A FREE COMPANION TO THE WILD TIGER AND THE ANSWER BOT

Petrichor

Blaze told Stanley why rain smells like rain. He went home and followed it all the way to the bottom of a forest.



RICHARD LOWE

Petrichor

The rain stopped right before lunch.

It was the first rain in five weeks. Somebody had wedged the side door by the gym open with a rubber stopper, and the smell came all the way down the hall and found me at the water fountain.

I knew that smell. Everybody knows that smell. I had never once wondered about the cause.

Blaze came around the corner with her nose up in the air.

She's a Bengal tiger. She's in my class. She has a tail that goes around in circles when she's thinking, and it was going around now, fast, like a fan on high.

“Do you smell that?” she said.

“Rain,” I said.

“It's not rain.” She stopped right next to the fountain. “Water doesn't have a smell. Rain is water. The smell is geosmin.”

I waited.

Most people don't wait. Most people say “okay” and leave.

I could see Blaze getting ready for me to go. Her ears were already turning a little toward the hall, the way you watch a door when somebody is about to leave.

I stayed where I was.

“Geosmin is a chemical,” she said. “Bacteria in the soil make it. When it's dry for a long time, the plants put oil on the ground, to keep their seeds from sprouting too early. Then the rain comes. The drops hit the dirt and knock the geosmin and the oils up into the air, and they mix, and you smell them. That smell is called petrichor.”

“Petrichor,” I said.

“It's Greek,” she said. Her tail went faster. “Petra means stone. Ichor is the stuff that ran in the veins of the gods in the old stories. So petrichor means the blood of the stones. Isn't that the best name? Somebody smelled wet dirt and thought, that's what rocks would bleed.”

She stopped.

She looked at me. She looked at my face for a while, like she was reading the small print on a cereal box.

“Sorry,” she said. “That was a lot.”

“How do you spell geosmin?” I said.

Her tail stopped completely.

She spelled it. G, E, O, S, M, I, N. Then the bell rang and she went one way and I went the other.

I didn't have a pen. I said it in my head the whole way to the lunchroom, on a beat, the way my drum teacher makes us say stickings.

Ge, os, min. Ge, os, min.

Right, left, right.

* * *

My mom says I get stuck on things.

She said it that night, the third time she called me for dinner. I was at the kitchen counter with the family laptop and I hadn't heard the first two times.

“Stanley,” she said. “You're stuck again.”

“One more page,” I said.

“You said one more page two pages ago.”

She was right. I had started with petrichor. The first article said geosmin.

The geosmin article said soil bacteria. The soil bacteria article had a part about how some bacteria and some fungus live around plant roots and help each other out. That part had a link at the bottom.

The link was about trees.

Under a forest, it said, there are thin fungus threads running from root to root. They hook the trees together.

Some scientists think the trees use those threads to pass water and carbon and chemical signals to each other. They call it the mycorrhizal network.

Some people call it the wood wide web.

I read that part four times.

Some scientists call the oldest trees in a forest mother trees. A mother tree might pass carbon to the younger trees around it, through the threads, under the ground.

Scientists are still testing how much of that is true. The article said that too. I liked it better for saying so.

“Stanley,” my mom said. “Food.”

I closed the laptop.

At dinner I tried to tell her about the trees. I got as far as the fungus threads, and she said, “That's nice, honey, eat your peas,” and I ate my peas.

I wasn't stuck. I knew that much.

Stuck is when you can't move. I had moved all the way from a water fountain to the bottom of a forest.

I didn't have a better word for it yet.

* * *

After dinner I went up to my room and dug through the back-to-school pile on my closet floor.

My mom buys too many notebooks every August. She says you never know. There were two red ones, a green one with a torn cover, and one with a blue spiral and a plain blue cover and nothing written in it at all.

I took the blue one.

I didn't write anything right away. I have a rule.

One source is a rumor. Two sources that don't copy each other is a fact.

So I went back down to the laptop while my mom was doing the dishes. I found a second place that said geosmin and soil bacteria.

I found a second place that said the plant oils keep seeds from sprouting. I found two more about the wood wide web, and both of them said scientists were still arguing about the mother trees.

Then I went back upstairs and wrote.

Petrichor: smell of rain on dry earth. Two sources: geosmin (soil bacteria) + plant oils. Greek: petra = stone, ichor = fluid of the gods.

Under that I wrote two whole pages about the trees: fungus threads, mother trees, carbon sharing, and the part where it's still being tested.

