

Alethea's breath misted in the cold night air. She wore white camouflage cargo pants, perfect for blending in with the snow-covered landscape. They were loose enough not to restrict movement and tight enough not to catch on anything. The matching jacket, however, like any coat designed for winter wear, was too large and bulky for quiet, easy movement. Instead, she wore a long-sleeved T-shirt that matched her pants and, beneath that, a black long-sleeved Under Armour shirt for warmth. She'd never cared much about clothing styles, but wearing camouflage had definitely not been part of her normal wardrobe until recently. Now she wore it every day—well, night. Luckily she lived in Michigan, where camouflage was readily available.

Alethea was twenty feet in the air, crouched on a tree branch while watching a spot on the ground fifty feet away from the tree she was perched in. So far, no sign of anything. She'd been tracking... something. All she'd seen so far were paw prints shaped like a cat's, only larger. Much larger.

Alethea's night had started when the police received an emergency call from the Mullins' house, but all they got was the call followed by silence. The Mullins lived in a neighborhood where all the homes were a healthy distance apart, and their backyards ran into one of the many areas of forest surrounding Saint Clair.

Alethea had heard the call over the police scanner in her bedroom, then snuck out the window to her car. She'd parked down the street, beyond the reach of the flashing cruiser lights. She ran through someone's side yard to the forest and used the trees as cover while making her way to the rear of the Mullins' house. She knew no one in the neighboring homes would see her. People had developed the habit of not looking out their windows. It made them feel safer to not see what happened at night.

The sliding glass door on the rear of the house, which led from the deck to the kitchen, was lying on the kitchen floor, along with part of the wall. Blood covered the ceiling, floor, and remaining walls. Body parts were strewn about. From where Alethea hid among the trees, less than twenty feet from the deck, it looked like parts of Mr. and Mrs. Mullin and their twelve-year-old son Tyler were missing. Probably eaten.

Officer Tom Duncan stood on the deck, looking into the kitchen. A new cop, Officer Scott, was puking into the grass. Alethea hid behind a tree close enough to eavesdrop thanks to her enhanced hearing.

“Cody,” Officer Duncan called out as Cody Scott straightened and wiped his mouth. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Cody nodded though he still looked green.

“Look at this.” Tom’s flashlight followed a set of giant bloody paw prints in the snow leading into the forest. “We’ll come back in the morning. Maybe we’ll find something worth burying.”

Officer Scott nodded agreement. “I’ll notify the military that there was another incident.” The two officers returned to the cruisers and drove away.

Alethea had followed the paw prints from the Mullins’ home a mile into the forest. The giant prints were easy to see in the snow. But then the tracks stopped inexplicably. Scared of a trap, Alethea had immediately leapt into the trees. Whatever these things were, they were too big for the branches to support them. She hopped from tree to tree, watching the area near where the prints ended, but found no trace of the monsters.

That’s how she found herself crouched in a tree and watching the place where the prints she’d been following had abruptly ended.

*There it is.* In the darkness of the forest, Alethea saw a spot of deeper blackness slide through the trees. It was the size of a draft horse, but panther shaped. The beast had followed its own footprints. Had Alethea stayed on the ground, it would have snuck up behind her. The thing was smart. *Damn.* The dumb ones were harder to kill because they were usually absurdly big, strong, and durable, but the smart ones were more likely to kill her. This one was both big and smart.

Alethea leapt from tree to tree toward the monster, as quiet as the moonlight. Another nice perk of her powers was an innate ability to move quietly, which had saved her life several times, since some of the monsters possessed amazing senses. Either this one couldn’t hear her, or it pretended not to. Probably the latter, since it had been intelligent enough to sneak up her back trail.

The cat-like creature followed Alethea’s prints to where she had leapt into the trees. From there, it started sniffing the ground in an ever-widening circle. Searching for her. *Crap.*

Alethea paused in a tree halfway back to where she’d first leapt up into the branches. The thing’s search pattern would soon bring it underneath the tree she was in. Despite its size, the creature stalked softly, without leaving fresh prints. Which meant it had left prints on purpose to lure her into a trap.

