A FREE COMPANION TO THE WILD TIGER AND THE ANSWER BOT

Guaranteed

Devon's uncle says his gold is guaranteed to go up. Devon wants to know who checked.



RICHARD LOWE

Guaranteed

My uncle wore four gold chains to Sunday dinner.

I counted them while he was still in the doorway. One thin one, two medium ones and one so thick it looked like it could pull a boat. They clicked against each other every time he laughed, and he laughed a lot.

“Look at you,” he said. He put one big hand on top of my head and rubbed my spines the wrong way.

“You got taller,” he said. “You eat your vegetables?”

“Some of them,” I said.

“Some of them,” he told my mom, like it was the funniest thing he'd heard all week.

* * *

My mom made the chicken with the crispy skin, which is the dinner she makes when somebody is coming over. She also made rolls. My uncle ate four of them before the chicken was even on the table.

“So I did it,” he said. He tore the fifth roll in half. “I moved it all over.”

“Moved what over?” my mom said.

“The savings. Into gold.” He tapped the thick chain on his chest, and it clicked.

“Real money,” he said. “Paper's just paper.”

My mom set the bowl of green beans down without a sound. She put a spoon in it. She didn't say anything for a second, and my uncle filled the second with more talking.

“Three reasons,” he said. He held up three fingers with butter on them.

“One,” he said. “They're not making any more of it. There's only so much gold in the ground.”

He folded down a finger.

“Two. It's gone up every year for ten years. Look it up.”

Another finger.

“Three. There's a guy I watch, he's got a whole channel, and he called every single one of the last big moves.”

“That's a lot of reasons,” my mom said.

“That's three reasons,” my uncle said. “That's all you need. It's guaranteed to go up.”

He bit the roll.

I was holding my fork over the chicken and not putting it into anything.

Guaranteed. The word sat in my ear like a bug that had flown in and couldn't find its way out.

I didn't know why. It was a normal word. The mattress commercial used it to mean nothing could go wrong.

“What does guaranteed mean?” I said.

My uncle pointed the half roll at me.

“It means it can't lose, buddy,” he said. “It means it's a sure thing.”

I looked out the window. It had been sunny all afternoon. The weatherman on Channel Six had said sunny all week, and he'd been wearing a suit when he said it and standing in front of a big map.

On Thursday it had rained so hard the gutters ran over.

Nobody had said guaranteed on Thursday. But he'd been just as sure.

“Eat your chicken,” my mom said.

I ate my chicken. My uncle's chains clicked all through dessert.

* * *

That week we were doing rocks and minerals in Ms. Burrows's class.

Ms. Burrows is a red panda. She stands at the side of the room more than the front, and she gets so still when she's listening that you forget she's there. Then you say things you didn't plan on saying out loud.

That's what happened to me.

We were looking at a poster of shiny things. Quartz, copper, a gray lump of iron, and a little gold nugget in the corner that someone had drawn too yellow.

“Where does gold come from?” I said.

I meant the question for Ms. Burrows, and I hadn't raised my paw. I'd been looking at the drawing and thinking about my uncle's thick chain. The question came out of my mouth on its own.

Blaze answered it.

Blaze is a Bengal tiger, and she sits near the front. She turned around in her seat. Her eyes were bright, like a flashlight somebody had just switched on.

“Two dead stars,” she said. “Neutron stars. They're what's left after a giant star burns out.”

She was talking faster now.

“Sometimes two of them spin around each other and crash,” she said. “They hit at a fraction of the speed of light, and the crash makes gold. Some of it ended up in the cloud that made the Earth, and scientists have written it all up in the peer-reviewed journals.”

She stopped.

I saw her press one finger into the middle of her palm. She pressed it like she was pushing a button only she could see. Then she turned back around.

Ms. Burrows said, “Thank you, Blaze,” and went back to the copper.

I didn't hear what she said about the copper.

I was thinking about two dead stars smashing into each other in the dark a long time before there were any iguanas or tigers or Sunday dinners. And some of what came out of that crash had ended up hanging on my uncle's neck, clicking when he laughed.

Nobody had guaranteed the stars anything.

I didn't say another word the whole rest of the day. Otis asked me twice at lunch if I was sick. Otis is a beaver, and he's been my best friend since kindergarten, and he gets worried when I'm quiet even though I'm usually quiet.

“I'm not sick,” I said.

“You're doing the face,” Otis said.

“What face?”

“The thinking face. Where your eyes go half closed.”