It took me until bedtime.

When I turned off the lamp, the notebook was on my desk, and I could see the blue cover in the light from the hall. Two pages. All of it from one word a tiger said at a water fountain, on her way to

somewhere else.

* * *

My drum lesson is on Thursdays.

I have played the drums for two years. Mostly I play on a practice pad, a round rubber thing that sits on a stand.

It's quiet enough that my mom can still hear the TV. My teacher has a real kit in the room behind his garage, with a fan in the corner that never gets turned off.

That Thursday he did the thing he does.

"Play the groove," he said.

I played the groove. Boom, tap, boom boom, tap. He clapped along for eight bars.

Then he clapped wrong, on purpose, way off the beat.

I fell out of rhythm, the way he wanted me to, and my sticks went in two different directions.

"Find it," he said.

I found it. It took me about four bars. I'm not fast at finding it, but I always come back.

"Everybody loses the beat," he said. He says this every week. "The drummers people want to play with are the ones who come back to it."

He made me fall out six more times. By the end I was down to two bars.

On the way home I thought about Blaze at the water fountain, talking about the blood of the stones. She didn't fall out of anything. She went all the way through without a single rest, like a song somebody had forgotten to put the quiet parts in.

I didn't think that was bad.

I thought she might need somebody to clap the beat for her sometimes. I didn't know how you'd even ask a person that.

* * *

Blaze and I eat lunch at the corner table by the window.

Nobody set that up. On the first day of school, she sat there and I sat there, and the next day we both sat there again.

We've been sitting there ever since. The best arrangements happen without meetings.

Mostly she talks and I listen. Mostly I like it that way.

A week after the rain, she told me about her beetle.

"Carabus nemoralis," she said. She had a carrot stick in one paw and she was using it to point. "Bronze black. The wing covers are iridescent, so they look green or purple depending on how the light hits them. They hunt at night. I caught mine by the storm drain on my street two years ago. It's the best one I have."

"How did you catch it at night?" I said.

"Flashlight," she said. "And patience. Mostly patience. I'm bad at patience except with beetles."

She stopped and checked my face again. She did that a lot, the cereal box look.

"Are you bored?" she said.

"No," I said.

She didn't believe me. I could tell, because she started talking about the lunchroom smell instead. She says it's industrial bread and steamed vegetables.

She says she likes it. I think she said that so we'd be talking about something regular.

The notebook was in my backpack under the table. It had eleven chains in it by then.

The beetle became number twelve that night. I found two sources. Bronze black, iridescent, active at night.

I didn't show her.

* * *

I almost showed her on the Monday after that.

She had told me about her obsidian. It's a black rock on her windowsill, shiny like a broken bottle. She said it isn't technically a mineral, it's a mineraloid, because it doesn't have crystals inside, and opal is a mineraloid too.

I went home and followed that one. Mineraloid went to volcanic glass.

Volcanic glass went to lava that cools too fast. Lava that cools too fast went to stone tools, and stone tools went to a page about how a chipped obsidian blade can have an edge finer than a steel scalpel.

The page said some surgeons still use them. I only found one page that said it. So I wrote down the mineraloid part and put the surgeon part on a sticky note on the inside cover, where I keep things that only have one source.

The next day at lunch I had the notebook on my lap. My paw was on the cover. I was going to put it on the table.

Then Devon walked past.

Devon is an iguana in our class. He has heavy eyelids and a smirk that never goes away, even when he's eating.

He leans on things. He leaned on the end of our table and looked at Blaze's tray.

“Smart lunch,” he said. “Is that a genius sandwich?”

His two friends laughed. One of them is Marcus, a tall raccoon. Marcus laughed late, like he'd been waiting to see if it was funny.

Blaze didn't say anything. She looked out the window. Her tail went flat against the bench.

They left.

I kept the notebook in my lap.

I kept thinking about what it would look like. A kid with a whole notebook full of things Blaze said. Her words, written down, with dates.

Devon wrote things about Blaze too. He wrote them on paper and held them up where she could see.

I didn't want to be one more person writing her down.

I put the notebook back in my backpack, and I zipped the zipper all the way.

* * *

It went on like that for three weeks.

She said things. I went home. I followed them.

I checked them twice and I wrote them down. I didn't show her.

By the first Tuesday in November I had twenty-nine chains. Some were short.

One was eight pages and went from Saturn's moons to how ice floats. The sticky notes inside the cover were getting crowded.