Definitely very smart. The only noise the monster made was the slight sound of it sniffing the ground.

Strapped to Alethea's lower back was a sheath containing a Rambo-style combat knife. She drew the blade slowly to avoid making any noise. In her small hands, the knife looked more like a short sword. The black metal of the blade didn't reflect the light. Two months ago, she'd almost gotten killed while hiding in some shrubbery from eight red, gorilla-type things with fangs when they saw the light glinting off her knife. After that, she'd switched to the black blade.

The moment the stalking beast stepped beneath Alethea, she dropped soundlessly from the branch where she'd perched. She landed on the thing's shoulders, simultaneously stabbing the blade into its neck between its first cervical vertebra and its skull, killing the monster instantly.

Lucky for her, the beast's hide was merely thick and durable. Some of the monsters were so well armored they were practically invincible. This forced her to do things like drown them or get dangerously close and stab them in the eye with something long enough to reach their brains.

As the beast collapsed to the ground, something heavy bowled into Alethea, knocking her off the monster's back, causing her to yelp in surprise. She heard a vicious growling as she instinctively raised her arms to protect herself.

A second panther monster's jaws snapped at her face, and she felt the searing pain of its claws gouging deeply into her shoulders. "Ahhh!" The thing's weight alone would have driven its claws through her body, but its weight combined with its strength meant she could be easily ripped to shreds. She held the claws back from her body as best she could; even so, they left deep lacerations along her sides and shredded her shoulder muscles. Not enough to kill her, the way she was now, but it would limit her ability to fight. *I'm in trouble.*

Alethea recalled a scene from not long ago. She never got a clear look at the creature that attacked her one night while she'd been patrolling in the woods, but something literally bit off the muscles in her shoulders. She'd only survived by running away as fast as she could. The mystery creature chased her until the sun rose. The sunlight didn't seem to hurt it, but all the monsters had an instinct to remain unseen. She liked to think she could have killed the unknown monster with her legs, but she couldn't risk it.

Now she maneuvered the beast's paw so its claws lodged into her hip bone. It hurt like hell, but it

meant she could release her grip on the paw for a few moments without worrying about it shredding more of her flesh and organs and hopefully give her the chance to fight back. She put her left hand to the thing's throat, just in time to keep the giant monster from biting her head off.

Her knife was digging into her back. It'd been knocked from her grip and she'd landed on top of it when she'd been knocked off the first monster's back. With her right hand now free she reached beneath her and pulled the knife free despite the creature's claws being embedded in her shoulder. She stabbed the monster in the side of its chest repeatedly. The monster barely acknowledged the wounds and continued to try to claw and bite at her.

Squeezing her arm between herself and the monster, the movement causing even further damage to her shoulder muscles from the claws already dug into them, Alethea jammed the knife, hilt deep, into the middle of the thing's chest. Holding the blade in place, she brought her knees to her chest, rolled backward, and kicked her legs out, launching the thing over her head. When the monster's claws were wrenched from her hip bone they took several bone fragments with them, causing her to cry out in pain. She kept a firm grip on the knife, slicing the length of the thing's body as it flew past her face to land on the ground behind her. It felt like someone had poured a five-gallon bucket of hot water over her entire body.

Alethea dove sideways and started rolling around in snow not soaked in the thing's blood, cleaning it off herself as fast as possible. Some of the beasts possessed acidic or poisonous blood. She was spitting repeatedly, trying not to swallow anything. She scrubbed snow into the gashes in her shoulders and sides to clean them. So far she'd proven relatively resistant to the poisons, but she had to be safe. The few times she'd been poisoned, she'd merely become weak or dizzy, but she'd survived.

A thought occurred to Alethea. *What if there's a third?*