

Unending Love

By PantherStorm

Submitted: July 2, 2006

Updated: July 2, 2006

WARNING: Do not read the following story unless you have read the original: The Calm before the Storm.

Some say love is a miracle... But for PantherStorm, it's no walk in the park. A tragic, heartbreaking story of forbidden love,

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/PantherStorm/36121/Unending-Love>

Chapter 1 - Unending Love

2

1 - Unending Love

Kelsey Finn

FINAL DRAFT II 4-10-06

Block 1

Snowflakes drifted silently down from the clouded gray sky, coating the forest with a blanket of pure white. Only the undersides of the trees remained untouched; but from their bare branches hung miniature icicles. Not a sound was being made; the silence broken only by the occasional bird-call. The tranquil scene was interrupted only by two cats making their way through the forest. A silver-gray tom, his fur touched white by the fallen flakes of snow, poked his head out from behind a cluster of snow-capped ferns. Shortly behind him, a slender black and white she-cat glanced warily over her shoulder.

Are you sure it's all right, IcePaw? the she-cat asked, her green eyes glittering in the dim light. Images from the battle that had taken place just moments ago flashed through her mind: The enormous dogs, the triumph of winning her first battle, and the strong love she felt for IcePaw, as he risked his life in attempt to save hers.

Never surer, PantherStorm. IcePaw replied. He brushed the tip of his tail along PantherStorm's flank. There'll be nothing to worry about, you'll see.

PantherStorm continued towards the camp, her fur still standing on edge.

I sure hope you're right. She murmured, glancing around again. I've been through enough for today.

IcePaw nodded silently. You've been through more in these past two days than most Medicine Cats go through in a lifetime. he mewed, pressing his nose to her shoulder to comfort her. I'll be here for you.

PantherStorm looked up gratefully. Thanks, IcePaw. She purred. They padded onward, leaving tiny pawprints in the freshly-fallen snow.

Suddenly, a black-and-white blur leapt out of the bushes in front of them.

PantherStorm? the cat asked incredulously. And IcePaw? her eyes brimmed with happiness.

SpiderClaw! PantherStorm gasped.

The WinterClan Deputy jumped for joy. I found them! she yowled suddenly. They're alive! SpiderClaw wouldn't have been visible at all in the snowy white abyss if it weren't for her irregular black stripes running all the way down her back. I found them! She called again. In response, pawsteps crunched in the snow next to them. MorningStar, WinterClan's leader, stood breathing a sigh of relief.

Thank StarClan you're all right. MorningStar meowed. I don't know what we would have done if we had lost our only Medicine Cat.

PantherStorm purred in delight. You'd be in a bit of trouble then, wouldn't you? She shook her head. Is my brother all right? she asked anxiously.

MorningStar glanced at SpiderClaw, who gave a solemn nod. PantherStorm, FrozenFire was injured in the battle. He& He s in no pain. MorningStar added hastily. PantherStorm breathed a silent sigh of relief.

I must go see him. She said immediately. Is he in my den?

MorningStar scuffed her paws on the ground. Like I said, FrozenFire was injured in the battle-

I have to see him! PantherStorm mewed desperately. Tell me where he is!

MorningStar glanced over at SpiderClaw once more. PantherStorm, *listen to me*. FrozenFire is in no pain, just remember that. MorningStar looked up, sorrow showing in her eyes. PantherStorm, FrozenFire didn t survive the battle.

PantherStorm felt lightheaded all of a sudden. FrozenFire? she stammered. FrozenFire s gone? She felt the world stop spinning under her feet.

MorningStar nodded, her eyes brimming with sadness.

PantherStorm stood, staring straight ahead. He can't be gone. She looked up at MorningStar.

Why have you let this happen? she hissed, almost sure that she could be heard from across the border. Why? she stalked away, whipping her tail from side to side.

SpiderClaw glanced over at MorningStar. She took it better than I expected. She mewed softly.

IcePaw looked over to where PantherStorm had disappeared. I'll go help her out. It must be hard for her. He looked at the ground. Her mother and father are gone, then her sister died of BlackCough. FrozenFire was the only one she had left. He mewed, his blue eyes clouded with sympathy. You can't blame her.

MorningStar nodded understandingly. I know. And I thought SilverRain took it badly. She glanced up as if she had suddenly remembered something. You don't know, do you? About SilverRain? IcePaw shook his head.

SilverRain just moved into the Nursery this morning. She's expecting kits.

IcePaw felt a sudden wave of sympathy for SilverRain. Her kits would never know their father! I'd better get going. He mewed suddenly. The longer she's out there alone, the worse condition she'll be in when

she gets back. You know PantherStorm. He sighed. I'll be back at camp in an hour or two. MorningStar flicked her tail as a signal of Good Luck as he vanished into the snow.

He really loves her, doesn't he? SpiderClaw asked MorningStar with a look of approval spreading over her face once IcePaw was out of earshot. MorningStar sighed. Sometimes I fear that PantherStorm may end up breaking the Warrior Code in order to be with him. Everyone knows that Medicine Cats can't have kits!

SpiderClaw shook the snowflakes off of her pelt. I know. She agreed. But love is love. Not even the Warrior Code can change that.

MorningStar said nothing, but turned back towards camp. We'd better get back to camp. SpiderClaw, convinced that she had won their argument, trailed her leader back to WinterClan.

* * * * *

PantherStorm&

PantherStorm looked up to see IcePaw standing next to her.

Go away. She said bluntly, looking away.

IcePaw looked hurt. PantherStorm, you need to get back to camp. It s cold out here.

PantherStorm lay huddled in a tiny ball. I need to be alone. She whispered.

IcePaw understood exactly how she felt. He, too, had lost his parents at a young age, and with his sister gone to join SpringClan, he had felt that the world would never be the same. PantherStorm, listen.

No, *you* listen. IcePaw was taken aback by her sudden fierceness. My parents are gone. FlamePaw died of BlackCough, and now, as if things couldn t possibly get any worse, FrozenFire is gone. She broke off, breathing heavily. Don t you be telling me to listen.

