Bonus Scenes

from Imogen's Perspective

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Imogen meandered through the worktables and examined the half-finished tinker tech strewn across their surfaces. She tried to guess the purpose of each machine, but her knowledge of tinkering was limited to the basics. If she wanted to get her filtering foundation to work, she might need more than magic.

As if on cue, footsteps sounded behind her.

Imogen smiled. "Specs," she said without turning around.

A soft laugh. "How do you always know it's me?"

Specs never walked anywhere. He rode his bike around town, sure, but on foot he bounded, bounced, skipped, hopped, loped and jogged. He never walked — at least not like anyone else. It was like he was always excited about where he was going, and it made Imogen want to go there too. "I have my ways," she replied and turned to face her best friend.

Specs was much taller than her, but he seemed less so with his shoulders slumped forward and a look of deep concern on his face.

Panic with hummingbird wings fluttered in Imogen's chest. "What's wrong?" Instinctively, her hand reached out and grasped his arm. Lean muscles tensed underneath his scarlet EAMS sweater.

"N-nothing," Specs stammered. "I, uh, I mean not with me. I came over here to check on you."

"Me?" Imogen laughed, and it slowed her racing heart. "You had me worried, looking at me like that. Why are you checking on me?"

"Well, I heard about your breakup." His eyes flicked to her hand on his arm.

Oops. She'd accidentally left it there too long. The physical closeness of their friendship had never bothered him before, but maybe the look hadn't meant anything.

"I'm fine," she answered. "I've cried my tears and I'm going to be sorted."

"Are you sure? You know you can talk to me about anything."

"Seriously. It was mostly mutual."

Specs laughed dryly. "Mutual? Fletcher has been moping around the halls of EAMS like a sad Victorian ghost. What happened?"

"He was mad that I don't want to spend more time with him, but I'm busy, you know?"

Specs' face melted with sympathy, and he took a half-step closer, his head tilted slightly as he listened and waited for her to go on.

"I've been working on this filtering foundation, and I can't get the charms to last more than thirty seconds or so." Imogen wanted something in her hands to fiddle with as the painful memories surfaced. She picked up an oscillating aether gauge. "He was cross I was working on it instead of coming to the gym with him, and it turned into this big thing."

It was Specs' turn to place a hand on her arm. "Gen." He was the only one who called her that. "You'll come across many guys like Fletcher who want you to follow them around to witness their *greatness*." Specs rolled his eyes, but then he squared Imogen by the shoulders so she had to look right into his warm brown eyes. "They only care about how *you* make *them* feel about themselves. They don't see you for what you are."

"What am I?" Imogen's heart thudded in her ears.

"You're full of ideas and schemes and dreams — more creative than any Tinker I've met here. You're an inventor, an artist, an innovator. You're a speeding train. A rocket to the moon."

"I'm a what?" They both laughed.

"You're going someplace fast," Specs clarified. "You just need to wait for a co-pilot who wants to chase your dreams too."

Imogen's lips parted as she sucked in a breath to steady her racing pulse. "That was the nicest thing —"

"Have you considered gold?" Specs' eyes darted away from her abruptly.

Imogen cleared her throat. "Erm, what?" When had she moved to stand so close to Specs? She took a step back to get her head right.

"For your filtering foundation? You're trying to stabilize a charm meant for a person on something inanimate, correct?"

"Yeah," Imogen answered, but her thoughts weren't on charms and enchantments of a magical sort at the moment.

"As student tinkers, we mostly use brass in our inventions because it's a relatively effective aether stabilizer, but reasonably cheap. A finer, softer metal like gold could, theoretically, hold a charm. Glass could work even better."

"Oh! I'll have to try that. Thanks, Specs." She threw her arms around his shoulders and squeezed him tightly. "Thank you, Thaddeus."

His arms wound around her waist. "Of course." His deep voice rumbled through her chest.

Imogen glanced over at Leo and Zelda. "Come on. We should join them."

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Imogen found a table along the railing on the library's third floor that looked over the rows of study tables in the center. The library was mostly deserted, but a

few studious tinkers and GITs bent their faces towards their books in the waning light.

She hadn't even bothered to change out of her work clothes before she went to find Specs at their predetermined meeting spot where they would wait for Zelda and Leo. Specs wasn't there yet, probably wouldn't be until his Tinkerbot team finished work for the night. There was a small Tinker Tussle league at EAMS that built aether-enhanced robots to fight each other. The winner of the Wishmaker Tinker Tussle got an invitation to the European Semi-pro league, and Specs' team actually had a shot.

