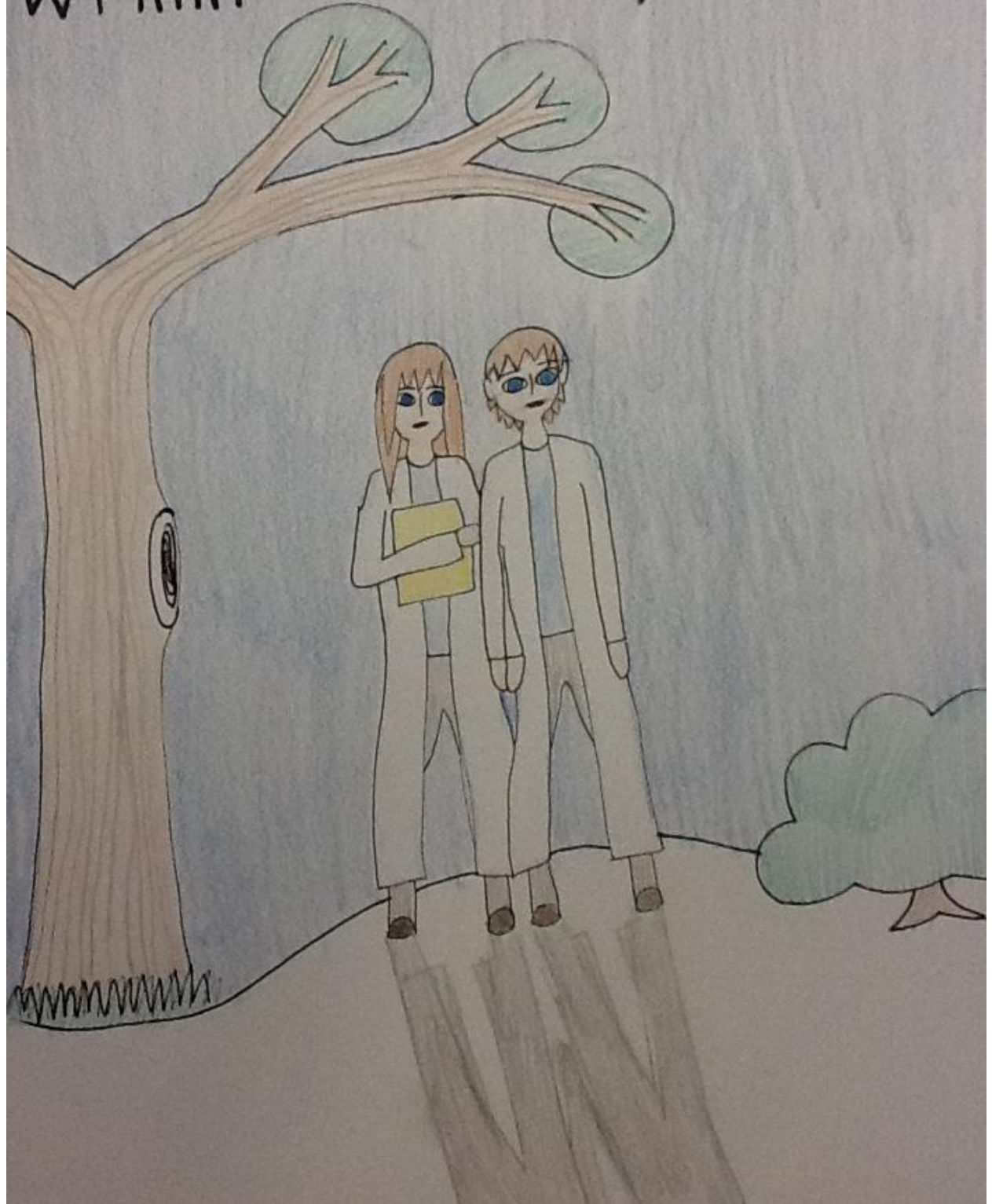


# Within the Woods By LOLO T.



# **WITHIN THE WOODS**

**BY LOLO T.**

## CHAPTER ONE

*It has been 34 years since the world ended. I was young when the economy broke down. Police broke into houses, fires started, citizens got very sick, and people left the city. Most people are homeless, and people fight for their food. Also, I suspect that somehow, the government is hiding something. All the city guards have mechanical devices in their bodies.*

~Arckofe

“Madilith, come on,” My brother says.