IcePaw sighed. PantherStorm& he hesitated, trying to figure out what to say. If you stay out here much

longer, you're going to freeze your fur off. Other cats were hurt in the battle. You're the only one in the clan who can heal. They need your help. He held his breath, wondering what her reaction would be.

PantherStorm glared up at him for a split second, fury glowing in her eyes, and then she seemed to give up. I'm sorry, IcePaw. I didn't mean it, I really didn't mean it. IcePaw breathed a sigh of relief. Come on. He mewed. Let's get you back to camp.

* * * * *

It had stopped snowing by the time PantherStorm and IcePaw arrived back at the campsite, but the sun still remained hidden behind dismal gray clouds. PantherStorm had just settled down to a nice, plump fish from the river when she heard MorningStar call the clan together for a meeting. She sighed and stood up, wandering over to the center of the camp to see what she had called the meeting for.

I ask our Warrior ancestors to look down upon this apprentice. She called. PantherStorm strained to see who she was talking about, and eventually spotted IcePaw's silver pelt.

He has trained long and hard under the ways of your noble code, and I ask that you accept him as a true Warrior. IcePaw, do you promise to uphold the Warrior Code, and to protect and defend this clan even at the cost of your life?

IcePaw stood still and met MorningStar's gaze squarely. I do. He murmured.

Then by the powers of StarClan, IcePaw, you shall now be known as IceHeart. StarClan honors your courage and bravery, and will forever honor you as a Warrior of WinterClan. MorningStar placed her muzzle on IceHeart's head, and he licked her shoulder in return.

Several cats began chanting IceHeart's new name in approval, and eventually, PantherStorm joined in. IceHeart! she called. IceHeart! Upon hearing his name, the silver tabby padded through the surrounding cats to see PantherStorm.

What do you think? he inquired.

I love it! PantherStorm exclaimed. Congratulations!

IceHeart glanced around to make sure no one was listening before he continued. PantherStorm, I've been meaning to talk to you about something. He mewed nervously. I love you with all of my heart. You mean the world to me. He paused. But you're a Medicine Cat. Medicine Cats can't have kits; it's

against the Warrior Code. I don't know how we could ever be together.

PantherStorm took a deep breath. She knew what was coming.

I want to ask you to leave your job as a Medicine Cat. Then we *could* be together. Don't you see? he asked, his voice shaking. It's the only way.

PantherStorm had not expected this; She presumed he was about to break off their relationship right then and there. I don't know. She said, uncertainty glowing in her eyes. Leave my job as a Medicine Cat? I don't know how I could possibly do that.

IceHeart turned away sadly. I knew you wouldn't listen.

PantherStorm stopped him. Now wait a minute. I never said I wasn't listening. But leaving the clan with no Medicine Cat? That would be a heartless thing to do.

If it comes from love, how could it be heartless? Come on, you could train another apprentice before you retired, it wouldn't be a big deal.

It wouldn't be a big deal? she gaped at him. How can you say that? It takes *moons* to train apprentices as Warriors, let alone Medicine Cats! she shook her head unbelievably. You're right. There's absolutely no way we can be together.

IceHeart slowly understood what she was saying, and his blue eyes grew bright with distress. Please, PantherStorm. You can't tell me I'm not allowed to love you anymore.

PantherStorm looked away. I'm sorry, IceHeart. I love you, I really do. But if it comes down to it, my loyalty to the Warrior Code is stronger than anything else. She whispered. I & I really am sorry.

IceHeart said nothing, but looked away. I understand. He said, his voice scarcely loud enough for PantherStorm to hear. If it makes you happy.

No, IceHeart. Listen. This is *far* from being a decision that I'm happy with. But StarClan chose me to be a Medicine Cat. StarClan chose for us not to be together.

IceHeart was silent as he turned around and disappeared into the Warrior's Den.

Oh, I hope I made the right choice. She thought as she wandered back to her bed. *I hope I didn't hurt him too badly.* But her thoughts quickly drifted to dreams as she fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

* * * * *

As PantherStorm awakened the next morning, she immediately sensed that something was wrong. MorningStar stood in the center of camp with a worried expression on her face as she addressed the two cats standing in front of her, who PantherStorm recognized as SpiderClaw, and her apprentice, NightPaw.

What s going on? PantherStorm asked as she got nearer to them. What s the matter?

SpiderClaw flashed her a sympathetic glance. It s IceHeart. She said, her expression unreadable.

IceHeart? PantherStorm continued cautiously. What s he done?

MorningStar answered for SpiderClaw. He s gone to SpringClan.

PantherStorm purred out of amusement. No, I m serious. What did he do?

MorningStar shook her head slowly. I m not joking, PantherStorm. He s been gone since last night, and we found his scent leading from here- she pointed with her nose to the Warriors Den. -All the way to SpringClan. She looked back up at her. I m sorry, PantherStorm. We never dreamed he was so unhappy here.

PantherStorm could not believe her ears. IceHeart had *left*? But& But how? she glanced around wildly. How? *Why*? She shook her head vigorously. Please tell me this is some kind of& some kind of sick joke? she pleaded. He can t be gone!

He is, PantherStorm. MorningStar sighed. IceHeart is in SpringClan. We can only hope he s happier where he is now.

PantherStorm felt the world coming to an end. Her only love was gone, and her life was drastically changing. She had no one left. PantherStorm had never known loneliness before, but that had been taken for granted. Now that IceHeart was gone, she realized how big a mistake she had made.

If I had never questioned his request, this never would have happened. She cried to no one. If he hadn t left, I would have given up my duties for him by now. Why did he have to go? She lay down and buried her head in her paws.

I have to retire. The thought suddenly crossed her mind. *It s the only way. I know there s no way I can live without him.* She stood up and shook herself briskly. She was going to get IceHeart back, one way or another. Although she wasn t entirely sure how she was going to pull it off, she knew it was necessary.