That Tuesday, Ms. Burrows drew the water cycle on the board.

Ms. Burrows teaches us science. She's a red panda.

She's small and neat and her classroom has a rule for everything, and every rule has a reason. Paws up. Wait to be called on.

She turned around and asked what makes water evaporate.

Blaze's desk was two rows in front of mine. I watched her put her paws flat on top of it. She pressed down so hard I could see her shoulders go up.

Then she was standing.

She was halfway out of her chair, and the answer was already out and running. Heat energy from the sun, molecules breaking free, vapor, and then a word I had never heard.

Nucleation. Water needs a speck of dust or pollen to grab before it can make a cloud. Without the specks, there are no clouds at all.

The room went quiet.

Ms. Burrows said the answer was correct. She said, “Please sit down, Blaze.”

Blaze sat.

And then everybody looked away from her. Twenty kids, all at once, looked at their desks and the clock and the poster about lab safety.

It sounded like paper and chair legs and nobody breathing loud.

I looked at my desk too.

I didn't decide to. I was looking at it before I knew.

There's a pencil groove in the top of my desk where somebody a long time ago carved the letter R. I stared at the R.

When I looked up again, Blaze had her paws in her lap. Her ears were down. She was looking at the R on her own desk, or whatever she has on hers.

I had looked away from her, the same as everybody else.

My face got hot. It stayed hot all the way through the rest of class.

* * *

After school I was at the water fountain when Ms. Burrows kept Blaze after class.

I wasn't waiting for her. I don't think I was. I was drinking a lot of water.

Devon was there before me. He was leaning on the wall by the door with his arms crossed, in the pose he thinks looks cool.

Blaze came out last. She had a folded white paper in her paw. She put it in her backpack fast, but not fast enough.

“Blaze got kept after class,” Devon said.

She kept walking.

“BLAZE GOT A NOTE HOME,” he said to the whole hallway. “BLAZE GOT A NOOOOOTE...”

She turned the corner. His voice went after her. It bounced off the lockers.

I stood at the fountain with water running into nothing.

I could have said something. I had a hundred things in my notebook.

I had the blood of the stones and the mother trees and a beetle that hunts at night. Not one of them was the right thing to say to Devon, and I couldn't think of anything that was.

So I didn't say anything.

Devon walked past me. He didn't even look at me. I wasn't the kind of kid he looked at.

I let go of the fountain button. My paw hurt. I'd been pressing it the whole time.

* * *

That night I looked up nucleation.

I found it in a weather book from the library and on two websites that didn't copy each other. Ice needs a speck to form around too, the same as cloud drops. If water is pure enough, with no specks at all, it can get all the way down to forty below zero and still not freeze.

Forty below. And still water. Because it had nothing to hold.

I wrote it down. Nucleation: ice and liquid water both need particles to form around. Very pure water can reach forty below without freezing.

That was chain number thirty.

I sat at my desk after that, looking at the cover, until my mom called up the stairs that it was a school night.

I thought about Blaze standing up before she decided to stand up. I thought about everybody looking at the clock. I thought about the R on my desk.

Then I did something I hadn't done before. I turned to the first page and read the whole notebook from the beginning, all thirty chains, every page.

It didn't look like Devon's paper.

Devon's paper was about Blaze. My notebook was about rain and fungus and beetles and rocks and ice.

It was about what happened after she said a thing, where it went and how far.

Every chain in there started with her. Not one of them stopped with her.

I didn't have a word for that either. But I knew it wasn't the same as being written down.

I put the notebook on top of my backpack, so I'd see it in the morning and not be able to pretend I forgot.

Then I got out my sticks and played the groove on my practice pad, quietly, so my mom wouldn't hear. I fell out on purpose. I came back.

I fell out again.

I came back.

* * *

In the morning I got to school early and stood at the water fountain.

Devon was on the front steps. I heard him through the doors.

“Note home AGAIN?” he said.

“Not today,” Blaze said.

I heard that part clearly. Not today.

She didn't say it loud and she didn't say it mean. She said it like it was a fact she'd checked.

Then she came around the corner.

She looked different. I'm not good at describing faces, so I'll say it the way I saw it. She looked like she hadn't slept, and like she didn't mind.

Her eyes were bright. Her tail wasn't going in circles. It was going side to side, slowly, like a cat watching a bird.

“You look different,” I said.

“Ask me after science,” she said.

I nodded.

I'm good at waiting. I'd been waiting three weeks already. One more period wasn't going to hurt.

