

SCENE ONE

Jukebox plays. Yawning, JANINE sets down a cup of coffee for RYAN.

RYAN

Looks like you need the coffee more than I do.

JANINE

Late night.

RYAN

In a shocking turn of events.

JANINE

Mini scone? They're blueberry.

RYAN

Did blueberry scones keep you up all night?

JANINE

...maybe.

RYAN

I should probably encourage you to let go of perfection, but on the other hand - these look really good.

JANINE sets down a scone for RYAN.

JANINE

Is that a new tie?

RYAN

Old, actually. I've had it forever, I just save it for special occasions.

JANINE

Oh? Special occasions involving constellations?

RYAN

There's a conference this weekend, and a few of us are pregaming at a lunch thing today.

JANINE

Oh, that sounds nice. So it's a bunch of astronomers all getting together and...talking...astronomy?

RYAN

Generally speaking, yes. Astrophysics. People come, present new research, we all argue, people get drunker than they intend to. Science!

JANINE

In my head it looks more like those conventions Kale likes.

RYAN

It would be kind of neat if someone tried to cosplay but - yeah not so much.

JANINE laughs. KALE enters from their studio.

RYAN

Didn't know you were even here, Kale.

JANINE

...neither did I. Did you sleep up there?

KALE

I can neither confirm nor deny that.

RYAN

How am I the one with the most normal sleep schedule out of all of us?

KALE

As an astronomer, you are one with the night.

JANINE

Like Batman!

KALE

No, Batman just *is* the night.

JANINE

Give me half a point for that one, at least.

KALE

Okay, yes, half a point..

JANINE

Big coffee or bigger coffee this morning?

KALE

Biggest coffee.

JANINE pours for them.

RYAN

So what were you working on?

KALE

A commission. A few paintings for an office lobby.

JANINE

I really should get more of your work on the walls in here.

KALE

I actually have a waiting list? Which is kind of new. But when I finish up these ones, let's talk about what you want. I feel like it might be more than "rainbows, please."

JANINE

Sounds good!

Chimes as ASPEN enters. RYAN makes a sound of surprise and recognition.

RYAN

Wow, I guess they'll just let anyone in here these days.

ASPEN

Ryan McAllister! Of all the people to run into.

RYAN

I get it - it's very shocking, finding me in a place like this. You'd never guess, right?

ASPEN

Get over here.

They hug.

JANINE

Ryan is...hugging that person.

KALE

Yes, she is.

JANINE

Huh.

RYAN

Here, come meet my friends. Kale Reynolds, they/them,
and Janine Bell, she/her.

KALE

Hi!

JANINE

Nice to meet you.

ASPEN

Hi. Aspen Rockwell, they/them.

KALE

I'm assuming you two work together?

RYAN

Well, we *used* to, until they went on to bigger and better
things.

ASPEN

She just means I tripped over some lucky science.

RYAN

And wrote *the* book on pulsar deceleration.

ASPEN

Nah, come on.

JANINE

What is that?

ASPEN

(REAL EXCITED TO TALK SCIENCE!)

Ooh! Okay, so, pulsar deceleration. Basically it's...so, you have a binary neutron star, right, which is two stars orbiting each other really fast, and the gravity pulls things out, which creates a disk. Called an accretion disk.

RYAN

(ALSO REAL EXCITED TO TALK SCIENCE!)

Yeah. But an X-ray pulsar is just one neutral star that emits material from the top and bottom.

ASPEN

Because gravity.

RYAN

Right. So there's not the right gravity in that system to form a disk, but there are simulations that show that the material just...flings out.

ASPEN

And as that happens, the stuff that's flung out decelerates, because of collision with atmospheric electrons. Which is *really* cool because, I mean, it's space, there's almost nothing in space, and yet the material is *hitting things*.

RYAN

Exactly! The idea that space is just this big empty void until you smack into a planet or a star or something is just...

ASPEN

Makes you wonder where *e/se* there's something when you think there's nothing, right?

RYAN

Oh, and sometimes the rotation rate of the pulsar will slow down. The star itself, I mean.

