, Atticus. They cannot be trusted to make their own decisions and that is why-”

“You decided to make the decisions for them?”

For some reason, Atticus finishing her sentence with exactly the right words made the Councilwoman even madder.

“Exactly!” she snapped, then felt foolish, childlike. It was entirely his fault that she was making such a fool of herself.

“Audra, it’s not too late,” Atticus said abruptly, stepping forwards. “Do you remember how it used to be? You used to dream of becoming a fair and just leader, respected by your advising council and upholding the honourable principles of democracy.”

“That may be true,” the Councilwoman snapped. She had regained some of her composure and stood up to her full height. A bead of sweat ran down from her wig, which suddenly felt pretentious and immature, like a child playing dress up. “But I was young and foolish then, and that has not been my dream for a long time. It was unattainable and it was you who put the notion in my head that it could come true.”

A shadow crossed Atticus’ face. “I admit, I have made many mistakes as well. My biggest one was to trust you too much, Audra.”

For some reason, Atticus’ disappointment in the Councilwoman hurt her more than his words. She felt the need to defend herself but came up wordless. What could she say to that? It felt like he was cheating, apologizing while reprimanding her at the same time.

Atticus took her silence as an invitation, asking one more question.

“Audra... what if it hadn’t happened? Where would you be now?” he asked in a soft tone, his voice confident in the success of his approach.

That was the snapping point for the Councilwoman. She arched her stooped back, adjusted her wig, and narrowed her piercing blue eyes. She slammed her pale hands on the desk and a satisfying thump echoed through the Hall.

“I am the leader of this village. I am in charge and no one dares meddle with my decisions. My words are *law* here and I order you to get out! How dare you come in here and be so impertinent! I am the ruler. I am the one and only Councilwoman!”

“Very well, Audra,” Atticus said wearily. “I tried. I had hoped... but no. Good day, Councilwoman.”

*You had hoped what?! the Councilwoman screamed inside her head as Atticus walked slowly out the door. It clanged shut behind him. That you would come talk to me and everything would suddenly be all right? Normal? Like... how it used to be?*

The harsh truth struck her like a bolt of lightning. Nothing would ever be like it used to. Nothing could be. The Councilwoman slumped down onto her desk, buried her face in her hands, and tried to stay perfectly still. To her shock, she felt warm, salty teardrops rolling down her cheeks and pooling in the corners of her mouth. It was a sensation she had not felt for many years and the realization only made her cry harder. Her muffled sobs reverberated throughout the Hall. They were lonely, pathetic. Everything the Councilwoman thought she was not.

There was a terrible ache inside the formidable leader, a sadness that tore at her, eating her from the inside. Her heart had never quite healed since it was broken on that fateful day.

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Audra rose at exactly 7:00 AM in her small cottage by the sea. She took a moment to admire the rolling waves outside her window before forcing her feet to move. It was an important day and she couldn't keep the Mayor waiting. Taking one last fond look at her peacefully sleeping father, Audra strolled out the door. She relished the feeling of the gravel path under her thin leather shoes.

As she approached the village, laughter and chattering flew up to greet her. Smiling idly, Audra walked through the rows of houses and through the market, kindly greeting people. She remarked on new babies, upcoming weddings, and sales of fish, the village's main source of food. Audra was troubled to hear that the fish harvest was unusually small, and she made a mental note to mention it when she reached the Hall. With fish on her mind, Audra quickly walked through the large wooden door of the Hall, throwing it shut behind her. Six annoyed faces greeted her.

"Late again, Audra!" Councilman Miles remarked with a dramatic sigh. Audra had never liked him, what with his scruffy red beard and mop of ginger curls. She always made a point of keeping her appearance impeccable and she resented his unprofessional attire. Besides, he was always complaining about such a young Councillor being introduced to their tight-knit group.

"Though not as late as the Mayor, I see," Councilwoman Serena added, motioning Audra towards her simple wooden chair. A few silent minutes later, a short, thin man came bursting into the Hall. His messy, greying black curls framed a soft, pleasant face with deep brown eyes.

"Sorry I'm late, everybody!" he said breathlessly. "I was just-well, never mind now. Shall we begin?"

They did a roll call and had a short debate on whether they should establish a rule that required cyclists to wear helmets on village paths. Since Atticus was against it, saying the law would just be a nuisance and nobody would follow it, the majority of the Councillors agreed.

“Any more propositions? Issues? Anything that’s worth our consideration?”

Audra raised a prim hand and was immediately called upon. There were hardly any problems in their idyllic little village, so the Council meetings were relatively short.