MorningStar, she called her leader over. I ve been having a hard time keeping up with everything that has been happening lately, and I need some help. I think I could use an apprentice&

* * * * *

Okay. So what so far do you know?

Umm, I know that Poppy seeds are to dull the pain, and& Well, that s it. PebblePaw looked down at his paws sheepishly.

The ceremony for PantherStorm to receive her new apprentice had been held just a few hours ago, but PantherStorm was already training. The sooner PebblePaw became a full Medicine Cat, the sooner she could retire.

That's okay. PantherStorm responded. You'll learn much more to come, you'll see. She straightened up. You already know that Poppy Seeds are to dull pain. But even with poppy seeds, there's much more to know. She continued. She reached up and picked off a few poppy seeds from a shelf formed by the jagged edges of the rocks making up the Medicine Cats' Den, and dropped them in front of PebblePaw.

When a cat is in pain, you give them these to swallow. If you give them too many, though, they'll fall into a deep sleep. Which isn't bad if they've just come out of something very serious. She added. But even a very small amount can make a cat drowsy. That's why you have to be careful. She finished.

PebblePaw looked up enthusiastically. Cool! he mewed. PantherStorm chuckled softly. It was not long ago that she had been an apprentice herself, and she remembered the endless energy all apprentices had. Their training continued all throughout the day, PantherStorm only stopping once to take a rabbit from the fresh-kill pile. The sun was finally setting on a long, tiring day as PantherStorm ended the training and told PebblePaw to get some rest. As PantherStorm heard her new apprentice's breathing become regular, telling her that he was asleep, she reflected on that morning. *IceHeart is gone, but maybe, just maybe, things could change.* She thought to herself as she drifted off into her thoughts and let sleep claim her at last.

Two Moons Later

PantherStorm stood at the edge of the river, examining her reflection on its crystal-clear surface. Her black fur was sleek and shining in the shimmering starlight, and her white paws and muzzle were touched to silver as the stars reflected their light on her pelt. Her green eyes were emeralds, glistening in the dim light as she noticed a flame-colored cat in the reflection behind her. She turned around, recognizing her brother FrozenFire as if he had been standing there for a moon.

FrozenFire& she mewed, her voice shaking. Why did you leave me? Why did you leave SilverRain?

FrozenFire shook his head slowly. Don't say that like it was my decision. In the end, it was up to StarClan. StarClan chose me to save the clan.

PantherStorm pressed her muzzle against his comfortingly. But why? she asked, half to herself. Why you?

FrozenFire pulled away from her. I need to tell you something. He looked into her deep green eyes.

StarClan sent me to tell you to be loyal to not only your clan.

PantherStorm felt confused. Loyal to& to not only my clan? What else could I possibly be loyal to? she shook her head. There must be some mistake.

There s no mistake, PantherStorm. Be loyal to not only your clan. FrozenFire stated.

But I don t understand.

You ll see. Don t fret over it, just remember. He nodded to his sister, then his image began to fade.

FrozenFire! PantherStorm called to no one. Wait! Tell me what you mean! But her yowl was met by silence.

Something sharp was prodding her in the side. She opened one eye, and saw PebblePaw standing over her with a worried expression on his face.

PantherStorm? he questioned uneasily. Are& Are you okay? You were talking in your sleep. Something about a& a fire that was... frozen? he looked at her quizzically.

I'm okay, PebblePaw. PantherStorm sighed. Just a dream, that's all. But in the back of her mind, she knew that it wasn't just a dream. *FrozenFire was trying to tell me something. What did he say?* She hung her head. *He told me to do one simple thing: Remember. How could I have forgotten already?*

PebblePaw mewed something, but it was barely audible. PantherStorm knew that he had gone back to sleep, but she also knew that there was no way she would be able to go back to sleep. She lay awake all through the night, thinking about her dream. *He said something about loyalty.* She recalled. *I wonder if he was talking about IceHeart.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the first ray of sunshine streaming through her den, which seemed to coat both her and PebblePaw's pelts with gold. PantherStorm stood up and stretched. A new day was beginning, and it would be a perfect opportunity to do more training. It would be hard for PantherStorm with IceHeart no longer by her side, but she would survive. He would be back within a moon or two, PantherStorm was sure of it. The sooner she trained PebblePaw, the sooner he would come back; it was that simple.

Let all cats join here in the center of camp for a Clan meeting. MorningStar's words made her jump.

At this time of day? PantherStorm muttered under her breath. She must be mad.

MorningStar stood, gathering cats around her. Once everyone had come out of their dens, MorningStar started her announcement, SpiderClaw at her side.

SpiderClaw, NightPaw and I have found evidence of SpringClan cats hunting on our territory.

Oh, no. PantherStorm gazed, horrified, up at her leader. *Not again.*

As the third time this season, we reserve the right to openly attack SpringClan. They have brought this upon themselves; StarClan have mercy on their souls. Yowls of approval went up all around the camp. We will attack at sunhigh.

PantherStorm had to bite her tongue to stop herself from objecting out loud.

IceHeart is in SpringClan! She reminded herself. *What will happen if it comes down to someone fighting him?* She forced the image out of her mind and a shudder crawled down her spine. *What if that someone is me?*

* * * * *

The sun was directly above in the sky as MorningStar addressed the clan once more before the battle. SilverRain, you are to stay here, as your kits could come any day, now. Elders are to stay behind and guard the kits and apprentices apprentices under 8 moons only, NightPaw. She winked at SpiderClaw s apprentice, who jumped up and down for joy. I get to be in a battle! she whispered excitedly to GoldenPaw, but she was quickly shushed by DarkFang.

Let s go, WinterClan. MorningStar yowled, and lead the clan onward, into SpringClan territory.