My eyes always look half closed. Iguanas have heavy lids. But Otis is right that there is a difference, and he's the only one who can tell.

“I'm thinking about gold,” I said.

“Why?”

I didn't know how to answer that yet. So I ate my sandwich.

* * *

My mom lets me use her tablet for homework. Gold was close enough to homework.

I sat on the end of my bed and typed: is gold guaranteed to go up.

The first thing that came up was a big orange box that said FIVE REASONS GOLD WILL DOUBLE. I clicked it. The page had a picture of a gold bar with a crown on it, and a man in a dark jacket smiling with too many teeth.

He was the man from my uncle's channel. I knew it right away. My uncle had shown us a clip on his phone at dinner, right before dessert.

The page gave the same three reasons my uncle had given, and it gave them in the same order. At the bottom there was a blue link that said SEE THE PROOF.

I clicked SEE THE PROOF.

It went to another page with a different color, green and white, and a different name at the top. It said experts agree gold is the safest place for your money. There was a link that said WHICH EXPERTS? and I clicked that too.

That one went to a video of the man in the dark jacket.

I sat there for a minute with the tablet getting warm on my knees.

I went back and tried the second search result. It was a chart going up and up like a staircase. At the bottom was a link that said LEARN MORE FROM OUR PARTNER, and the partner was the orange page with the crown.

I tried the third result.

It sent me to the green page.

The green page sent me to the man.

I kept going. My mom's tablet has a little clock in the corner, but I stopped looking at it.

Every page had a button, and every button had a word on it that made you want to push it, words like PROOF and SECRET and WHAT THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO KNOW.

I pushed every one.

I didn't learn anything new.

That was the strange part. I pushed maybe forty buttons, and I knew exactly what I'd known at the beginning: three reasons, a man in a dark jacket, and guaranteed.

When I finally looked up, the window was black. My stomach hurt in the empty way it does when you've skipped something. The tablet was hot enough to leave a pink square on my legs.

“Devon,” my mom called from the kitchen. “Dinner was half an hour ago. I called you three times.”

I hadn't heard her once.

I turned the tablet over, face down on the blanket, the way you'd turn over a bug to see what was underneath. The back was plain and gray. There was nothing on it at all.

* * *

At lunch the next day I asked Marcus a question.

Marcus is a raccoon. He's the tallest kid in our class, and he sits at the next table with his elbows out so he takes up more room than he needs.

He doesn't usually ask questions. But he listens to everything, and when Blaze answered my gold question, he was the only one who wrote a word down.

“What's a peer-reviewed journal?” I said.

Marcus had half a taco in his mouth. He finished chewing, which took a while.

“Blaze said it,” he said. “When you asked about the gold.”

“I know she said it,” I said. “What is it?”

“It's like a magazine for scientists.” He wiped his paws on his shirt. “But before your thing gets put in, other scientists have to check it.”

“And if they find something wrong?”

“Then you have to fix it,” Marcus said. “Or they don't put it in.”

“Who are the other scientists?”

“I don't know. Other ones. Ones that didn't write it.”

I thought about that.

“So somebody who didn't write it checks it,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Somebody who doesn't get anything if it's right.”

Marcus stopped with the taco halfway to his mouth.

“I guess,” he said. “I didn't think about that part.”

“Who checks the videos?” I said.

“What videos?”

“The ones where a guy tells you something is going to happen. Like with money. Who checks those before they go up?”

Marcus put the taco down on the tray. He looked at it like the taco might know.

“Nobody,” he said. “I don't think anybody does. You just put it up.”

“That's what I thought,” I said.

Otis was looking back and forth between us like he was watching a tennis game with rules he didn't know.

“Why are we talking about magazines?” he said.

“We're not,” I said.

Marcus didn't eat the rest of his taco. He sat there with his elbows out and his eyes on the ceiling, and when the bell rang he was still sitting there. Otis had to tap him on the shoulder.

* * *

Thanksgiving was at our house.

My uncle came early. He brought a pie from the store and a new chain, which made five. The new one was thin and shiny and kept getting caught in the other ones.

“Gold's up,” he told my mom at the door, before he even had his coat off. “Told you. Up again this week.”

“That's good,” my mom said.

“That's guaranteed,” my uncle said.

There it was again. The bug in my ear woke up and started flying around.

I'd been thinking about it for weeks, on the bus and in the bath and during math, which was a problem during math.