“Mayor Atticus, I was talking to some of the people at the market this morning and apparently there seems to be quite a shortage of fish. I’m concerned that soon we’ll run out completely.”

Councillor May, a petite woman with short blonde hair, spoke up. “When I talked to the fishermen, they said the same thing. The fish are simply disappearing. The ones they have been able to find are small and diseased, with rotting flesh inside.”

“Everyone, please,” Atticus said, “I know that some of you are concerned, but we need to remain calm. We are not in a crisis. Frankly, I myself don’t think it’s such a big deal. We still have fish, and people can deal with minor issues like this. Besides, there are other things to eat besides fish. We need to remember that.”

Audra nodded eagerly. The Councillors knew that Atticus, as Mayor, always knew what was best for his people. The meeting was shortly dismissed and she avoided the village on her way back home.

On her next trip to the market, Audra found that hardly any fish were available. With little to trade with the fruit farmers from the South, there was now quite a shortage of fresh fruit as well. She started noticing children swipe old bruised apples from the stands, or even a fish when they could get one. Over time, the theft only became worse. Even the more well-off began stealing from the vendors in the market, many of whom felt unsafe and closed their businesses. Concerned by this rapid turn of events, Audra and two other Councillors brought it up at the next meeting.

“People are hungry,” Atticus said soothingly. “Really, what harm is there in a couple of stolen apples? I’m sure everything will sort itself out soon.”

“I just saw a fully grown man wrestle a chunk of moldy bread from the little boy who had just stolen it,” Audra protested. “How is that harmless? I’m worried that this will get much worse.”

Atticus shrugged flippantly. “The boy stole it in the first place, so there’s no legal issue.”

People were getting more afraid in the village, barring their doors at night and some were even keeping weapons under their beds. The normally happy, quaint villagers had turned against each other seemingly overnight.

The day when everything changed started off like an ordinary Sunday. Audra was coming home from yet another frustrating Council meeting and was ready to have a nice bath and a hot supper. It was a rainy, miserable day and her shoes squished against the wet gravel with every step. She was so intent on watching the rain fall on the stones that at first she didn't notice that something was wrong when she reached her home. Something was off about the way the door hung oddly on its hinges, the huge muddy footprints tracking a path into her house. Only when broken glass crunched under the soles of her shoes did Audra pay attention to her surroundings.

A tall boy of about fourteen was crouched over their food cabinet, stuffing dried fish and canned fruit into a burlap sack. Audra stood frozen in the doorway for a moment, dread sinking into her stomach. It had finally happened. Someone had finally broken in.

"Hey!" she called out in a voice that came out more meek than frightening. Still, the boy jumped up and his eyes darted around in panic. They were swollen and red and he was covered in dirt. Audra could count his ribs through his thin shirt, but she couldn't afford to feel sorry for him. All she cared about in that moment was the food.

"Give me back my food," Audra growled, brandishing her umbrella like a sword. The boy backed away slowly towards the broken window behind him.

"I don't want any trouble," he said, slow as molasses. "I take this food, you forget this ever happened. Okay?"

"Audra?"

Audra closed her eyes for a brief second before turning to face her father, who was coming from his bedroom. He looked like he had just woken up from a nap, but he wasn't well and had looked gaunt for weeks. The food shortage had not been kind to his frail body.

"Papa, everything's okay. I can handle this. Please just go back to bed, okay?"

Her father noticed the boy. "You-you get out of my house! Thief! You-"

He wheezed and slumped against the doorframe. Audra felt a jolt of panic in her stomach. Fully focused on her father, Audra didn't notice the boy's hand inching towards the heavy brass candlestick on the table until it was too late.

"Papa, look-"

In one swift move, the boy swung the candlestick towards her father's head. As if in slow motion, it hit him on the temple and he instantly crumpled to the ground. At that point, everything became blurry. Audra heard someone scream and realized that it must have been her because the

boy was gone with her food and her father was... a few shaky minutes later, Audra stood up from where she had been lying on the floor (how did she get there?) with black spots clogging her vision.

Audra swayed on the spot for a moment then stumbled toward the door. Her feet took her along her usual path to the Hall. She stumbled through the door and vaguely noticed that the Hall was empty. Empty of all except for Atticus. He was standing with his back to her, filing papers or something in a cabinet. Audra looked down at her hand, which she had only just realized was clutching something so tight that her knuckles were turning white. It was a piece of wood, somehow dry despite the pouring rain. She must have picked it up on her way to the Hall, but she had no memory of it.