ASPEN

Right. And the magnetic field shifts. Intermittent pulsars, those are called. NASA just found a young pulsar they *think* may be an intermittent pulsar, but, you know.

RYAN

Needs more studying.

ASPEN

So, yeah, that's the gist of it. Make sense?

Beat.

KALE

(It definitely does not make sense.)

Sure.

JANINE

Coffee?

ASPEN

Please. Can I get it to go?

JANINE

Sure thing.

Janine pours coffee into a to-go cup and hands it to Aspen.

ASPEN

I like the cups! So, this is your place... Janine?

JANINE

Well...mostly.

RYAN

It *is* your place, Janine.

JANINE

I know, I know, I just -

RYAN

I help out a bit, and she won't let me live it down.

ASPEN

No kidding?

RYAN

So does Kale.

KALE

I'm the pet artist. Like a cat, but without all the knocking things off of counters.

JANINE

I never knew I needed a pet artist who is a marketing genius but it turns out they're very useful.

ASPEN

Couldn't help noticing the bookshelves back there.

JANINE

Oh, right, our library. Feel free to take a peek. If there's anything you like, you can borrow it.

RYAN

I say this with great love, but my friend here has never returned a library book in their life.

ASPEN

HEY.

RYAN

You know I had to flirt with that librarian to get her to waive your fines...

ASPEN

I was doing research! And anyway, I got better once I didn't have you around to save me. I swear. And I happened to leave the book I was reading at home, didn't realize till I got on the plane...

KALE

Oh, that's the worst.

ASPEN

Good opportunity to find something new, though.

KALE

Hope it wasn't too long a flight to be without a book.

ASPEN

Well...pretty long, but I survived. At least I wasn't sitting between two strangers...

They share a collective shudder. Can we figure out how to make that audible?

RYAN

Aspen's out near your original neck of the woods now, Kale.

KALE

California? Cool, we traded! Was it as big a shift for you going out there as it was for me coming here? Because coming here was a *huge* change.

ASPEN

Oh, definitely. I keep wondering when I'll get used to it, feel like I'm really at home, you know?

KALE

I hope it'll happen soon.

ASPEN

Thanks, Kale. I hope so too. I think I'll go check out the library now while I'm thinking about it.

JANINE

Yeah, go right ahead.

ASPEN goes to peruse the bookshelves.

JANINE

I have never seen you be a bigger nerd.

RYAN

You don't become an astronomer by accident. I like outer space stuff. Sue me.

KALE

It's delightful.

RYAN

Well, I'm glad you think so. Prepare for an onslaught of it this weekend. I'll be bringing all the gayest people in my profession here after hours.

KALE

I will do my best to keep up. I really should go home and do some Googling before I try to follow any more space talk, though.

JANINE

Want something for the road?

KALE

Surprise me.

JANINE bags up a pastry.

KALE

Thanks.

JANINE

Maybe get some *real* sleep today? Unless you want me to put a cot in your studio.

KALE

...actually...

RYAN

Nope. That way lies burnout.

KALE

Okay, okay.

JANINE

Bye.

KALE goes. ASPEN approaches with a book.

JANINE

Find something good?

ASPEN

Found several somethings good, narrowed it down to this.
“Finna” - looks like a pretty delightful story, something
about an interdimensional portal opening in something
resembling an Ikea.

JANINE

Well, you’re welcome to borrow it. Here, I have a signout.

ASPEN signs the book out as they talk.

ASPEN

I’m a fast reader, so don’t worry. I’ll definitely have it back
to you before I leave Monday. Don’t listen to Ryan, she
slanders me like there’s an honorarium in it.

RYAN

Some targets are too easy to resist.

JANINE

I’m seeing a whole new side of you today. (beat) . I hope
you enjoy the book, Aspen. Anything else I can get you?
We just opened up the living room if you want to curl up
and read for a bit..

ASPEN

That sounds really nice, but I should head out. Very nice to
meet you, Janine. Ryan, I’ll see you later. I might not
survive this lunch if you’re not there.