As PantherStorm traveled, carrying all sorts of healing herbs, her mind was filled with images of IceHeart. She pictured the enthusiasm in his eyes as they were kits, pouncing on one another; the sorrow as the realization hit him that his sister was gone; the joy as they were both apprenticed; and a more recent one: the pain and desperation as PantherStorm chose the Warrior Code over her love for him. They had been through so much together. *How will I bear it?* She wondered, feeling her heart beat faster as they neared SpringClan. *I want him back. I want to feel the warmth of his fur against mine, and the comfort of his voice. I can t live without him.*

Up ahead, the rest of the cats had dropped into their battle crouches. PantherStorm mimicked them, wishing that she had IceHeart by her side. MorningStar gave her battle cry, and WinterClan raced into the SpringClan camp. PantherStorm could see nothing but cats locked in battle. Nearby, MorningStar was tussling with a pure black SpringClan tom. DarkFang was scratching fiercely at a SpringClan queen, who was fighting to get ahold of her neck. Near the entrance, NightPaw was struggling bravely against a

gray and white tom.

No! PantherStorm cried, and charged towards them. PantherStorm skidded to a halt as the two cats turned to stare at her. PantherStorm finally realized that the tom was not IceHeart, and backed away.

Sorry. She said, embarrassed. Wrong cat.

NightPaw shrugged, and once again leapt on her opponent. PantherStorm continued making her way through the battle. Suddenly, a familiar silver pelt stood in front of her.

PantherStorm. IceHeart murmured. He looked at his paws.

IceHeart& PantherStorm gazed up at him. Why did you leave me?

IceHeart shook his head slowly. I had nothing left.

PantherStorm gave him a disbelieving look. What about me? she whispered. Am I nothing to you?

IceHeart sighed. You said so yourself. There s no way we could be together.

That s not true. PantherStorm objected. I ve started training another apprentice. As soon as he becomes a full Medicine Cat, I can retire. She looked at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. It s no big deal.

IceHeart pricked his ears up. You would do that for me? he shook his head, as if it weren t a real offer. You chose the Warrior Code over me before.

I was being stupid, okay? she cried. I didn t know what I had until it was gone. Think of it as punishment for ruining the best thing that ever happened to me.

PantherStorm heard her name being called, and saw SpiderClaw, who had deep scratch marks all along her side. I have to go. She whispered, and dashed off to help SpiderClaw, leaving IceHeart standing there, watching her leave him once more.

* * * * *

Where does it hurt, SpiderClaw?

SpiderClaw was too weak to respond to PantherStorm's question, so she rolled her eyes over to her side, which had long, deep claw marks stretching from her shoulder to her tail.

Good. PantherStorm nodded, making sure her apprentice was watching her. What do we use to stop infection, PebblePaw?

PebblePaw thought in silence for a moment. Cobwebs to stop the bleeding, and feverfew in case of infection.

Very good! PantherStorm praised. Can you get me some cobwebs, please?

PebblePaw nodded and pulled a layer of sticky cobweb off of the wall. PantherStorm took it from him and pressed it against SpiderClaw's wounds, with only a squeak of protest from her patient. It hurt PantherStorm to see SpiderClaw in such a state; her deputy was usually lively, just bursting with strength and tireless energy.

The battle had ended only a few minutes ago, and WinterClan had won. PantherStorm was thrilled that IceHeart had not been injured, even though she wasn't supposed to be rooting for the other team.

Okay, now do you remember what feverfew looks like? It's the little white flower with the yellow center. Can you pull off one of the leaves and bring it to me please?

PebblePaw leapt up and tore off a few feverfew leaves, then dropped them at PantherStorm's paws. Thanks, PebblePaw. She chewed up the leaf in her mouth, then placed the remedy on SpiderClaw's gashes.

Now all we can do is wait. She told PebblePaw, but suddenly noticed that SpiderClaw was trying to say something.

What is it, SpiderClaw? she asked worriedly. Is something the matter?

SpiderClaw looked up at PantherStorm, happiness in her blue eyes. NightPaw & NightPaw should be & made a Warrior & she whispered softly. Please & let it be granted & my final wish.

PantherStorm nodded. Yes. Okay. I'll go tell MorningStar. PebblePaw will be here if you need anything. She padded out of her den and skidded into MorningStar.

SpiderClaw says that NightPaw should be made a Warrior, but she was too weak to tell you herself.

MorningStar nodded in approval. Very well then. NightPaw shall be made a Warrior right now. She trotted into the center of camp. Let all cats join here in the center of camp for a clan meeting. She waited patiently as WinterClan gathered around her.

I have three announcements to make. As some of you may know, I lost one life during the battle. I am currently on my eighth life. Second of all, I would like to give my congratulations to SilverRain, who has just given birth to three healthy kits. And last, but certainly not least- she motioned NightPaw forward. -It's time for a Warrior Ceremony. NightPaw stood, quivering, under MorningStar's gaze.

I ask our Warrior Ancestors to look down upon this apprentice. She has trained long and hard under the ways of your noble code, and I ask that you accept her as a true Warrior. NightPaw, do you promise to uphold the Warrior Code, and to protect and defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?

NightPaw met her leader's gaze proudly. I do.

Then by the powers of StarClan, NightPaw, you shall now be known as NightCloud. StarClan honors your courage and bravery, and will forever honor you as a Warrior of WinterClan. MorningStar placed her muzzle on top of NightCloud's head, and NightCloud licked her shoulder respectfully in return.

NightCloud! PantherStorm called happily. A pang of sadness suddenly hit her when she remembered that the last Warrior to be named IceHeart had left the clan.

PantherStorm twitched her whiskers happily, and made her way over to the nursery to see SilverRain, her best friend and half-sister. She squeezed through the narrow entrance, and immediately saw SilverRain nursing three beautiful kits. Two of the kits had silver pelts, just like their mother's, one darker than the other. The third kit was bright orange, and reminded PantherStorm distinctly of their father.

Oh, hello, PantherStorm. Murmured SilverRain. Come to see the kits?

