

CHAPTER THREE: BLACK HOLES AND BRAVERY

Olivia's house continued to hurtle through space with alarming speed. Autumn could remember learning from her school teachers about the planets closest to the sun: Mercury, Venus, the Earth, and Mars. She could not remember the order of what came past Mars, except when she happened to pass by Saturn and Jupiter—then she remembered Saturn, because of its rings.

While Autumn tried to calm her frantic niece, Olivia continued to pace back and forth, from one room to the next, busily going from window to window to see what curious sights her house was flying by. All the while, stars and planets continued to pass by the window, full of bright lights and brilliant colors. The girls realized that they were far from the Earth at this point, and the sun itself could barely be seen from the window in the upstairs bathroom, and even then only by straining one's eyes to the point of getting a headache.

Just then, Olivia remembered something that she thought could be important: the little blue box. She ran back into the kitchen and saw a bright glow emanating from underneath the refrigerator; for apparently, in all the commotion during the house's ascent into space, the blue box had slid across the floor, and wedged itself tightly underneath the appliance.

Why is it glowing? she thought to herself. She got on her hands and knees, and peered under the fridge, and saw the little blue box, shining brightly. "Autumn! Come here!" she called to her aunt in the living room.

"I don't want to," Autumn mumbled back.

Why do moody teenagers give up so easily? Olivia thought. *I don't think I ever want to be one.* And then, much to her surprise, Autumn came strolling into the room. "Oh there you are—" Olivia said excitedly. "I think we need to get that glowing box thing under the fridge."

Autumn took one look at the floor, and then stooped down to peer under the fridge. “We can get it,” she commented, “But we’ll need the right tool.” The girls ran to the storage closet in her father’s study and grabbed the broom, then back to the kitchen, where Autumn was able to use the handle to dislodge the box from underneath the refrigerator.

“This is what I was touching when the house flew away!” Olivia said with a gasp.

“But it’s just a box... that’s glowing,” Autumn muttered in disbelief.

Olivia reached down to pick it up, when Autumn lightly slapped the back of her hand. “Don’t touch that! You don’t know what that does!”

Olivia sneered at her aunt, and reached down again to touch the mysterious box with just the tip of her finger. The box lit up as soon as her skin made contact with its smooth surface, and she was shocked to feel that it was warm to the touch. She recoiled, quickly pulling her finger away, and the girls could immediately feel the house come to a freezing halt, indicating to them that the box had responded to Olivia’s touch—not just the box, but the house as well. They ran to the living room window to see what was going on, and what they beheld was a sight of pure wonder: hundreds upon thousands of bright, brilliant stars, of all sizes and colors, painted on the black canvas of space.

While Olivia was busy gazing off into the beauty of the stars, Autumn made a connection in the back of her mind: the house stopped when her niece touched the blue box. Not knowing what to expect, she ran back to the kitchen and picked up the blue box from the floor, half expecting the house to fly off in some other random direction; but much to her relief, nothing bad happened. On the other hand, she was disappointed that nothing good happened either. The house remained still, and the box, though still glowing, was faint.

Maybe it’s like a video game, Autumn thought, and this is the controller. She examined the blue box up one side and down the other, searching for some kind of button, or touch screen, that might cause it to activate. She even shook it around for a second, wondering if maybe something bad had been jostled when it had slid across the floor; but the box still did nothing. Autumn’s mood went from curious to disappointed as she gave up on the box.

Olivia, still half-dazed from the beauty of the stars outside the window, strolled back into the kitchen, and saw Autumn holding the box. “Did you figure anything out about it yet?” she asked.

Autumn, frustrated that the box had stopped working, replied with a frustrated “No,” as she casually tossed it to Olivia. “Knock yourself out, kid.”

Olivia, caught off guard at having to grasp the box mid-air, reached out her hands in a panic, and fumbled about with the box for a couple of seconds, afraid she would drop it. No sooner had the little blue box’s smooth edge come in contact with her outstretched fingers than it began to shine brightly; and as the box bounced around from one hand to the other as Olivia struggled to catch it, the house itself began to jostle around haphazardly in space, turning every which way in step with the box.