RYAN

We can’t have that, the loss to astrophysics would be too
great a burden to bear... I’ll see you soon.

ASPEN leaves.

JANINE

Well, if all your colleagues are as nice as they are,
please bring them here this weekend.

RYAN

Even if I don't bring them, Space queers will find this place.
I mean, Aspen did. They've probably been in town half an hour.

JANINE laughs.

RYAN

And on that note, this space queer needs to head out.

JANINE

Have fun at nerd lunch.

RYAN goes. Jukebox changes, JANINE hums along a bit and does some general owner-of-the-place stuff. After a moment, ASPEN returns.

JANINE

Forget something?

ASPEN

I looked in my bag and saw I had accidentally taken this book too. Sorry about that, I don't even remember picking it up.

JANINE

Oh, I do stuff like that all the time. Huh...I don't think I've seen this one before. "The Forest Found Me: one family's journey from the old country to the new"...anyway, no worries, I'll put it back.

ASPEN

Thanks. Okay, *now* I'll see you later.

JANINE

Bye.

ASPEN goes again. Jukebox changes a few times in a row, rapidly.

JANINE

Whoever's messing with the jukebox, take it easy. Don't break it, okay? I can't exactly buy a replacement at the moment.

JANINE puts the book away and the jukebox flickers through a few songs again.

JANINE

Whoa. Hey. Settle on a song.

Jukebox settles.

JANINE

So weird.

SCENE TWO

Sound of a small crowd of space queers. RYAN, KALE, and ASPEN are sitting together and laughing.

KALE

You did *not*.

ASPEN

Oh, she did.

KALE

But the *dean*?

RYAN

Hey, if he didn't want to lose an arm-wrestling match, he shouldn't have gone up against me.

ASPEN

It was pretty spectacular.

RYAN

And that's the Christmas party story.

ASPEN

Well, one of them. There was the time...

RYAN

Oh, *that* time!

KALE

Wait, what time? I want to hear about all the times.

A wild JANINE appears, bearing an assortment of snacks.

JANINE

Sounds like you're having fun over here.

KALE

Ryan has some seriously good stories about academic life.

JANINE

I have no doubts.

ASPEN

This is quite a spread.

JANINE

Peach tarts, veggie flatbread with walnut pesto, mini yogurt parfaits, and chocolate babka.

ASPEN

Wow.

RYAN

Food is how Janine expresses... everything really.

KALE

Babka means she likes you.

JANINE

It's true.

ASPEN

Oh! Well, good to know.

JANINE

So how is all the science-y stuff going?

RYAN

It's all very scientific.

JANINE

As one would hope.

ASPEN

My talk is tonight. I always get a little nervous when I'm presenting new findings.

KALE

Is it about the uh...plural...delineation...thing?

ASPEN AND RYAN

Pulsar deceleration.

KALE

Gesundheit.

ASPEN

(With a laugh.)

It is.

JANINE

Well, that's exciting. I hope it goes well.

RYAN

You're not opening with a joke this time, are you?

ASPEN

Hey, people like my jokes.

RYAN

People like *you*.

ASPEN

I happen to have *several* jokes to choose from. I'm not sure which to use.

JANINE

Can we hear them?

ASPEN

Oh! Sure. Let me get my notes.

RYAN

Janine actually *will* like your jokes. She loves a pun.

ASPEN rummages in their bag and pulls out a book.

JANINE

Isn't that the book you brought back earlier? I recognize the cover. "The Forest Found Me."

ASPEN

Uh...yeah, it is. That's...very weird. Sorry. I swear I'm not *trying* to steal it.

JANINE

I believe you. Hand it over, I'll put it back after I hear these jokes.

ASPEN hands her the book and pulls out the cards for their speech.

ASPEN

Thanks. Okay...so, joke one: "Hey, everyone. Sorry I'm a little late, I had to run out to my car and put some more time on the parking meteor."

JANINE giggles, KALE lets out a hearty "ha!", and RYAN groans good-naturedly.

