

Second Prize: Elf Reliance

by Jim Busch

"I love you, you love me, I don't see why we can't get married," Mavis said.

"You know our ways. I can't bond until my myrmidon commits to another," Toomas explained.

"Then why don't we move things along a bit? I'm starting to get desperate."

Toomas said, "Would you listen to yourself? Do you want me to ignore our traditions because you're impatient? We elves have been guiding humans since we whispered in their ears and told them to climb down from the tree and walk on their hind feet. With those big brains, they'd spend their lives trying to figure out 'the right course of action, the logical thing to do,' blah, blah, blah."

He shook his head. "Without us whispering in their ears they'd never take a chance, they'd never 'waste time' writing a novel or painting a picture or even telling a joke."

Mavis snorted. "That's a load of sleek. They don't even know we exist."

"I agree, their vision is limited. They don't know much about our dimension, they can't see us, and those weird little round ears can't hear our voices. But they feel our presence. They have many names for us: muse, intuition, the subconscious, their gut! Christopher may not know my name, but we share a connection. He listens to me."

Toomas scratched his pointy ear. "What would his life be like if I hadn't told him to spend the money he was saving for a motorcycle on that guitar he saw in the shop window? Not only did I save him from crashing into a tree, but the only time he's really happy is when he's playing it."

Mavis said, "You made him fall in love with music, so make him fall in love with Lauren! He'll be happy, she'll be happy and most important, we'll be happy!"

"It's not that easy. What if she's not the one? What if she doesn't go for him? This is the biggest thing I'll ever do for him. If I screw it up I'll be trying to make it right for the rest of his life."

"Now who's overanalyzing?" Mavis asked. "What does *your* gut say? You're worried about what will happen if he asks her, but what's his life going to be like if he doesn't? Can you tell me? I know I'm miserable waiting for you. Don't you think the same is true for him? Don't be such a scotch. Talk to him."

"What if she shoots him down?" Toomas demanded. "I'll have to talk him off a ledge if she says no."

"Don't worry about Lauren. I'll mosey over to her left shoulder and have a chat with her. By the time I'm done she'll look at Christopher like he's a Greek god with Einstein's brain and Bill Gates's money. She'll look at him like I look at you."

Toomas never could say no to Mavis, so he went looking for Christopher. Taking a comfortable seat on his myrmidon's left shoulder, he reached up and put his right hand on Christopher's temple. The human was already thinking about Lauren. "She doesn't even know I'm alive. She's way out of my league. I get tongue-tied ordering lunch. What am I

going to say to such a beautiful, amazing girl? I'm going to end up a lonely old man feeding pigeons in the park."

Toomas was pondering how to explain his failure to Mavis when it hit him.

"You don't have to talk to her, dummy! You can play your guitar and sing for her. We'll write a song just for her."

Christopher reached for his guitar so quickly that Toomas almost tumbled to the floor. For the next four hours they experimented with melodies and words. Toomas helped him with the lyrics. He won a major victory convincing Christopher to remove one of his favorite lines. Toomas wasn't convinced that Lauren would be pleased with a lyrical description extolling how she filled out a tight sweater. He convinced Christopher to focus on her smile and her eyes instead. By midafternoon, "Lovely Lauren" was finished and well-rehearsed. Christopher shaved, showered, and dressed. Toomas had to dissuade him from wearing the open-collar poet's shirt he'd bought at the Renaissance Faire, opting for a nice button-down instead.

They spotted Lauren sitting on the grass outside the student union. Toomas was happy to see Mavis sitting on her left shoulder. He was even happier to see the big smile on her face. That smug smile said, "Mission accomplished!" As soon as they saw Christopher's and Lauren's eyes meet, the two elves knew their work was done.

There was an awkward moment while Christopher swore under his breath as he fiddled with the guitar's keys to bring it into tune, but once he started playing, things went much more smoothly. He had her from the first line. When she heard, "Lauren, lovely Lauren, you make me want to sing," the young woman let out a soft sigh and laid her head on Christopher's shoulder.

The elves moved to a shady spot nearby.

"You're a miracle worker," Toomas said. "How did you get her to come around so quickly?"

Mavis laughed. "I planned to tell you how hard I had to work and how clever I was, but really it was nothing."

"She certainly seems to be into him."

"Oh, she is, but that's not my doing. She's as much a basket case as he is. She was already thinking about him when I put my hand on her temple. I'm surprised her thoughts didn't scorch my palm!"

"So she's already in love with Christopher?" Toomas mused.

"Yes, for months. I don't know how these humans ever get together. They're all total scotchies," Mavis said.

"That's why they need us."

"It's a matter of Elf Reliance!" she declared.

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