I'd gone back to the tablet two more times. Both times I set a timer so I wouldn't miss dinner. Both times I went around and around the same three pages until the timer went off.

The man in the dark jacket was on all of them. Every road I took went back to his face.

I hadn't found anything that said my uncle was wrong. I couldn't find anything that said anything except what he'd already said. That was the part that bothered me.

The real things I knew about didn't work like that. When Blaze answered the gold question, it led to stars, and the stars led to the speed of light. The speed of light led to Ms. Burrows saying we'd get to

that in fifth grade.

Every answer opened onto another room.

The gold pages were all one room with a lot of doors that went back into the same room.

I didn't have a word for that. I had a feeling about it, and the feeling was in my stomach, the same empty feeling from the night I missed dinner.

We ate at four. My uncle carved the turkey because he always carves the turkey. He did it with a lot of sawing, and his chains swung over the platter, and my mom kept moving the gravy so they wouldn't swing into it.

I waited until the pie. I thought pie was a good time. Everyone is happy at pie.

“I looked up the gold,” I said.

My uncle grinned at me with pie on his teeth.

“Yeah?” he said. “You see that chart? Up and up.”

“I saw the chart,” I said. “But the chart page said learn more from our partner, and the partner was the man from your channel. His page said see the proof, and the proof sent you right back to him.”

My uncle kept grinning. The grin didn't move, but his eyes went somewhere else, like when you call a dog and it hears a different noise.

“So?” he said.

“So all of them go back to him,” I said. “I couldn't find one that didn't. I tried a lot.”

“That's because he's the guy,” my uncle said. “He's the expert. Everybody quotes the expert.”

“But who checked him?”

“Checked him?”

“Like a peer-reviewed journal,” I said. “Somebody who didn't make the video, who doesn't get anything if it's right, and they look at it first.”

My uncle laughed. All five chains clicked at once, which was a lot of clicking.

He reached over and rubbed my spines the wrong way again.

“Buddy,” he said, “you're too young to understand this stuff. It's money stuff. Grown-up stuff.”

He winked at my mom.

“You leave the money to me,” he said, “and I'll leave the peer-whatever to you. Deal?”

He held out his hand to shake.

I looked at my mom.

My mom was looking at her pie. She cut a tiny piece off the end of it with the side of her fork, and she didn't eat it. She moved it over to the other side of the plate.

“Deal?” my uncle said again.

I shook his hand. It was warm and a little sticky from the pie.

“Deal,” I said.

He let go and started talking to my mom about the parade.

I sat there with my sticky hand in my lap. My face was hot. My crest was hot, all the way down the back of my neck, the way it gets when the sun has been on it too long.

I hadn't said it right.

I knew what I meant. I could feel it, the one room with all the doors.

But when it came out of my mouth it came out as pages and partners and proof. It sounded like a kid who'd spent too much time on his mom's tablet, and that's exactly what I was.

And he hadn't said I was wrong.

He'd said I was too young to understand.

That's different. I could tell it was different even then, sitting at the table with the pie, though I couldn't have told you how.

* * *

That night I couldn't sleep.

I got up and turned on my desk light and found an empty notebook. It was a composition book with a black and white cover that my mom had bought in August for a class that ended up not needing one. The first page was so clean it squeaked when I ran my finger over it.

At the top I wrote: guaranteed.

Under it I wrote what bothered me.

All the pages go back to the same man.

Nobody checks him.

When I said so, nobody said I was wrong. They said I was too young.

I looked at it for a while. It didn't look like much. It was three lines and a word.

But it was the first time the bug had been anywhere except inside my head. It was on the page now, where I could see it. It had a shape.

I decided something then. I didn't say it out loud, because there was nobody awake to hear it, and because the house was quiet and my uncle was asleep on the couch downstairs with the TV still on.

Next time I said it, I would be able to show it.

* * *

Ms. Burrows started Current Discoveries in November.

The way it works is somebody gets five minutes at the front of the class to tell everyone about a thing they found out. Mostly it's Blaze.

Blaze has so many discoveries that Ms. Burrows has to stop her at five minutes. You can see it's hard for her, because she gets to the end of a sentence and there's another sentence already behind it.

That's when she does the thing with her finger. She presses it into her palm, three times. I started counting, and it's almost always three.

I don't know what it does. But after she does it, she stops talking. And she's still Blaze after she stops, which I hadn't thought was possible.

The second week of Current Discoveries, after Blaze did one about obsidian, Ms. Burrows asked if anyone had questions.