ASPEN

Next one: "You know, I usually open with a joke when I do these things, but I just couldn't come up with one. It's like my brain is a vacuum."

Similar reactions.

RYAN

Aspen, that's terrible.

ASPEN

All right, all right, admittedly not my best work. Last one: "If a celebrity uses they/them pronouns, does that make them a non-binary star?"

This time, everyone laughs, and KALE particularly appreciates this one.

RYAN

Okay, that's actually good. You got me.

ASPEN

Aha! I knew I'd win you over eventually.

JANINE

That's definitely the one. Okay, let me put this book away before I forget.

JANINE goes over to the library. Jukebox goes on the fritz again.

ASPEN

Whoa. That's weird.

KALE

Yeah, it *really* is.

RYAN

Uh...hang on a second. I might be able to fix it.

RYAN goes to see if she can do anything about the jukebox ghost.

ASPEN

Never seen a jukebox do that before. Ryan knows how it works?

KALE

Yeah, she's...good that way.

ASPEN

Huh. Guess I shouldn't be surprised, she's pretty handy.

Jukebox settles down and RYAN returns.

RYAN

I think it's all sorted out now.

KALE

Yeah? Nothing, uh...too *strange*?

RYAN

No more than usual.

ASPEN

Strange things happen a lot here?

RYAN

Old building. It's bound to happen.

ASPEN

It's a nice building, really. I do miss this kind of thing. Where I live now, everything feels so...shiny and new, you know? And that's fine, there's nothing wrong with it, but it's just not the same.

KALE

It's hard to turn a new place into a home.

ASPEN

How did you do it when you came here?

KALE

Once I had about a half-dozen half-finished paintings all over the place and paint splattered over most of my stuff, it felt pretty familiar. And then I met Janine.

JANINE returns.

RYAN

What about you, Janine?

JANINE

What about me?

RYAN

You're not from around here. How did you make yourself feel at home when you moved up this way?

JANINE

Baking.

ASPEN

Really?

JANINE

I'm from a small town, so I always knew pretty much everyone. And I went to college with a bunch of friends,

too. When I moved here, all of a sudden I had to learn how to...you know...meet people. So I started trying out a new recipe every weekend and I'd go around to my neighbors, knock on the doors, offer them whatever it was I had made. It was a good conversation starter, and before long I felt like I was at home. Turns out it's pretty easy to feel like you belong when you show up with fresh brownies.

ASPEN

Maybe I should try that.

JANINE

Well, if you need suggestions, I happen to have a chocolate chip cookie recipe that never fails.

KALE

Uh, I don't think I remember these cookies...

RYAN

Yeah, same, that doesn't sound familiar, have you ever even made them for us?

JANINE

Subtle. You're both very subtle.

Sound of a glass smashing.

KALE

Wow, that wasn't even because of me.

JANINE

Smash it. I hope that wasn't one of the new stemless glasses, they're so pretty...

Another glass smash.

JANINE

(While hurrying off.)

Hey, whoever's swearing in here, knock it off! You know the rules!

Another smash.

KALE

I'll give you a hand, Janine!

KALE hurries to help JANINE.

KALE

(distant)

Hey, what the smash is happening here?

ASPEN

Are people - throwing glasses?

RYAN

Oh, no, nothing so dramatic. It happens. She tends to buy in bulk these days.

ASPEN shuffles their notecards.

RYAN

More nervous than you were letting on?

ASPEN

You always see through me.

RYAN

You'll be fine. You always do great.

ASPEN makes a noncommittal sound of nerves.

RYAN

Hey, you know me well enough to know I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true..

ASPEN

I do. Thank you.

RYAN

I'll be sitting right up front. If you get freaked out, just look at me and I'll make some ridiculous face or something.

ASPEN

See, now I'm going to look at you whether I'm nervous or not just to see how many faces you can make in an hour.

RYAN

Oh, no. I've given you too much power.

ASPEN laughs. JANINE and KALE return, bearing a cat!

RYAN

...uh, where did that cat come from?

KALE

This little rascal was the one breaking the glasses!