Of course! PantherStorm said softly, and knelt down next to her. They're absolutely adorable. She said happily. Have you picked out names yet?

Yes, actually. The dark gray tom is ShadowKit. The light gray she-kit is FrostKit and the one she broke off. The she-kit that looks like FrozenFire is AmberKit.

PantherStorm gazed at the kits with an unreadable expression on her face. Beautiful names. PantherStorm commented. I'm so happy for you. FrozenFire would be proud. With that, she turned and squeezed herself back out of the Nursery. She was about to go pick up some fresh-kill when a worried mew sounded from beside her, and she looked down and saw PebblePaw.

PebblePaw? PantherStorm inquired. What s wrong?

SpiderClaw! he mewed weakly, and without another word, PantherStorm raced into her den. SpiderClaw lay on the ground, her chest barely moving.

PantherStorm& SpiderClaw whispered. I m...glad you re here.

What, SpiderClaw? PantherStorm forced herself to remain calm. It s okay, SpiderClaw. You re strong; you re going to make it through this.

NightPaw?... she asked. &Warrior?

Yes, NightPaw is a Warrior. Her name is NightCloud now.

SpiderClaw purred weakly. Take care, PantherStorm.

No, SpiderClaw. Don't talk like that. You're going to make it through this, remember?

Tell MorningStar I'm sorry. She mewed, her voice barely audible. That I didn't serve her longer&

PantherStorm shook her head. SpiderClaw, listen. You *will* serve her longer. You're going to make it through this, and live a full, happy, content life with a mate, and lots of kits, and& she took a deep breath as she realized that SpiderClaw was no longer breathing. PantherStorm placed her head on her paws. She had been unable to save her Deputy.

MorningStar! she called as she noticed her leader's tan pelt just outside her den. MorningStar, come in here. She sighed as her leader made her way into the Medicine Cat's den. SpiderClaw has passed. Her wounds were apparently fatal. She hesitated before continuing. I also think that PebblePaw is ready to become a full Medicine cat.

What? That's ridiculous! MorningStar objected. You only received him as your apprentice two moons ago!

Yes, but he's a fast learner. I've taught him everything there is to know, and he remembers every bit of it! she was determined to win this argument.

PebblePaw, what do we use for rat bites?

Burdock root, and garlic if it gets infected.

Very good! PantherStorm felt truly amazed at her apprentice's skills. Now, what if a cat swallows poison?

Yarrow - it'll make them sick.

Excellent! Hmm&

She was interrupted by MorningStar. Mind if I try?

No problem! PantherStorm mewed confidently.

MorningStar thought for a moment. What if a cat falls into the river?

PantherStorm froze. She had either gone over that, or planned on going over that, PantherStorm

couldn't remember which.

Press on their chests until water comes out, then lick their fur the wrong way to make it dry faster. Maybe some lavender, in case of chills.

Wow. MorningStar was stunned. Maybe you're right, PantherStorm. Good timing, too. Tonight is the full moon! You can take him to Highstones with you at Moonhigh.

PantherStorm bowed her head. Thank you, MorningStar. She said softly. MorningStar nodded and dragged SpiderClaw's body into the center of camp.

I get to be a Warrior tonight? PebblePaw leapt up with joy.

No, PebblePaw. You get to be a *Medicine Cat* tonight, remember?

PebblePaw rolled his eyes. Same difference. He mewed.

MorningStar has to choose a new deputy by midnight tonight. PantherStorm recalled. *I wonder who it will be. Perhaps SilverRain.* She mused. *Or DarkFang, even. Well, whoever it is, I hope they do a good*

job.

And with that, she trotted out of her den to pay her respects to SpiderClaw one final time.

* * * * *

It's time to go, PantherStorm! PebblePaw pranced around his mentor excitedly. Let's go, let's go, let's go!

Okay, I'm coming! PantherStorm sighed. Are you ready? I was *kidding!* she added, at a disbelieving look from PebblePaw. It was a joke! she shook her head. Let's go. We've got to meet the other Medicine Cats.

Okay! PebblePaw bounced up and stood waiting at the Den's entrance.

PantherStorm rolled her eyes and followed, remembering the last time that she had traveled to the Moonstone. It seemed like it had taken place just yesterday; and yet here she was, bringing her apprentice to become a full Medicine Cat. Sorrow struck her as she realized that she would have to retire soon, but she knew that it was for the best. Who knew what lay in store for her?

The heather bushes in front of the camp parted, and PantherStorm stepped through, with PebblePaw right behind her. Okay. Do you remember which way it is to Fourtrees?

Fourtrees? PebblePaw asked, confused. I thought we were going to the Moonstone!

Of course we re going to the Moonstone, you stupid furball.

But you said-

We re going to Fourtrees first to meet with the other Medicine Cats! She yowled. Great StarClan, are you deaf? I told you that already.

Okay, sorry.

They continued in silence for a while, and finally come upon Fourtrees. PantherStorm sighed and looked on, watching the SummerClan Medicine Cats making their way towards Fourtrees. The AutumnClan and SpringClan Medicine Cats, however, were already there waiting.

It s a shame our clans had to fight each other. Meowed CloudFur, the SpringClan Medicine Cat, as PantherStorm and PebbleClaw arrived. I hear you lost a valuable member of your clan?

Yes, SpiderClaw died of fatal wounds. I was unable to save her. PantherStorm responded. Has SunPelt retired already? SunPelt had been the former SpringClan Medicine Cat, and he and BlackClaw the former WinterClan Medicine Cat had been close friends.

Yes, the rule is unfortunate, isn t it? CloudFur shook his head as he spoke. Once a Medicine Cat fully trains an apprentice, he must retire within a moon of their apprentice s becoming a full Medicine Cat?

Not for me it isn t. PantherStorm thought, but she didn t dare say that in front of the other Medicine Cats. Yes, terribly unfortunate. PantherStorm responded softly.

Okay. So, PebblePaw, is it? PantherStorm looked up to see that the SummerClan cats had made it.