“Okay, I’m coming Karphin,” I say. I pull on my old green jacket. “Where are we hunting today?” I asked.

“Hmm, I guess the northern woods,” he says, handing me my bone-handled knife. We walk outside as glittering snowflakes melt on our chilled faces. We cautiously go to the woods’ border, listening for sounds of scratching or scurrying.

I hear a yell, and we both turn. About 200 yards away, a guard starts running after an old man hobbling on a cane, trying to run away. “He probably stole from someone,” Karphin mumbles. The guard pulls a gun from his belt. I close my eyes and wait for the gunshot. After a few seconds I hear the bang, and the man collapses over his cane. I grab Karphin’s arm, and we hurry into the brush.

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Karphin and I quickly walk back to our Aunt’s shelter, with a rabbit and two squirrels tied to my belt. We call our aunt, Aunt Louie. Her real name is Louise, but we liked our name for her better. She saved up money and supplies for four years, and made a shelter about the size of an old school classroom, by emptying out a shell of an abandoned building. We call it home.

Karphin helps me untie the squirrels and rabbit from my belt, and we use our knives to cut off the skin and cut up the soft meat into small cubes. Aunt Louie walks up to us. “Good job. Put it in the fire pit,” she says. I put the meat in a stone pan and lay it over a wire rack. We listen as the meat sizzles, and I hear shuffling coming from the doorway.

Turning suddenly, I see a middle-aged man step clumsily through the planked door. His eyes widen. “You have food? And a fire!” The man says. His face is long and thin, and his voice raspy and hollow. He stares at us weakly, and steps closer. I stand; tighten my grip on my knife handle. I scour at him, and tighten my jaw.

“Come on in,” Aunt Louie says, touching my arm. “Anyone is welcome to stay.”

“If it’s okay with you it’s okay with me,” I grumble, slumping back into my chair. My Aunt’s amount of acceptance amazes me. The man’s face relaxes and he comes over to us. I sit back down and get the tin plates from the old wooden cabinet Aunt Louie made. I hand everyone a plate as Aunt Louie uses old cooking tongs to serve bite-sized pieces of squirrel. I wrap up the rabbit meat for later.

“What’s your name mister?” Karphin asks after a few silent bites.

“Arckofe,” The man says.

“Well, hello there, Arckofe,” Aunt Louie interrupts. Arckofe smiles, and takes another bite.

Once the sun sets, we all pull up our blankets and sleeping mats around the fire pit. Aunt Louie adds one of her many dried logs to the fire pit, and adjusts it perfectly so the fire will stay bright and warm most of the night. I pull my covers up to my cheeks and drift into a dream I don’t remember.

## CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, Karphin and I wake up early. We mix wheat flour with spices and water, and form them into patties. We let them cook on the wire rack. The sweet aroma wakes Arckofe. He grunts and sits up as we finish taking off eight patties. Arckofe stretches and takes a drink from the cold rain barrel.

As Aunt Louie wakes, we all sit and eat, and start a conversation.

“How old are you, Arckofe?” I ask.

“I’m 56,” Arckofe answers. “I may be old, but I have seen quite a lot in my time.”

“What do you mean, ‘Seen a lot in my life’?” Karphin interjects.

“When I was younger, the government was very equal among the citizens. And there were separations among the land. And then suddenly, 34 years ago, it was all gone.” Arckofe’s eyes look blank as he stares into the fire. I glance at Karphin. He catches my eye, and gives me a glance that tells me he is curious about what Arckofe just said. I am wondering as well.

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Once it is nightfall, we pull our blankets up to the fire after eating a dinner of washed dandelion leaves and leftover meat. Karphin and I lie next to each other, watching each other and waiting for a long while, until Aunt Louie and Arckofe relax and quietly start to snore and mumble to themselves.

He quietly sits up, and he whispers, “Madilith, are you awake?” I roll over and nod. We wrap wool scarves around our necks, pull our hoods up around our heads and put on our gloves. “C’mon,” he whispers. I turn the handle on the wooden door, and pull it open. As it creaks, cold air blows inside and makes the fire crackle and puff. Aunt Louie stirs, and we both freeze. She grumbles and goes back to her dream.