I raised my paw.

Usually I don't. I could feel Otis staring at the side of my head from the next desk.

“Why do some websites make you keep clicking?” I said. “You keep going, and you don't find out anything new, and you don't stop.”

The room got quiet in a different way.

Blaze looked at me for a long time. Her eyes did the flashlight thing.

“I don't know,” she said.

I'd never heard her say that. I don't think anybody in our class had ever heard her say that. A girl in the front row turned all the way around in her seat.

“I'll find out,” Blaze said.

Then she pressed her finger into her palm. Three times.

* * *

She found out in December.

Her presentation was called Attention Traps. Ms. Burrows let it go past five minutes, which she never does, and she stood at the side of the room so still she might have been a poster.

Blaze talked about how some things are built so you'll look at them and not stop. The button at the bottom is there to make you push it.

The page doesn't want you to find anything. It wants you to stay.

I was in the second row by then. I'd moved up.

I sat there with my notebook open on my desk, and my pen didn't move, because I didn't need to write it down. I'd already lived it. I'd sat on the end of my bed with the tablet burning my knees and missed dinner while my mom called me three times.

There was a name for it.

It was a trap. Somebody built it, and they didn't build it by accident.

At the end Blaze told us what to do. When you find something, she said, follow it back to where it came from. Follow the chain all the way to the start, and see if the start is real.

Everybody wrote that down. Marcus wrote it down twice.

I didn't write it down.

My stomach had gone empty again.

* * *

I caught her in the hallway after class.

She was at the water fountain. Stanley was with her. Stanley is the cheetah who writes in a spiral notebook all the time now, and he was writing in it while she drank, standing a little to one side.

The hallway smelled like the floor wax they use on Fridays. Somebody's locker slammed. A sixth grader went past us carrying a trombone case that was bigger than he was.

“Blaze,” I said.

She straightened up. Water was dripping off her chin.

“Hi,” she said.

I'd thought about how to say it all through the rest of class. I'd thought about my uncle and the pie and the pages and partners and proof, and how badly that had gone.

This time I wanted to say it short, so it couldn't come out wrong.

“You said follow the chain back,” I said.

“Yes.”

“I did that, with the gold pages.” I held my notebook against my chest. “Every time I followed it back, it went to another page.”

Blaze waited.

“And that page went to another page,” I said. “And they all went to the same man.”

Blaze didn't say anything. She was listening with her whole face.

Stanley had stopped writing.

“So I did what you said,” I said. “I followed the chain. And the chain was part of the trap.”

I took a breath.

“But what if the chain goes somewhere that's also a trap?”

The fountain made its little gurgling noise behind her. Down the hall the trombone case hit a door frame. Somebody yelled sorry.

Blaze opened her mouth.

I watched her. She always had an answer. She'd had one for the gold and the stars and the obsidian and the trap.

I waited for her to say something big and bright that would make the bug go away.

She closed her mouth.

She pressed her finger into her palm, three times.

“I don't know yet,” she said.

I stood there.

“I'll find out,” she said.

She didn't laugh. She didn't rub anybody's spines. She didn't tell me I was too young to understand it, and she didn't say it was a sure thing.

She said she didn't know yet.

It was the best answer anybody had given me since October.

“Okay,” I said.

Stanley was writing again, fast, in small letters. I couldn't read it from where I stood.

Blaze wiped her chin with the back of her paw. The bell rang for next period, and the hallway filled up all at once, the way it does, and she and Stanley went one way and I went the other.

I didn't go to class right away.

I stood by my locker and opened the notebook to the first page. Guaranteed was at the top, with the three lines underneath.

I found the next empty line. I wrote my question there, the whole thing, slowly, so I'd get every word.

What if the chain goes somewhere that's also a trap?

Then I closed the notebook, and I went to math, and for the first time since Sunday dinner in October, the bug in my ear was quiet.

It wasn't gone. I could still feel it in there.

It was waiting to see what she'd find.