* * *

First was math.

Mr. Chen put a long division problem on the board.

Blaze was doing something with her paw under her desk. I couldn't see what.

Mr. Chen turned around. “Can anyone...”

“Three hundred and forty-seven,” Blaze said.

She was standing again.

I felt it in my stomach, the same drop as when an elevator starts. She sat back down. She stared at her paw under the desk like it had done something wrong.

I didn't look away this time. I looked at the back of her head.

It wasn't much, but I made myself do it until Mr. Chen started talking again.

* * *

Then science.

Blaze didn't sit two rows in front of me anymore. Her desk was in the corner now, by the window, away from everybody.

Her old desk was empty. Somebody had left a pencil on it and nobody had moved it.

Ms. Burrows drew the rock cycle, with boxes and arrows and every process labeled.

While her back was turned, Devon held up a piece of paper.

BLAZE KNOWS EVERYTHING ABOUT NOTHING.

He turned it so the kids next to him could see. One of them tried not to smile. The other one didn't try.

The hot feeling came back into my face. It went all the way down into my paws. I squeezed my pencil until it creaked.

Blaze looked at the paper. Then she looked at the board.

That was all she did. She faced the board.

But her paws were doing something on top of her desk now, where I could see them. Her right finger was tapping on the back of her left paw.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Steady, like a click track.

I didn't know what it was. I watched it anyway. I know what it looks like when somebody is keeping time.

Ms. Burrows asked the first question.

Three kids answered. They were right, but not all the way right.

Blaze's finger went faster. Tap tap tap tap. Her whole body was leaning toward the board.

Her tail was trying to go, and she wasn't letting it.

Then her paw went up.

It went up in the air and it stayed there. She was still in her seat. She was waiting.

Ms. Burrows saw it. She stared at it, like she'd turned around and found a different classroom.

“Blaze,” she said.

And Blaze answered from her chair.

She started with the boxes on the board, and then she kept going, past the parts the board showed.

Obsidian is volcanic glass. Lava cools too quickly to make crystals, so it's a mineraloid. A chipped obsidian blade can have an edge about three nanometers wide, finer than a steel scalpel.

“Some surgeons still use it,” she said.

My pencil stopped.

That was on my sticky note. The one inside the cover with the things that only had one source.

She put her paw down before she was three sentences in. She finished, and nobody made a sound.

Ms. Burrows set her marker in the tray.

“Thank you, Blaze,” she said.

My ears went flat. Then they went straight up. I couldn't stop them doing either one.

Devon turned his piece of paper over and laid it facedown on his desk.

* * *

I got to the lunch table first.

I didn't even open my lunch. I got out the blue notebook and opened it to the next clean page, and I peeled the sticky note off the inside cover. I stuck it at the bottom of the page.

Then I wrote.

From today: obsidian = volcanic glass = mineraloid. Blade edge about 3 nanometers. Some surgeons still use it.

That was chain number thirty-one.

Blaze was the second source. She didn't know she was. She'd been my first source for every single chain in the book, and now she was a second one too.

I heard her tray hit the table. She sat down across from me. I kept writing.

Check: all of the above confirmed in multiple sources.

She was eating. She hadn't said anything.

She was waiting for me to finish. I had never seen her do that before, not once, about anything.

I finished.

I closed the notebook, and I put my paw flat on the blue cover for a second. Then I slid it across the table to her.

She looked at it. She didn't move.

“Open it,” I said.

The World of The Wild Tiger and the Answer Bot

Who's Who

The main characters of Where the Answer Lies, plus two you met only in this story.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Blaze	A nine-year-old Bengal tiger who knows the answer before the question is finished. Her tail spins when she is thinking. She tells the story of the novel.
Stanley	A quiet cheetah in Blaze's class who asks better questions than almost anyone. He plays the drums and keeps a notebook with a blue spiral cover. He tells the story you just read.
Chip	Blaze's shoebox-sized silver robot, a gift from Uncle Rodney on her fifth birthday. He rides on her shoulder, and his round green eye changes brightness with his mood.
Leonardo da Vinci	The answer bot. He lives in a workshop inside the internet, finds answers no one else can find, and has the most awake eyes Blaze has ever seen.
The portal	A talking carrier with three voices at once. It keeps a schedule and has opinions about tails near its lower edge.
Ms. Burrows	A red panda who teaches Blaze's class. Small, precise, and a rule for everything, with a reason for every rule.
Devon	A large green iguana with heavy eyelids and a permanent smirk. He leans on walls and likes an audience.
Marcus	Devon's tall raccoon companion.
Mr. Chen and Mrs. Park	Blaze's math and history teacher, and her art teacher.
Mom and Dad	Blaze's parents. Mom reads faces. Dad knows the right fishing line for Neptune's rings.
Uncle Rodney	Blaze's uncle, who gave her Chip and brings her fossils.
Stanley's mom (this story)	Buys too many notebooks every August. Thinks Stanley gets stuck on things.
Stanley's drum teacher (this story)	Makes his students fall out of rhythm on purpose so they learn how to come back.