We step outside and my body freezes as I breathe in the frigid air. Wiping his nose on his sleeve, Karphin starts walking in the direction of the only building the government still uses. We carefully walk along the edge of the forest and the thin layer of snow crunches beneath our feet. Anytime we see a guard, we quickly side step into the trees. As a guard with an eye attachment with a flashlight walks around a corner of a building, we step into the brush. But Karphin accidentally steps on a large stick that fell off of a tree and a loud crack echoes through the sky. “Hey!” The guard yells. We start running. “Who’s out there at this hour?” he growls. I pick up into a sprint. Falling behind, Karphin grabs my wrist. We run deeper into the woods, and darkness engulfs us.

We keep running, and I eventually see the bright white lights of the Officials' Building. I stop, and trip as Karphin is still gripping my wrist like a vice. We curl over our knees and catch our breath. Our breathing comes in short, quick pants. I faintly hear the guard's footsteps long behind us slow into a walk.

A tall spiked fence closely surrounds the Officials' Building. Barbed wire is looped around and in between the tall spikes. Two guards are standing firmly positioned at the high gate in front of the large metal door. The Officials' Building is a short but very large building. The two guards occasionally look around the darkness sharply. We crawl along bushes until we reach another, smaller gate. Another guard is standing in front of that gate, his hand tightly gripping his gun. His eyes carefully scan the whole area around him.

"We have to distract him," I whisper.

"I have an idea," Karphin says.

He runs his hands through the snow and comes up with a large, smooth, white-gray stone. He rubs his wet hands off on his pants, and stands up. Before the guard can see him, he throws the stone far away from us near a group of bushes. The stone flies through the dark, cracks through weak sticks, and crashes into the ground. The guard's head snaps around, and his eyes dart around to where the stone landed. He glances around, and shuffles to the bushes, grumbling to himself.

We stand up and run to the gate. I grab a bar and shake it. It jiggles, but doesn't give way. I sigh. "Darn," I mutter. I fumble around and find a long, thin stick. I push it far into the keyhole. I shove it in farther and twisting it around, I give up. Karphin takes the stick from me and presses it at an angle into the keyhole. Slowly twisting it, he angles it sharper. He hears a faint click, and he pushes the gate open.

I open the white metal door and step inside. The hallway smells strong with chemicals and cleaning supplies. Long lights are set up every few feet on the ceiling, giving everything a white glow. I pull off my jacket, as there are heating vents along the wall. All I hear other than silence is our heavy breathing and footsteps clicking on the tile floor. We turn a corner, and voices echo around the hallway.

## CHAPTER THREE

Karphin puts a finger to his lips, and pulls me around a corner. I strain my ears to hear as the voice gets louder. We crouch behind a shiny metal cart. We watch as a woman holding a small device to her ear walks through the hallway intersection and stops to lean against the chalk-white walls. Her long blonde hair flows down her back as she brushes her bangs out of her eyes.

“No, Mr. Fane,” she says. A faint voice mumbles on the other end. She lowers her voice.

“I think the citizens are getting suspicious. One guard said that a man confronted him and was yelling, ‘Everything is your fault!’.”

“Suspicious about what?” I thought. I gave Karphin a confused look. More mumbling comes from the other end.

“Okay sir. I will put the file in the safe,” she says. She takes the device from her ear and presses an orange button on it. She turns on her heel and walks away. We turn the corner to enter a door with a glass window. We crawl up to the door and peek through the glass window.

Inside, the woman is going through files in metal cabinets. She flicks through a few. After a while, she pulls out a large pale-yellow folder. She walks out the door and tucks the folder under her arm. We slide behind a corner so she doesn’t see us. Her tall heels click as she strides down the hallway.

“I want to know what’s in that folder,” I whisper.

“How will we get it, though?” Karphin mumbles. I shrug, and scoot around the corner. We quickly brush through the hallway and past doors. We glance through windows looking into rooms, trying to find the lady.

I stop when I look into a room with white lab coats on many hangers, gray pairs of pants, and light blue undershirts. I put my hand on Karphin’s shoulder to stop him. “Wait, what if we wear disguises, do you think we would be able to get in?” he whispers after looking in the window. I shrug, and push open the door.

We both change into clean clothes and I tuck my knife in my pants, hidden under my coat. To further disguise myself, I find a pair of glasses in a brown purse and put them on after breaking out the lenses. “Okay, now we look like workers,” I say, as we step back into the hallway.