“Olivia—stop!” Autumn shouted out as she struggled to stay standing upright. “I think I’m going to be sick!”

As soon as Olivia had a firm grip on the box, the house likewise ceased turning around. “Don’t throw up!” Olivia protested. “If you throw up, then I’ll throw up too—and that’s that much more to clean up!”

Autumn, regaining her composure, shuddered at the thought. She took the box out of Olivia’s hands, and immediately it ceased shining, and returned again to a dull glow. “What the heck?” she said. “Why doesn’t it work for me?”

“Incorrect genetic profile detected,” a voice from within the box responded.

“What was that?” Olivia yelled.

Autumn was so startled—more by Olivia’s squeal than the fact that an unseen voice was speaking to her—that she nearly dropped the box.

Autumn gave Olivia a stern look, and then looked at the box. “What’s wrong with my ‘genetic profile?’” she asked.

“Your genetic profile does not match that of the aviator,” the box replied.

“And hers does?” Autumn asked. The box sat silently for a moment, and Autumn placed it back—very gently—into Olivia’s little hands.

“Correct genetic profile detected,” the box said as it began to shine again. “Welcome back, Aviator.”

Olivia gently turned the blue box this way and that, and, just as she had suspected, the house followed the motion of the blue box, turning this way and that. Amazingly, the scenery outside the window changed drastically with the slightest movement of the blue box, but inside the house, she could feel but a slight shift as the house turned itself about.

“Well this will be easy then,” she declared. “We can just go back the way we came.” Therein lay the problem: neither of the girls knew which direction they had come from, nor did they have any clue where they were.

Olivia remembered that her parents taught her to always be respectful when addressing a stranger. “Mr. Box,” she said, as cordially as she could, “Can you get us home?”

“My programming does not understand the location ‘home.’”

“Can you get us to Earth?” Olivia asked again.

“My programming does not understand the location ‘earth.’”

“Well can you get us to the moon?”

“There are 15,287,462 moons within immediate traveling distance. You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“I want to go to our moon—to Earth’s moon!”

The box remained silent for a moment, then repeated itself. “There are 15,287,462 moons within the immediate traveling distance. Please specify.”

“This is hopeless,” Autumn said as she slumped over on the floor of the kitchen.

“No, this isn’t hopeless, Autumn!” Olivia said, trying in vain to cheer up her aunt, while keeping her own spirits high.

“Did you say ‘Plottum?’” the box asked.

“No, I did not say Plottum!” Olivia shouted at the box. “I wasn’t even talking to you, I was talking to my aunt, Autumn.”

“I think I heard you say ‘Plottum...’” the box replied.

At this point, Olivia realized she was faced with only two options: she could either give up, and she and her aunt would live for as long as they could floating around in space; or she and her aunt could try to get home to Earth—and try, they would. The girl who was afraid of everything would just have to figure it out, and to do that, she would need the help of the girl who didn’t care about anything.

I know, she thought to herself with a glimmer of hope. The blue box was packed away in the upstairs storage room. *Maybe there’s something else up there that we can use to get home!* And, staring directly at the blue box, and sternly shaking her finger at it, she added, “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Ascent to Plottum has been canceled,” the box responded.

Olivia carefully set the little blue box down on the kitchen counter and tugged at her aunt's sleeve to pull her up. Autumn shrugged, and went upstairs with her niece. She sprinted into the storage room and began tearing into the many packed boxes, looking for something that could help.

The girls divided the room into halves; Olivia looked in the cardboard boxes, while Autumn looked through the plastic storage tubs.

“Don't make a mess of this stuff, or your mom will kill us both,” Autumn said sternly.

“Well she would probably hug us and welcome us home first,” Olivia said, then added with a laugh, “And after she realized we got home safe and sound, then she would kill us.” Autumn cracked a smile, then brought back her serious face.

At first, the girls found only useless things, like holiday decorations, light bulbs, old clothes, books, and the like; all of which were certainly useful for something, but not for getting home from halfway across the galaxy. They each rummaged through a good ten or so more boxes, and right before they were almost convinced to give up and try something else, Olivia came across a small box labeled: “In case of emergency.”