JANINE

The back door must have been propped open too long or something. She was exploring.

ASPEN

Think she'll let me pet her?

JANINE

She seems really friendly, go for it. Also, *there is a cat in my food establishment, what do I do?*

The cat starts purring as ASPEN takes the cat and pets her.

RYAN

I wouldn't worry too much. She can't have been here long and you keep everything nice and tidy.

JANINE

I'm going to go sanitize all the things. Just in case.

JANINE goes off to sanitize all the things. Just in case.

KALE

I think a cat would fit right in here. It's a cat kind of place. Ooh! We could get her a little...what's it called...those cat stand things, and I could paint it! Hey, Janine, I have an idea!

KALE scurries back to tell JANINE their brilliant idea.

RYAN

Wow. That cat *really* likes you.

ASPEN

She's sweet. Think Janine will let her stay?

RYAN

Oh, sure. If she wasn't already going to, Kale will just do the puppy eyes. No one can resist those, not even me.

ASPEN

I haven't even seen them and I doubt I could either. If she's staying, this cat needs a name.

RYAN

(Without missing a beat.)

Marsha. Marsha P.

ASPEN

(Please do feel free to make this a pun - "purr-fect")

Perfect.

CAT meows.

ASPEN

I guess we're in agreement.

RYAN

Oh, hey, what time do you have to set up? I feel like you should head back to the conference..

ASPEN

You're right. Here, take Marsha.

RYAN chuckles as she takes the cat.

RYAN

I'll see you there. Hey, notecards, don't forget.

ASPEN

Oh - thanks.

ASPEN gathers their notecards and opens their bag, and lo and behold...

RYAN

Is...that the same book Janine put away for you earlier?

ASPEN

I *thought* she did. This thing is like a boomerang. I'll put it back.

RYAN

You know what, why don't you just hang on to it? I'll write it in the log for you. What's it called?

ASPEN

"The Forest Found Me." Looks old... thanks. I guess the universe is trying to tell me to read it, huh?

RYAN

Yeah, the...universe can be pretty insistent that way.

ASPEN

And who am I to argue against the cosmos? Anyway. See you there.

ASPEN goes. CAT meows again.

RYAN

Yeah, I see them too.

Cat purrs.

SCENE THREE

JANINE hums along with the jukebox and yawns. Marsha meows.

JANINE

Don't you start. I slept!

Meow.

JANINE

...I slept *a little*.

Meow.

JANINE

Ryan put you up to this, didn't she?

Meow.

JANINE

If I give you a kitty treat will you stop judging me?

Kitty chirp.

JANINE

Deal.

JANINE gets a treat for Marsha, who purrs. The windchimes sound, and RYAN enters.

RYAN

Morning.

JANINE

Hey. I've got sausage rolls.

RYAN

Please and thank you.

ASPEN enters. Marsha meows at them and runs up for pets.

ASPEN

Aww. Hey, Marsha. Good to see you're still here.

JANINE

Marsha?

RYAN

Admittedly, my idea.

JANINE

Unsurprising.

ASPEN yawns.

JANINE

Late night?

ASPEN

Yeah, it's my own fault, though. After the talk - which went really well, by the way, they liked the joke a lot - I got back to my hotel room and started reading the book that kept ending up in my bag.

JANINE

Oh yeah? Any good?

ASPEN

It's...well, it's not a book, exactly, it's a journal.

JANINE

Journal?

ASPEN

Yeah. The foreword said someone in the family found it and had it published. I started reading and I couldn't put it down.

RYAN

So, whose journal is it?

ASPEN

That's the thing that's so...they're actually...a distant relation. Of me, I mean.

RYAN

What? Really?

ASPEN

Yeah. They lived here, and I realized the dates matched about when my family would have come over, so I got curious and spent way too much time searching around on a genealogy website, and, well...yeah. This is the journal of my great...something...removed a couple times.

JANINE

That's amazing!

ASPEN

It is. And it's really interesting. They talked a lot about living in a strange new place, feeling like they didn't belong, wondering if it would ever feel like home...