Yeppers. PebblePaw responded proudly.

And to be a full medicine Cat already. FrostCloud purred. He must be quite something!

Isn't that the truth. PantherStorm murmured. Okay. Let's get moving.

* * * * *

The tunnel leading to the Moonstone was much longer than PantherStorm remembered it to be. The hot, damp atmosphere of the cavern surrounded her, and she savored the last moment she would have as the only Medicine Cat of WinterClan for a few moments before she sat down and waited for StarClan to send PebblePaw to sleep.

PantherStorm had nearly dozed off by the time PebblePaw awoke from his ceremony. They traveled out

of the Moonstone s cavern, and PantherStorm waited for PebblePaw s news.

Well? PantherStorm asked, unable to contain her excitement. What s your new name?

I m PebbleClaw! He purred. And I m a true Medicine Cat now!

Yeah, well you don t look any different& And you sure as StarClan don t act any different, so don t try anything stupid. PantherStorm said matter-of-factly. We ve got to get back to camp for MorningStar s new Deputy s ceremony, remember?

Oh yeah! PebbleClaw s face lit up. Who do you think it s going to be?

Mmm, I m thinking along the lines of SilverRain or DarkFang. she said, deep in thought. Or quite possibly BlackFur.

PebbleClaw followed close behind. Good choices.

The rest of the way back was completely silent, except for the pitter-patter of snowflakes hitting the ground.

PebbleClaw. PantherStorm said softly. How is your life going right now?

PebbleClaw took no time in replying. A perfect ten, no doubt. PantherStorm nodded, as if something had just made perfect sense to her.

When I went with MorningStar MorningFlower then to receive her nine lives and become MorningStar, she told me that it only snows when a cat's life is as perfect as it can get. I thought it was just an old she-cat's tale at first, but then when we won the battle against the dogs, I felt like my life was perfect, and it started snowing. I guess it really is true.

PebbleClaw looked up in amazement at the falling snowflakes. I suppose you're right. He murmured, gazing up at the pale blue sky. I feel like my life couldn't possibly get any better.

Well, let's just get back to camp and spread all that happiness. Come on. PantherStorm motioned with a flick of her tail for PebbleClaw to follow her as she trotted back to camp.

* * * * *

As PantherStorm and PebbleClaw finally trudged into camp, worn out from the journey, they were happily greeted by MorningStar, who had just come out of her den.

I m glad you re back! MorningStar mewed happily. I need to ask you a question: Are you retiring immediately, or will you wait a while?

PantherStorm had no problem answering her question. I ll be retiring right now. She stated.

Great! MorningStar said loudly, then corrected herself. I mean, okay. I m just glad you re back so soon, we ve been waiting for you to get back.

Thanks. PantherStorm said happily. Are you going to start the meeting now?

Yeah. Sorry. She walked to the center of camp, and yowled the familiar words.

Let all cats join here in the center of camp for a clan meeting! Within a few moments, all cats had joined PantherStorm and PebbleClaw in front of MorningStar.

As you may already know, PantherStorm traveled with PebblePaw to become a full Medicine Cat. We have a New Medicine Cat now& she leaned over to PebbleClaw. What was it again?

PebbleClaw. He whispered.

PebbleClaw! she finished. And now that PebbleClaw is a full Medicine Cat, PantherStorm has decided to retire immediately. And with that, our Deputy must be chosen. PantherStorm could feel everyone tense up around her.

A new deputy must be chosen. She repeated. I say these words before the body of SpiderClaw, that her spirit may hear and approve my choice.

SilverRain! PantherStorm cheered silently. *Oh, I hope it s SilverRain!*

PantherStorm will be the new deputy of WinterClan. PantherStorm felt dizzy all of a sudden. *She was to be Deputy?*

But I'm a well, I was a Medicine Cat. PantherStorm finished quickly.

Now that PantherStorm is no longer the Medicine Cat, she is eligible to take on the roles of a Deputy. MorningStar announced.

PantherStorm! a voice behind her mewed. Congratulations, PantherStorm!

PantherStorm turned to see SilverRain, with a proud expression on her face.

Thanks, SilverRain! PantherStorm purred happily. And here I was, rooting for you!

Oh, I'm *glad* I didn't get picked. SilverRain said with an edge to her voice. If I had to be Deputy *and* take care of my kits, I don't know how I would manage.

Well, I don't feel guilty anymore, then. PantherStorm commented.

In that case, I m glad, because- She was cut off by the sound of mewling coming from the nursery.

Sorry. SilverRain sighed. I have to go. That little AmberKit is a whiner, I tell you.

And with that, she vanished back into the Nursery.

I m not a Medicine Cat anymore. PantherStorm reminded herself. *It s time.*

PantherStorm had been waiting for this moment for a long time, but now that it was finally here, she dreaded having to do this: She had to find IceHeart.

* * * * *

Who are you, and what do you want?

PantherStorm froze. She was on the SpringClan side of the border trying to find IceHeart, and she had not even noticed she had been followed.

I said, who are you, and what do you want?

She looked over to see who the stranger was, and recognized a familiar silver pelt. After a brief moment's hesitation, she realized that it was not the cat she was looking for, though. She was a silver-gray she-cat, with blue eyes, and a striking resemblance to IceHeart. Then, suddenly, it hit her. *This cat is IceHeart's sister! Of course!*

My name is PantherStorm. I'm here because I need to talk to IceHeart.

The silver she-cat closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. So you're the one and only PantherStorm. She murmured, shaking her head. You hurt him very badly, you know.

I& I was confused. She explained. I didn't know what to do.

Clearly. The she-cat responded coldly. Why do you want to see him, even after all of this?

I knew, even right after I talked with him, that I had made a mistake. I knew I couldn't live without him. I was going to make it up to him that morning, but he had gone already. PantherStorm whispered. My heart was broken.

As was his. The silver cat replied, much softer this time. Why did you leave him?