“I think she went that way,” Karphin says, pointing to the right. I shrug, and start jogging in that direction. I turn the corner and I see the lady at the end of the hallway. She stands in front of a large door and pulls a white card from her pocket. She holds it in front of a black device next to the door handle. The device beeps, and she pushes the door open. After she steps inside, the door slams behind her.

“What was that thing she used to open the door?” I whisper.

“A magnetic card, I think,” Karphin shrugs. He shoves his hand in his labcoat pocket, and comes out with an ID card similar to the woman’s. On the card, there is a picture of a young man with short dark hair and a beard. “Jeremy Wellins,” Karphin says. “I hope it works for the door.”

I take the card from his hand and walk up to the door. I hold the back of the card to the device on the door. A high-pitched beep echoes through the hallway. I cautiously turn the door handle as dirt and sweat drips down my face. I push, and the door swings open, creaking eerily. Inside is a room with bright lights, tables, and cabinets. A few doors lead to closets and other rooms. I look through one of the windows. There is a small room with more filing cabinets and a table with a desk chair.

The woman is standing in front of a safe with the door left open, talking to herself as she looks through the folders and binders. I strain my ears to hear as she talks. “Management...No, Taxes...No, ah! Here we are, City History,” she mumbles as she pulls out a large document binder and plops it down on the glossy wood table. She opens it and it hits the table with a thud.

“What do we do?” I whisper to Karphin.

“Should we take it?” He whispers back.

“I guess so,” I mumble. “Maybe we should knock her out,” I think. I slip my knife out of my pants. Karphin sees it.

“You’re not going to-,” he says.

“It’s to knock her out!” I cut him off, smacking his arm.

“You ready?” he whispers. I nod, and shove open the door.

The lady sees us and cries out. Before she can react, I use the blunt end of my knife and give her a hard blow to the left temple. Her eyes close, and her body crumbles to the floor. “Someone’s going to come!” I hiss. I scoop up the binder and we run out the door. As we sprint through the hallways I try to remember what direction we came from.



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We eventually burst outside and run into the forest, with two city guards close behind us. "Keep...Running!" I pant.

"Uh-huh," Karphin agrees. Sweat soaks my jacket, and the chilly air makes my lungs burn like fire. Branches and thorns tug at my hair and clothes, and scratch my face and hands. I pull my knife out, and hack away at the brush in front of me.

The thick roots on the ground grab at our boots and make us stumble. My foot gets caught on a log, and I'm thrown foreword. I grab onto Karphin's wrist to steady myself, but instead he is pulled to the ground as well. I grunt as I tumble onto my stomach. I scramble to my hands and knees, but a hand on the back of my head shoves my face into the snow-covered ground. I hug the binder close to my chest as the snow makes my face and wrists burn.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Out of the corner of my eye, Karphin turns and sits up before the other guard can get to him. As the second guard lunges at Karphin, he pulls his knife out of his pocket and stabs the guard in the arm. The guard pulls back, clutching his forearm. He lunges again, and this time Karphin plunges the knife in the guard's chest. He coughs, and collapses to the ground.

The guard holding my head down rolls me over and punches my jaw. I groan as black and white dots curtain my vision, threatening to pull me out of consciousness. I feel his weight being thrown off me as Karphin stabs him in the back with his knife, and kicks him in the shoulder. I stand up, but fall to my hands and knees from dizziness. I sigh at the sight of the crimson snow all around us. I stand again and Karphin helps me steady myself as the dots fade from my vision.

I dry my hands off on my dirt covered pants as we continue along a trail. The woods soon thin and open up into a clearing. A frozen lake glimmers and shines in the dusty moonlight. I sit under a bare tree and hold snow to my face to dull the pain in my jaw. Karphin sits beside me and takes the binder from my lap.

The spine of the binder creaks with cleanliness. A stack of papers, each with dates on them, have events neatly typed on them. I read over the sheet on the top of the stack.

*December, 2132:*

*Today, twelve groups were sent to raid a city. 153 houses were burned down. Over 1300 were killed. We hope to send about twenty more groups to another city within the next year.*

I shiver as cold water dribbles down my wrist to my elbow. I let out a big breath, and the air in front of me clouds as a fog. I let the snow drop to the ground as I wrap my arms around myself. Karphin slips the page back into the binder.

"Let's go home," he says, slowly getting to his feet. He gives me his hand, and I stand up as well. He tucks the binder under his arm, and we start in the direction of home.