This counts as an emergency, she thought to herself. She opened the box, and resting securely in it was a small gray stone, wrapped in sheets of soft white fluff. Above the stone was a little scrap of paper, on which was written, “Activate if Bravery is needed.”

“Well if ever there was a time when I needed to be brave, it's now!” Olivia said as she picked up the gray stone out of the box. “Hey Autumn,” Olivia called out from the other side of a stack of boxes. “I found some kind of bravery stone! Seeing as how I'm afraid of everything, maybe it will help me be brave.”

Autumn, meanwhile, had come upon something unusual while digging through the stacks of totes: one tote, visibly smaller than the rest, on which was written those same words: “In case of emergency.” In it was a small dagger, gently wrapped in soft white fluff. At first, she thought it was part of her brother-in-law Harold's collection of civil war relics—he was, after all, an avid student of history, and Autumn thought of him as a genuine nerd. But then Autumn noticed that this dagger was engraved with letters and symbols she had never seen before. She knew for certain that they weren't English, nor did they bare any resemblance to any other language she had ever seen. Above the dagger was a small scrap of paper, on which the words “The Eye of the Storm” were written.

“I found something too,” Autumn said quietly, “But I’m not sure if it will help or not.”

All the while, the girls were quite unaware that Olivia had unknowingly parked her house squarely atop a super massive black hole; so while they were busy looking for ideas to get themselves home, the house was slowly drifting into the gravitational pull of the collapsing star. As Olivia and Autumn continued searching through boxes in the junk room, the house was making a descent into an almost certain doom.

Suddenly, Autumn could feel a low rumble, similar to what she had felt when the house first began its ascent into space. “Wait... do you feel that?” she asked her niece.

Olivia also felt the rumble. She happened to look out her bedroom window, saw the problem at hand: right underneath her house, she saw the area of space where all light and matter seemed to be absorbed into a dark, swirling whirlpool, and she could feel as the house itself was being pulled right in.

“Get the blue box!” Autumn shouted. The girls ran downstairs and back to the kitchen as fast as they could, where they saw the little blue box, still sitting on the counter. It was flashing bright red, as if to indicate danger, and the voice within the box was saying, “Alert! A black hole has been detected. I advise you proceed with caution.”

Olivia picked up the box and motioned it in the direction away from the black hole; and although it lit up at her touch, the house itself continued on its gradual descent into the black hole.

“It’s not working!” Olivia shouted. “What do I do?”

“Alert! A black hole has been detected. I advise you proceed with caution,” The box repeated itself.

“How do I ‘proceed with caution’ away from a black hole?” Olivia shouted out in bewilderment.

“For starters, I’d suggest you move away from it.”

“And what if I can’t move away!”

“If you don’t move away, then this vessel will be crushed in the gravitational weight of the black hole. So I suggest you move away.”

“You’ve got to get us out of here, kid!” Autumn snapped.

Olivia shook the box a little bit more, but the house simply remained trapped in the low rumble. “The house isn’t moving when I try to make it move! Can you get us out of here?” she pleaded.

“There is...” the box replied, and said after a slight pause, “Insufficient... energy...”

“The box is dying!” Olivia shouted as she vigorously shook it. “It’s not time to die!”

“Insufficient energy... to navigate... away.” The box then ceased to shine brightly, and strained to emit even a dull glow. “Time to sleep now, Aviator. Wake me up when it’s over!”

Autumn fell into despair, and Olivia was terrified. Both girls began to cry aloud, when just then, Olivia remembered the stone she had found upstairs, and the little scrap of paper, reading, “Activate if Bravery is needed.”

“I need to be brave!” she shouted.

Autumn gave her niece a puzzled look. Olivia firmly clutched the stone and removed it from her pocket; then, as if thrown by an unseen force, the stone flew out of her hand. In a flash of light, the stone vanished, and a tall, dark skinned man, dressed in a fine, white suit, appeared in its place. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, and had a kind, but stern expression on his face.

Both girls screamed at the unexpected appearance of this man, and Olivia jumped to hide behind her aunt. He looked around for a few seconds, then directly at the two girls, and said with an intense stare and an outstretched palm, “Give me the dagger!”