When I told him there was no way we could be together, I was a Medicine Cat. He suggested that I leave my duties, but the clan would have no healer if I did that. PantherStorm shivered in the cold. In the end, it was my loyalty to the clan that broke us up. But I have just recently retired. I knew I couldn't last another day without him by my side, as he had been through the rest of my life.

The silver cat's eyes glowed. And you did all that for him? she sighed. Oh, StarClan, was I wrong about you.

Can you please take me to him? PantherStorm pleaded. I must speak with him.

The silver cat shook her head. I cannot take you to him, but I can bring him to you. She turned to leave, and then stopped. I m SilverMist, by the way.

Thank you, SilverMist. You have no idea how much this means to me. PantherStorm called after her.

Oh, I think I do. SilverMist looked at her, her expression unreadable. And with that, she turned and vanished into the forest.

PantherStorm had been waiting in that very spot for a long time before she noticed IceHeart making his way through the forest.

IceHeart. She called in a whisper, in case other cats were around.

IceHeart turned to look at her, and PantherStorm saw a lifetime s worth of pain in his eyes.

I m sorry. They both chorused at the same time.

Don't be. IceHeart interrupted, before PantherStorm could say anything else. This never would have happened if I had been thinking straight. I was such an idiot.

Not nearly as much as I was. PantherStorm stopped him. I miss you, IceHeart.

I miss you, too. IceHeart said softly. I only wish the circumstances could be different.

Come back to WinterClan. PantherStorm pleaded. Please, I can't last another day without you.

I would if I could. Oh, believe me, I would. He sighed. But there's no way I'll be accepted back.

Of course there is! PantherStorm objected. As the Clan Deputy, MorningStar II *have* to listen to me!

You're Clan Deputy now? That's great! IceHeart congratulated her, happiness shining in his eyes.

Come on, let's get out of here. PantherStorm directed him. We've got a clan to get back to.

* * * * *

As PantherStorm and IceHeart wandered back to camp, PantherStorm immediately felt a pang of regret. *What if he's not accepted back? Or if he is, what if no one will want to have anything to do with him?*

PantherStorm held her breath as she walked into MorningStar's den. MorningStar immediately perked her ears up, a surprised expression on her face.

PantherStorm? MorningStar asked, puzzled. What's the matter?

PantherStorm felt nervous under her leader's icy blue gaze. I've come to ask you permission for& for

something.

Well of course, PantherStorm. What do you need?

Before I ask you, MorningStar& Do you know why IceHeart left?

I don't. I only assumed that he was unhappy here. She looked at PantherStorm suspiciously. But I also assumed that there was something you weren't telling me. Carry on.

Well& MorningStar, the night IceHeart was made a Warrior, he asked me a question that I didn't know the answer to. She paused, trying to figure out the best possible way to say this. He wanted me to leave my duty as a Medicine Cat so that we could be together, because Medicine Cats can't have kits.

MorningStar nodded, her expression giving nothing away. I'm following you.

I didn't know what to say, but I knew that I couldn't leave my job just then, because then the clan would be without a Medicine Cat entirely. So I& I told him that there was no way we could be together. She gazed at her leader, emotion burning like embers of fire in her eyes.

So he left, because he no longer had anyone in WinterClan. MorningStar concluded. I see.

Exactly. PantherStorm said, her voice becoming louder and louder. So do you see how& How it was my fault? Do you think you could help me correct my mistake by& by letting him come back?

MorningStar took a deep breath. PantherStorm, I see how this is partially related to you. But it was his decision to leave. She shook her head slowly, sadness and sympathy shining in her eyes. It was his choice to leave; therefore he must live with his decision. I m sorry, PantherStorm. Please escort IceHeart off of WinterClan territory.

PantherStorm was in shock. He& He can t come back?

I m sorry. But no. MorningStar sighed. Please escort him back to SpringClan.

PantherStorm trudged back out of her leader s den, her tail dragging and ears drooping.

I take it that s a no? IceHeart asked sadly. It s okay. I ll go.

No, wait. PantherStorm caught up with him. MorningStar told me to *escort* you back. We can be

together, for a few more minutes.

They traveled in silence for about 5 minutes. Each were trying to think of something to say, to brighten up the sky, or let the blossoms come back into bloom, but the sky remained a gloomy, cloudy gray, and the trees stayed bare. And the silence in the forest just added to the sadness of the two friends as they said separated one more time.

* * * * *

Are you asleep, PantherStorm?

Yes. Please leave your message after the beep.

PantherStorm, I m serious.

PantherStorm groggily raised her head, only to see PebbleClaw, with a worried expression on his face. What do you want? she asked, still half-asleep.

I don't feel good. PebbleClaw said anxiously. You never told me what to use for a combination of coughs and stomach pains.

Sounds like a fever. Try some water mint, and if that doesn't work, maybe some borage leaves. But go easy on the water mint, too much will give you a headache.

Okay. Thanks, PantherStorm. PebbleClaw added as he disappeared from the Deputy's den.

Sounded like he's having a rough day, she thought. I hope he feels better once he gets some water mint.

PantherStorm, who was wide awake at this point, stood up and stretched. It was almost dawn; the stars still shone dimly in the sky, despite the sunlight tinting the horizon red. Today would be a long day, PantherStorm could already tell. IceHeart was still in SpringClan, and at this point, nothing was going to change that. She had to move on.

PantherStorm could hear soft mews coming from the Warriors Den, which told her that the others were waking in their turn. The Apprentices Den was still silent, however, but that did not surprise her. The younger cats usually slept until noon if they were permitted, and not waken up sooner.

PantherStorm yawned and shook herself briskly. She wanted to get an early start on the day, and she trotted happily out of her den, where she noticed that the fresh-kill pile was dwindling down to a rabbit and a few mice. *Hunting*, PantherStorm decided finally. *I ll go hunting this morning.*

She rustled through the ferns and heather bushes, and then stopped. Something was in the air, something that she had not scented since last winter, when her sister, FlamePaw, had been helplessly grasped in the jaws of death. She scented the air again. She was sure of it this time. There was sickness somewhere in the camp, most likely BlackCough the fatal disease that had claimed countless others in the past winters.