Thinking about Specs made Imogen's stomach twist in a way she didn't understand. Since they came back from holiday, Zelda had been absorbed in schoolwork and her new relationship with Prince Charming. And with Fletcher out of the picture, Imogen was spending more and more time with Specs — and it was becoming the best part of her days.

A strange sound made her pause, a clatter of metal clunking on the wooden floors growing louder. Something flashed out of the corner of her eye, then she jumped when something bumped into her foot. Imogen looked under the table to find a brass sphere next to her gold shoe.

Specs.

She picked up the contraption and searched for him nearby but didn't find him. The sphere had seams running concentrically around its surface, but with a little twist, nothing happened. "Aha," Imogen said with a laugh. It was another one of Specs' puzzle machines. He was always testing out a new design on her.

Her heart raced at the prospect of testing the limits of her puzzle skills. The surface was smooth, with only the seams on its surface. She applied a light pressure to twist the sphere along each seam until she finally found the right one and was rewarded with a satisfying click. She repeated this process until each sequential twist opened the final lock.

Imogen squeaked in surprise when the sphere popped itself open and landed on the table with a thunk. It had required a delicate touch, but Imogen had

expected a few more steps. She examined the open contraption and realized it was meant to look like a ladybird with its wings open — more art than puzzle, though Specs' puzzles were usually both. She turned over the beautiful sculpture and found a small roll of paper clutched in the ladybird's legs.

Imogen unrolled the paper and read the note. It took her a few seconds to decipher Specs' messy handwriting.

Will you go to the ball with me?

Imogen froze. Couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Her feelings were too much to take in at once.

A quiet cough broke the spell and Imogen turned to see Specs propped against a bookcase, watching her nervously with one hand on the back of his neck, the other shoved deep into a pocket.

"You figured that one out quick," he said, ignoring the fact that he'd just asked her to the ball.

"What's this?" She held up the note.

"I-uhm ... I want to take you to the Wishmaker Festival Ball." He tried to keep his eyes on her, but his gaze fell to his feet.

Imogen stood and joined him between the shelves. "What do you mean, Thaddeus? I didn't think you would be interested in a ball, so are you asking to go as my friend, or is this a date?"

"I know how much you love gowns and getting dressed up. I didn't want you to miss the ball your last year at Madame LeBleu's." Specs scrubbed the back of his neck nervously.

"And so you asked me as a friend?"

Specs' eyes snapped to Imogen. "Of course, as a friend, always a friend, but ... not just a friend."

"Specs!" she cried. "What are you doing?" Her pulse fluttered, but her mind reeled. *More than friends.* The thought had never once crossed her mind. Of course, she had often wondered, cute as he was, why Specs never dated anyone. She'd just assumed he wasn't interested in it, but she'd assumed wrong.

"I'm asking you on a date," Specs replied. "I thought that was obvious."

"I know, but our *friendship*. It's one of my favorite relationships in the whole world and I ... I don't want to mess it up."

Specs shifted nervously between his feet. His smile fell and his face grew deeply serious. "Imogen. I've kept my feelings to myself for as long as I can, but it's eating me up. You're finally not dating anyone and—"

"Wait." Imogen pressed her fingertips to his chest. "How long have you been waiting to tell me this? Are you saying you've liked me since *before* my breakup with Fletcher?"

Specs ducked his head and smiled sheepishly.

"Longer?"

"Fall term. When I saw you again after summer holiday, it scared me how much I'd missed you. I don't know how or when, but it was then I realized I wanted to be something more. I guess I was falling so slowly I didn't notice until I was in too deep and then I was scared," he pressed his hand on top of hers so her palm flattened against his heart. "I didn't want to lose what we had, but every time you looked at me I wanted. I wondered. I ... burned for more."

Imogen's cheeks heated. Where had Specs, her sweet, kind friend, hidden this version of himself from her? Furthermore, why? She wanted to yell at him or kiss him or both, but she was struggling to wrap her head around either. "Thaddeus Asher, I had no idea you had that kind of talk in you."

Specs chuckled. "So I'm not making a total mess of this?"

"Oh." Imogen laughed dryly. "This is a mess. A complete mess."

Specs turned and started to walk away.

"Where are you going?"