The World of The Wrong Answer

Who's Who

The main characters of The Wrong Answer, plus the three you met only in this story.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Blaze	A nine-year-old Bengal tiger with more answers than she knows what to do with. She tells the story of the novel. Her room has a star map on the ceiling, a beetle collection and a model of Neptune's rings made with fishing line.
Stanley	A quiet cheetah who writes everything in a notebook. His spots go still when he is trying not to show what he feels. He started writing things down the day Blaze told him why rain smells like rain.
Chip	The shoebox-sized robot who rides on Blaze's shoulder. He raises one silver arm at midnight to open the portal. His green eye goes to full brightness for things that can't wait.
Leonardo da Vinci	Known to everyone inside the internet as the answer bot. He checks where information comes from before he trusts it. He has the most awake eyes Blaze has ever seen.
The portal	The round, glowing doorway that opens in Blaze's bedroom wall at midnight. It talks, it keeps a schedule, and it is amused when Blaze waves at buildings.
Devon	An iguana in Blaze's class with heavy lids and a question he won't let go of. He tells the story you just read.
Marcus	A tall raccoon in the second row. He listens to everything and has started asking questions of his own.
Ms. Burrows	The red panda who teaches Blaze's class and runs Current Discoveries. She goes still when she is paying close attention.
The troll	A lumpy blue-gray creature with scuffed shoes, eyes that point in different directions and a sign it likes to wave.
Otis (this story)	A beaver, Devon's best friend since kindergarten. He can tell Devon's thinking face from his regular face.
Devon's uncle (this story)	Loud, generous with the rolls, and fond of gold chains and the word guaranteed.
Devon's mom (this story)	Makes the crispy chicken when somebody is coming over. Says less than she thinks.

When It Happened

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED
October	Stanley starts his first notebook after Blaze explains why rain smells like rain at the water fountain. Devon's uncle puts his savings into gold. Devon asks where gold comes from, and Blaze says two dead stars.
November	Ms. Burrows starts Current Discoveries: five minutes at the front of the class to share something you found out. Blaze presents stars, then obsidian. Devon asks why some websites keep you clicking.
December	Blaze gives her Attention Traps presentation. In the hallway afterward, Devon asks what happens if the chain goes somewhere that's also a trap. Blaze says she doesn't know yet.
Winter	The novel begins. Stanley goes through the portal for the first time and finds the right door in eleven minutes. Leonardo gives the friends three tests and a warning about one of his sources.
Three days later	Blaze teaches the three tests to her class. Kids write them down and pass them along.
After that	Stanley finds a flaw in test two. The rest is in the book.

The Three Tests

As Blaze first taught them to her class. One of them has a flaw.

1. **Where does the source point?** Toward other things, or back at itself?
2. **Where do the chains end up?** When you follow the chains, do most of them end up somewhere different from where you started?
3. **What happens if it fixes a mistake?** If this source fixed a mistake, would you learn more, or would the whole thing fall apart?

Places

PLACE	WHAT IT IS
Ms. Burrows's classroom	Where Current Discoveries happens, five minutes at a time, unless Ms. Burrows lets it run long.
The data stream	The view from inside the portal: a city made of other cities, in library blues, database silvers and the warm amber of old archives.
The encyclopedia building	A building with a steady light. Someone is always adding a new fact to it. Blaze waves at it.

The red district	The part of the internet that wants you to look and never leave. Looking is how it gets you.
The corridor of blue doors	Hundreds of identical blue doors with no numbers. Only one leads to Leonardo, and the clue is a thin, old scratch.
Leonardo's workshop	Smells of old ink and wood smoke. Drawings of wings and water spirals cover the walls, and a pen on the table writes by itself.

Words to Know

WORD	MEANING
Answer bot	What everyone inside the internet calls Leonardo.
Attention trap	Something built so you'll look at it and not stop. It doesn't want you to find anything. It wants you to stay.
Chain	The way one piece of information connects to the next. Follow one link and it leads to another.
Branching	What real information does when you follow it. Each link leads somewhere new, and the chain keeps getting bigger.
Looping	What a chain does when it curves back toward where it started. It's a signal to stop and check.
Current Discoveries	Ms. Burrows's five-minute slot for sharing something you found out.
Peer-reviewed journal	A magazine for scientists. Before a paper goes in, other scientists who didn't write it check it first.
Valve	Blaze's way of giving an answer somewhere to go that isn't her mouth: one finger pressed into her palm. Tap. Tap. Tap.
Troll	A creature that takes something uncertain and acts like it means everything is wrong.

Read the Novel

Devon has been carrying his question since October. In The Wild Tiger and the Answer Bot: The Wrong Answer, Blaze, Stanley and Leonardo go looking for the answer, and Blaze teaches her class three tests that turn out to have a flaw. Read the novel to see how she puts it right.



The Wild Tiger and the Answer Bot:
The Wrong Answer
The Wild Tiger Series, Book Two

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