JANINE

Sounds like what we were talking about yesterday.

ASPEN

It does.

RYAN

Did they ever get settled?

ASPEN

I'd have to keep reading to find out. I have to get to the airport soon, though, so...

JANINE

Please, keep the book.

ASPEN

Really?

JANINE

Of course! That's your family history. And maybe it'll help, you know? Seeing how someone you're related to made their new home their own.

ASPEN

Well...thank you. It's funny - I have no idea how it kept ending up in my bag, but if it hadn't, I wouldn't have given it a second glance. Would never have known it was here. I guess you never know where you'll find something important, right?

JANINE

Like the star stuff.

ASPEN

The...?

JANINE

You wouldn't give empty space a second glance either, but there's important things there too, right? And that's what slows the star stuff down? Or did I completely botch this metaphor because I don't *actually* understand pulsar deceleration?

ASPEN laughs.

ASPEN

I definitely get what you're saying.

RYAN

And you've... got the gist, actually. I'm genuinely impressed. Takes students quite a bit longer and they sign up for our classes on purpose..

A bleary KALE makes their way in.

JANINE

Kale! Did you sleep in the studio last night?

KALE

I plead the fifth.

JANINE

You have paint in your *hair*.

KALE

There is a chance I passed out on a palette.

JANINE

Sit down, I'll get you some coffee.

RYAN

So, Aspen, you're heading out?

ASPEN

I am. Just wanted to say goodbye before I left. It was really great to see you.

RYAN

It was. Let's try to make it happen more often, yeah?

ASPEN

Yeah, what's a little 3000-plus miles between friends?

They hug.

KALE

Still weird, the hugging.

JANINE

Little bit.

ASPEN

It was really great to meet you both. Oh, Kale, I grabbed one of your cards - I think maybe a couple of your paintings might help make my place feel a little more like it's mine.

KALE

Oh! Great! And I kind of love the idea of sending art back home.

JANINE

I hope we'll see you again.

ASPEN

Count on it.

JANINE sets a coffee and pastry bag on the counter.

JANINE

Here - in case the airport offerings aren't so great.

ASPEN

Oh, thank you. All right, well...I'll see you around. Take care.

RYAN

Bye, nerd.

JANINE

Something something pots and kettles.

As ASPEN goes, the jukebox goes berserk one last time and settles as they leave.

RYAN

So. Guess that ghost recognized family when they saw it.

JANINE

That's a new one for us.

KALE

Definitely fits the vibe here, though.

RYAN

It does.

JANINE

Aww.

RYAN

And that's me at my warm and fuzzy quota for the day. You two have a good one.

KALE

What, no hugs for us?

RYAN

When you've caught me serving the university president \$11 scotch and telling him it's Macallan, and you back me up instead of ratting me out, you can have a hug.

JANINE

Bye, nerd.

RYAN

And *sleep* tonight. In a bed. Both of you. I mean - two beds. One each.

MARSHA meows.

RYAN

Thanks for backing me up.

RYAN goes. Once RYAN is out the door, MARSHA meows.

KALE

Why does the cat agree with Ryan so much?

JANINE

They're going to lovingly gang up on us a *lot*, aren't they?

KALE

Yeah, well. That's what family does.

MARSHA purrs.

Outro.

CREDITS

Light Hearts is a joint project of three seriously silly souls, Tal Minear, Evan Tess Murrar, and Caroline Mincks. This episode was written by Caroline and Evan and directed by Caroline. Sound design and engineering were by Tal. Janine, who will continue to buy glasses in bulk, is played by Caroline. Ryan, whose quota for warm fuzzies is finally reset, is Played by Evan. Kale, who will sleep in a bed eventually, they promise, is played by Tal. Aspen, who is down to talk about pulsar deceleration any day of the week, was played by AR Olivieri. This episode also featured Emma, Leggy, and Arwen as Marsha P., the newest resident of Prism. Special thanks to Molly Burdick and Allan Cancinos for providing two of Aspen's excellent jokes that everyone likes. Happy hauntings!