Specs stopped. "First, I'm going to take a bracingly cold walk around the outside of the library. You're going to sit and wait for me at that table, and when I get back, I'm going to say 'Hi Gen! Heard from Leo and Zelda, yet?' You'll say 'Nope,' and we're going to pretend that none of this conversation ever happened."

Imogen shook her head and pulled Specs deep into the shadows between the bookshelves. "No, you're not taking this back because–" She wrestled with the thoughts and feelings racing through her head and which to deal with first. "I'm a little mad at you."

"I'm so sorry–"

Imogen held off his sorry with a finger to his lips. The feeling of soft lips on the pad of her finger made her snatch it away before she completely lost her train of thought. "Before you start apologizing, you numpty, let me explain. I'm not mad at you for your feelings. I'm mad at you for waiting so long."

There was the truth of it. This was Specs! Imogen was choosy in who she chose to date, and even choosier in her friends. If he had given her any indication, flirted with her even in the slightest, she knew the care she had for him as her friend would have blossomed into more.

Imogen's pulse raced as she realized what was bothering her most. "I wouldn't have wasted four months on that loser, Fletcher, and we wouldn't be trying to figure this out three months before school ends."

Specs rocked back and forth onto his toes, lips pursed, like he was holding in something he wanted to say.

The air felt charged like a lightning strike. Imogen shook her head with a laugh, her high ponytail swishing back and forth. "You were going to apologize, weren't you?"

Specs chuckled, but their shared amusement did little to diffuse the tension singing in the air. "I was. Then I realized that would be disingenuous, Because I'm not sorry. I'm kicking myself, sure, but I'm not going to disappear from your life after school ends." He took a step closer and fixed his brown eyes directly on hers. "Every moment we have ahead of us, the chance for something deeper and more meaningful is worth risking our friendship for."

Imogen couldn't think straight. With all the noise in her head, the only thing she could think of to answer Specs' question was ... heat rushed to Imogen's cheeks. It had to be done. She pulled Specs' face to hers and kissed him boldly.

Specs held his hands stiffly at his sides and they broke apart seconds later when they both had to laugh nervously. Imogen touched her lips, a faint quiver in her stomach. "That was..."

"You caught me off guard," Specs said at the same time as Imogen said, "I was still in my head."

Specs shuffled closer. "Should we try again?"

Imogen shook her head to clear it. "Yes. Again."

This time, Specs took the lead and placed a hand on the back of Imogen's neck and tilted her chin up to meet his lips. His kiss was soft, tender, and Imogen tried to ignore the fact that this was Specs kissing her, but that was the whole point of this chemistry experiment. It was Specs' lips and nose brushing hers. His dark curls coiling through her fingertips. His hand on the small of her back. There was something fundamentally incongruous about kissing your best friend.

They broke apart and Imogen gave a frustrated sigh. Specs scratched his head.

"That was—"

Specs fisted a hand into his curls. "Don't say it."

"This was awkward."

Specs let his head fall back and let out an exasperated groan. "Fine. It's a little awkward. But not ... unpleasant, right?"

Imogen touched her lips. "No. Not unpleasant. As with all things, you're technically proficient, Specs. It's just, there was a spark but no flame. Those kisses weren't worth risking our friendship over."

"We're in our heads."

"In our heads," Imogen agreed.

Specs' shoulders slumped forward. He almost placed a hand on her arm, but seemed to change his mind and shoved it in his pocket instead. "Maybe just take some time and think about us, and we'll take a step back on the kissing."

"Ugh. Fine," Imogen said. "That's probably for the best."

Specs lifted a shoulder. "Unless there's a moment where a kiss would feel natural."

"Right. It's not off the table."

"Right." Specs bobbed his head towards the study table. "Come on. Let's go wait for Leo and Zelda to get back."

How was it possible to simultaneously want to kiss someone again and wish you'd never kissed them in the first place?



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Specs had left Imogen completely tangled in uncertainty. She was wedged firmly between friends and romantically interested, too scared to take a step forward and too afraid she'd always wonder *what if?* if she didn't. The week of the Wishmaker Festival arrived, and she still hadn't given Specs an answer to his invitation to the ball.

The bustling greenroom started to clear out after Iris Pickett called for places and the start of the Wishmaker Festival Follies. Imogen and Specs stood beside Zelda in a cramped corner.

"I'm going to go watch from the wings," Zelda said brightly. Imogen could easily guess who she was eager to see. She'd spotted Prince Charming's bodyguard in the security sweep of the theatre.

"We'll meet you there," Specs said. "I need Imogen to help me run my lines."