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Back home, I force my numb fingers around the chilled door handle, and I push it open. Orange and peach specks of the rising sunlight gleam through the cracked windows, and give the whole room a pretty illumination. I look to the middle of the room and I see Aunt Louie sitting with her arms crossed, scowling at us.

“Where on Earth were the both of you?!” she snarls, and I flinch at her fierceness.

“Calm down,” I grumble, and I slunk down next to her.

I tell her the whole story, from us sneaking out, to when we arrived at the lake. She listens quietly, calming down. As I tell the story, she has the occasional question. I read some pages from the binder to Aunt Louie and Arckofe, who has just woken up. I carefully watch Aunt Louie’s expression as I read, at some points worry spreads over her face, and sometimes it’s in deep concentration. I finish, and Arckofe says, “It all makes sense now.”

“We have to get this to the rest of the city,” Aunt Louie says.

We think, and Karphin blurts out, “I have an idea!” He explains his plan to us. “So, we have to get these pages to the whole city, right?” I nod. “What if we go to the town, after we read all the sheets, we just pass them out to the citizens, so they know the truth?”

“That should work,” Aunt Louie says. Arckofe nods.

“We should eat first, and then we can go.” I say, standing up. I go over to the cabinet, and grab the extra rabbit meat, wrapped in a long strip of gray cloth, and the heavy stone pan. Karphin gets the fire going hotter, and I sit down next to him. He sits back and I place the pan on the wire rack.

The fire slowly glows to be a bright orange, with yellow specks. I un-wrap the meat and place the cubes carefully on the hot pan, cautious not to burn my fingers. We all wait in silence and listen to the sizzle as the tasty aroma fills the room. Only then do I realize how hungry I am. My stomach grumbles loudly, and Karphin smiles at me. I take the meat cubes out of the pan and serve the plates. I quickly eat; finally glad to have food in my system.

After eating, I go outside and rinse off the plates in the rain barrel outside the doorway. I cup my hands and take a long refreshing drink as well. I put away the plates and gather up the binder. I slump down next to Aunt Louie and place the binder in my lap. She drapes her arm around my shoulders as I open the binder. The chalk-white smell sterile like harmful chemicals. Bright sunlight reflects onto the pages, and makes them look white-hot.

Over the course of the next hour, we all sit hunches around the fire as we read through the 70 or so pages from the stack of events. This was the one page that made disgust and fear course through my veins.

*October, 2146: Only a few cities remain to be raided. Tomorrow, more groups and airships will be sent to attack and bomb five more cities. We have also takes citizens by force to work as troops.*

I shudder as I read last page. I slam the binder closed and stretch after standing. "Let's go." I say, pulling my coat collar up to my ears.

Everyone stands and I tuck the binder under my arm, turning to the door. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Aunt Louie says, placing her hand on my arm. I nod, and she drops her arm. We step outside as wind howls through the doorway. A new layer of snow glitters on the ground.

We soon get to the small town. It consists of only a few huts and tents set up in a small loop. People in heavy clothing crowd around fires for warmth. Silence fills the area other than coughing from a sick man. I open the binder and take out all the pages. Setting it on the ground, I separate the stack of papers into four equal piles. I hand one stack to each of the others, and keep one for myself.

I step out into the center of the loop "Excuse me! People," I yell. "There is something very important that we have to tell you!"

People look and stare in my direction. "All of the suspicions we have are confirmed! We have proof. This binder was stolen from the Officials' Building!" I say, holding up my stack of papers.

"We're going to hand them out!" Karphin yells. I step over to a lady curled under a tent. I hand her two sheets and watch her as she reads them over. Her expression seems to get angry, then upset.

"I knew it." She grumbles.

We keep handing out papers until we have none left. "What do we do now?" someone asks. "Let's take back what's ours!" yells another. "Yeah!" the town erupts.

Soon us and most of the Town have formed a large circle around the Officials' Building. The few guards positioned around the building give us frustrated and confused looks.

"Go!" Karphin says. Everyone starts running. Men attack the guards as the rest of us run inside. Soon all the workers have been locked out and all their weapons taken. We stay inside, since the building has heating. We search all the rooms and someone finds a room with freezers full of food packages. We heat them up in something called 'ovens' and have a large lunch.

We finally have our home back.