When It Happened

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
Blaze's fifth birthday	Uncle Rodney gives her Chip.
The next four years	Blaze tries to stop the answers by pressing her paws flat on her desk. It never works.
September	Blaze puts Andromeda on her ceiling star map, checked against two reference books. The notes home begin.
October	The first rain after a dry spell. Blaze explains petrichor to Stanley at the water fountain. Stanley starts his notebook.
A Tuesday in early November	The water cycle answer. Blaze's third note home, and a new seat in the corner by the window. At midnight, Chip calls the portal.
November 5th	The rock cycle. Ms. Burrows says “Thank you, Blaze.” At lunch, Stanley slides his notebook across the table.
November 6th and 12th	Four out of six. Then two for two.
The Friday before Thanksgiving	Ms. Burrows keeps Blaze after class with an offer.
After that	The rest is in the book.

From Stanley's Notebook

A few of the thirty-one chains, as Stanley wrote them.

- Petrichor: smell of rain on dry earth. Two sources: geosmin (soil bacteria) + plant oils. Greek: petra = stone, ichor = fluid of the gods.
- Mineraloid: amorphous, inorganic, technically not a mineral. E.g. obsidian, opal.
- Nucleation: ice and liquid water both need particles to form around. Very pure water can reach forty below zero without freezing.
- Carabus nemoralis: bronze black ground beetle. Iridescent wing covers. Active at night.
- From today: obsidian = volcanic glass = mineraloid. Blade edge about 3 nanometers. Some surgeons still use it.
- Check: all of the above confirmed in multiple sources.

Places

PLACE	WHAT IT IS
The water fountain	Where Stanley can usually be found. It is where the rain conversation happened.

The corner lunch table	By the window. Blaze and Stanley sat there on the first day and kept sitting there.
Ms. Burrows's classroom	Paws up before you answer. Wait to be called on. The corner seat is by the window.
Blaze's room	A star map on the ceiling, a solar system model on the shelf, specimen jars and a piece of obsidian on the windowsill.
The stream	The inside of the internet: millions of buildings and rivers of light carrying data between them.
The encyclopedia building	An old building with a steady light. Someone is always adding a new fact to it.
The red district	Dark red buildings designed to be noticed. Looking is the mechanism. Don't look.
The corridor of doors	Hundreds of identical blue doors with no numbers or signs.
Leonardo's workshop	Old ink, wood smoke, drawings of wings and water spirals on every wall, and a pen that writes by itself.

Words to Know

WORD	MEANING
Chain	One thing leading to another. Stanley follows Blaze's chains home and writes them down.
Geosmin	A chemical made by bacteria in soil. Rain knocks it into the air.
Petrichor	The smell of rain on dry earth: geosmin plus the oils plants put out in dry weather.
Mycorrhizal network	Fungus threads underground that connect the roots of trees. Some people call it the wood wide web. Scientists are still testing how much the trees share through it.
Mother tree	An old tree that may pass carbon to younger ones through the network.
Mineraloid	A natural solid with no crystals inside, so it is not a true mineral. Obsidian and opal are mineraloids.
Nucleation	Water vapor needs a speck of dust, pollen, sea salt or bacteria to form a droplet. No specks, no clouds.
Nanometer	One billionth of a meter. A human hair is about 80,000 of them wide.
Click-crawler	A creature from the red district with twenty eyes. Your attention is its fuel.
Troll	A lumpy creature with a sign that says WRONG. It has no real claims, only volume.

Read the Novel

Stanley kept his notebook to himself for three weeks. In The Wild Tiger and the Answer Bot: Where the Answer Lies, Blaze is about to find out why stopping her answers never works, and where an answer can go instead. Read the novel to follow her through the portal.



The Wild Tiger and the Answer Bot:
Where the Answer Lies
The Wild Tiger Series, Book One

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