Imogen's stomach flipped. *Really? Or is he going to demand an answer to know if they were actually going to the ball together?*

Zelda nodded and seemed to think nothing of leaving them alone together. She hurried off with the rest of the students toward the stage.

Even though the room was less crowded, Specs didn't move away, his shoulder just inches from hers. Imogen snuck a glance up at him. She had always been distracted by his long, dark lashes and warm, round eyes, but everything about his features was charming. His perfectly sloped nose, full cheekbones, and angular jaw were pleasant in every way.

Then her eyes fell on his full lips.

As if he knew all along what she was doing, his lips turned up in the corner. Imogen felt his hand find hers and intertwine their fingers.

"Subtle," she said.

"You're staring at me." His eyes crinkled.

"I'm trying to figure out if I'm crazy for not taking you up on your offer."

Specs' gaze danced around the room. "And your conclusion?"

"Undecided."

Specs shoved away from the wall and pulled her with him. Hand-holding was a new and strangely comfortable thing as Specs led her through the cramped halls of the theater and ducked into a large, dimly lit room filled with disparate set pieces and large props.

"Are we allowed in here?" Imogen asked.

"Probably not." Specs climbed the steps to a columned folly covered with fake ivy that looked like it belonged in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"What are your intentions, Thaddeus?" Imogen tugged Specs closer. *Was she actually flirting with him? And enjoying it?*

"I want to know what's still running through your head." He released her hand and brushed a stray hair from her cheek.

Imogen's stomach sank. "I don't want to say."

"Oh. Bad news?"

"I just keep thinking of all the reasons you're going to break up with me or how I'm going to hurt you."

Specs chuckled. "That's a terrible place to start."

"My last four relationships ended on someone else's terms, not mine."

"I thought Fletcher was a mutual breakup?"

"It was, but he initiated the process. Not every relationship broke my heart, but each one stung more than the last."

Specs brows pushed together. "All right, then. Why do you think I would break up with you?"

Imogen knew the reasons. They ran through her head like a catchy song whenever she couldn't fall asleep. "I can be flaky."

"Spontaneous," Specs corrected.

"Flighty."

"Whimsical," he offered.

"I'm always absorbed in a project."

"So am I."

Imogen smiled when she realized what he was doing. "I don't even know what corner of the world I'll end up granting wishes in!"

"And I can be a tinker anywhere."

Imogen folded her arms. "You would do a long-distance thing?"

"Not really. I'll go where you go."

"What?" Imogen sputtered, and her arms fell to her sides.

"I've applied to the top tinkering programs at universities on every continent."

"What?" Imogen was so shocked she actually laughed.

"Maybe you should stop trying to figure out our relationship by its end date and consider, perhaps, that it doesn't have one."

Imogen just stared at Specs.

"Here's my proposition: we treat each other with the respect and admiration we've always shown each other, only now we think of ourselves as copilots ... who kiss a little." Specs held out his hand for her to take.

"I haven't forgotten that day you called me a speeding train and a rocket to the moon. Were you talking about yourself when you told me I needed a copilot?"

Specs grinned bashfully.

Imogen's stomach fluttered. She took his hand and gave it a firm shake. Before she could release it, Specs tugged her in and kissed her. Her worries disappeared as her heart soared and softened, letting herself fall into him. This was everything a kiss should be: tender, earnest, and electric.

They broke apart to catch their breath, and when their eyes found each other, they laughed.

"I think that proves this equation," Specs said.

Imogen blew out a puff of air and tried to collect her thundering pulse. "Thoroughly."

Specs lifted a shoulder. "Should we double-check our work?"

"Thoroughly," Imogen answered.

They fit back together with seamless ease, each kiss sending Imogen's heart further into the security of Specs' care. Imogen could have spent hours kissing him, but a cough behind them sent them flying five feet apart. Imogen turned to find Leo standing at the bottom of the steps to the folly wearing a dark suit with a blue button-down underneath.

He grinned wildly. "Sorry to interrupt."

Imogen flew down the stairs and threw her arms over Prince Charming's shoulders. "Leo! What's going on? We've missed you!"

Specs clapped him on the shoulder. "Yeah, man. Why'd you disappear on us?"

"I'll explain everything soon, but I need your help with something."

Imogen and Specs glanced at each other. "Whatever you need," she answered.

"How do you think Zelda would feel about a big romantic gesture?"

Imogen squealed. "She'd love it!"