She turned back around, convinced that the terrible taint of sickness in the air was coming from the camp. She had to find the source of it before& before it was too late. A faint coughing could be heard coming from the Medicine Cat s Den, and it hit her. *PebbleClaw!* She realized. *PebbleClaw has BlackCough!*

She raced into the Den, where she watched PebbleClaw feebly struggling to reach the shelf above him, which held the storage of Borage leaves.

PebbleClaw, I& I told you not to use the Borage leaves unless& she retraced what she had told him in her mind, and pain struck her like a dog s claw. &Unless the Water Mint didn t work.

PebbleClaw nodded weakly. I tried, but the pain just got worse. And Oh, PantherStorm, I feel terrible.

I know, PebbleClaw. It'll be okay. But even in the back of her mind, she knew that it would not be okay. BlackCough was incurable, and the final result to all cases had been death. Try some catnip; it'll soothe your stomach. Some honey might help your throat. She added thoughtfully. I think it's on the top; I'll get some for you. She pounced upwards, almost losing her balance on the narrow ledge, but she pressed her fur against the wall of the den so that she wouldn't fall. A small pool of sticky honey gathered into a small puddle in an indentation on the shelf. She dabbed her paw in and took a little taste. The sugary, sweet taste of the honey soon alerted her senses, and she dipped her paw in again.

It's up here. She called to PebbleClaw, who mewed in relief. I'm coming down, watch out.

She leapt down and coaxed the honey into his open mouth. Once he had swallowed the sweet remedy, he gazed up at PantherStorm.

PantherStorm. He mewed softly. You taught me all about BlackCough. You said that it usually comes during winter, and I have all of the symptoms. He shook his head. Tell me the truth, PantherStorm. Am I & Am I going to die?

PantherStorm felt choked with emotion. Yes. She hung her head. I'm sorry, PebbleClaw. But yes.

Thank you. That's what I wanted to know. He gazed longingly over to the Apprentices Den. Can you bring my sister in here? he pleaded. I have to say goodbye.

Of course. She mewed sadly. I'll go get her. She padded silently towards the Apprentices Den, and poked her head in.

MistyPaw. She glanced around at the four apprentices, finally spotting MistyPaw's gray pelt.
MistyPaw. She hissed, trying not to wake the others. MistyPaw lifted her head, and spotted PantherStorm.

PantherStorm? She asked, confused. What's wrong?

PebbleClaw. PantherStorm whispered simply.

PebbleClaw? Is he hurt? MistyPaw asked anxiously.

He's well, he's sick. He wants to see you.

MistyPaw stood up immediately. Where is he?

In the Medicine Cat s Den. PantherStorm said softly. He only has a little bit of time left. Hurry now.

MistyPaw disappeared into the Medicine Cat s Den within a few seconds. PantherStorm followed nervously, not sure if this would be the last time PebbleClaw would see his sister. She heard soft mews coming from her den, and hoped that, if it was the last time they would talk, they would make it mean a lot. PantherStorm waited for about an hour outside of the den for MistyPaw to be finished saying goodbye, when she appeared in the entrance.

He s gone. MistyPaw wailed aloud. My brother is gone.

This had drawn the attention of almost every cat in the camp. Outbursts and cries from cats all over the place could be heard.

PebbleClaw s died of BlackCough! , We have no Medicine Cat now! , But PantherStorm is the Deputy!

MorningStar rushed into the center of camp, and yowled for the commotion to stop. Let all cats join here in the center of camp for a Clan Meeting! One by one, the cats all joined her in the center of the campsite.

As you all know already, PebbleClaw is the victim of our first case of BlackCough this winter. Unfortunately, we have no Medicine Cat now. PantherStorm, who is a retired Medicine Cat, will carry on the roles of a deputy. However, we are in desperate need of a Medicine Cat, as a long, cold winter faces us. PantherStorm, in addition to being the Deputy, will go back to being a Medicine Cat. And with that, she padded silently into her den. PantherStorm followed her, directly on her tail.

MorningStar, PantherStorm asked nervously. It has never happened in the history of the clans, that a cat is Deputy *and* Medicine Cat! It s just unheard of!

MorningStar gave her a long, hard stare. And would you rather leave the clan without a Medicine Cat?

Well, no, but& Well&

Precisely. You will continue the roles of a Deputy, and return to be a Medicine Cat.

PantherStorm knew that it was pointless to argue. Yes, MorningStar. She dipped her head and backed out of her leader s den.

Other cats were gathering around PebbleClaw's lifeless body, which had been moved to the center of camp so that cats that were closest to him could pay their final respects.

I'm Medicine Cat and Deputy. PantherStorm reminded herself. *This is the first time this has ever happened. What would happen if MorningStar passed?* She shuddered at the thought of having to be leader.

I need to find IceHeart. She thought suddenly. *He'll help me through this.*

PantherStorm slipped past the sea of cats, and vanished into the entrance to Camp. She trampled through the undergrowth, heading straight for SpringClan territory. She did not hear the sound of running water, though, which was odd, because the river was directly ahead. As she neared the border, she noticed ice formed at the banks of the river, and realized that the entire river had frozen over.

How will I make it across a frozen river? She wondered worriedly. *Other cats have tried, and fallen through the ice!*

A flash of silver on the other side of the river caught her eye, and she recognized IceHeart.

Ice& she immediately stopped herself, as she realized that IceHeart was not alone. There were a few other cats with him, and luckily they did not seem to notice her.

As PantherStorm watched IceHeart walk away, she realized that her life would be completely different without him. Her life would never be the same, but this was a chance for her to start over. It was the sunshine at the end of a rainy day, the pieces of a completed puzzle scattered everywhere. And, one by one, those pieces would fit together, ultimately creating a new beginning.