Numbly, Audra reached into her pocket to pull out a box of matches. Her hand struck a match against the wall of the Hall. It lit up with a bright, fierce blaze and Audra stared curiously at it with blank eyes. Moving without her bidding, her hand touched the match and the wood. Instantly, the wood caught ablaze with a small whoosh. Without a second thought, Audra threw the wood towards Atticus' fancy carved desk. As it soared through the air, Atticus turned around.

“Audra-”

The desk was burning, slow at first but catching on fast. Atticus yelled and jumped back as Audra slowly turned on her heel to leave the burning Hall. She would reconstruct a new one once she was in charge. The useless Mayor and his minions on the Council were no longer suitable for the enormous responsibility before them. This was not a time for slow democracy. The people needed a leader to guide them to safety with a strong hand.

The next few weeks seemed to pass in a haze. The first step Audra made towards a better future was to remove Atticus from it. She found that most of the Councillors agreed with her views, so Atticus was immediately deemed a threat to society and banished from the village. They sent him on his way with an angry horde of villagers chasing after him and the few Councillors who remained loyal to him. Audra watched with no remorse from the entrance of her shiny new Hall.

Slowly, peacefully, order was restored to the village. The people welcomed the Councilwoman as their leader and a new era was born.

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The Councilwoman stood up shakily, feeling drained in a strangely cozy way after crying so much. A wave of grief made her sit down again heavily and at last the realization of what she

was doing to her people struck her. The Councilwoman knew where she needed to go. Back in time, to a place she had not been to for years. Riddled with pain, she trudged the path to her old house, which was now overgrown with weeds and grass. She felt a sudden spike of anger at the plants, flourishing when she couldn't. On the way, she stomped every flower to the ground, not managing to stop even as guilt consumed her.

The door was still hanging oddly on its hinges and the Councilwoman could still see broken glass inside the narrow hallway. She felt dizzy and nauseous as she stepped through the door. The cupboard was still open after all this time, and there was someone bending over it. The Councilwoman screamed. The man turned around.

"Hello, Audra," said Atticus. "I thought I'd find you here. I think it's time you and I have a little chat."

The Councilwoman felt like she should be angry, but she just felt empty, like a slowly deflating balloon. Wordlessly, she and Atticus sat down at the small table. She noticed with a pang that there was a small spot that was a different colour from the rest of the table where the candlestick used to sit.

"Audra," Atticus said, leaning forwards. "It is time to make a decision that should have been made a long time ago."

The Councilwoman nodded in silence, understanding. Things weren't working the way they were supposed to. The village needed change.

"Things need to change," said Atticus, echoing her thoughts. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming you. We each had our faults as leaders-I was too lenient, and we both know how that turned out. Your way is not working either. The villagers live empty lives. They are just pieces in your board game."

"So what do you suggest we do?" the Councilwoman muttered stiffly, speaking for the first time. "It's not as if we can just leave them to their own devices."

"That's exactly what I'm proposing!" Atticus said excitedly. "Maybe the problem is that we never asked the people what *they* wanted. Neither of us are fit to govern here. We should just go far away and leave all this behind. As for the villagers, let them govern themselves! They could do what they wanted, when they wanted. What do you say?"

The Councilwoman thought about it for a short second, but there seemed to be only one real answer. "I-I don't know."

Atticus leaned forwards in his chair even more, tipping its back legs off the floor. "Audra, I don't think you'll ever really stop being the Councilwoman, and I'll never stop being the Mayor.

Even if we were to suddenly be good and fair rulers, the village people would never forget what we did to them. It's kinder this way, for us and for them."

"Us and them". Such a simple sentence, but it made the Councilwoman balk at the enormity of what she had done. She realized that there *was* a divide between her and her people. Atticus was right. Things could never be the same again.

"All right," the Councilwoman finally said with a dip in her voice. She lowered her head humbly. "I think... we need to let them decide for themselves."

Atticus smiled gently and Audra took his offered arm. Together, they walked out of the cottage and kept walking until the village was far behind them.

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The villagers gathered in the square squinted at the receding figures of their leaders, walking off together into the sunset.

"Well, that's new," said one man, looking slightly stunned. Many of the people in the crowd were also shocked, staring in disbelief at the people who were supposed to guide and protect them. They felt like the Mayor and the Councilwoman had destroyed their beloved village and then, when their duty was to fix it, they ran away like cowards.

"Well, what do we do now?" a woman called out angrily. "When do we wake up now? Who is going to make our decisions? How do we choose a new leader?"

A young voice soared above the chatter of the crowd.

"Do we even need a leader?"