

Friendly Competition
by Lesley L. Smith

I couldn't help watching the young woman practicing on the balance beam; she looked like she was flying as she leapt into the air and landed back on the beam again and again. She finished her routine and jumped off, making a perfect landing, arms thrust into the air, back arched. Then she relaxed and turned to face me. "Take a picture, it'll last longer."

Motionless, she was still beautiful, with a cute upturned nose, a sprinkling of freckles and exotic slanted eyes. My eyes slid along her perfect trim body, and I started to get--

She cleared her throat. "Do you mind? Some of us are working here."

"Huh?" I asked.

She clenched her fists and narrowed her eyes. "Some of us are working here."

I came to my senses. I couldn't get involved with the athletes. Besides, she had to be a teenager. "Sorry. I'm, uh, working, too. I'm Michael Williams. I'm from WADA, the World Anti-Doping--"

"I know what it is." She relaxed her arms. "Are you here to take a blood sample?"

She was cute when she wasn't angry. I smiled. "I am if you're Ashley Brown."

"Then, I guess this is your lucky day." She leaned back against the beam. "Is here okay?"

I nodded and stepped forward with my medical bag. "Just relax," I said as the needle approached her arm.

She flinched, and I tried to distract her. "So, we have a fancy new test." I smiled. "We can detect all kinds of stuff about you with it."

If anything, she looked even more alarmed. Surely, she wasn't a doper?

I must have frowned, because she said, "That's nice about the test. I'm totally normal. I mean I haven't taken anything. I don't have anything to hide." Who was she trying to convince? Me? That would be a waste of time. The only thing that mattered was the lab results. "This doesn't include a DNA test does it?" she added.

"That's an odd question," I said, and finished taking the sample, labeled it, and put it in my bag. "Thanks, Miss Brown," I said before I walked away.

She nodded, but I thought she looked nervous.

Back at the lab, I was curious to see what her sample showed. How could such an attractive healthy young woman take drugs? I couldn't believe she'd stoop that low.

I put the latest batch of samples, Ashley's included, into the analyzer, and went down to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee.

When I came back the computer was beeping like a dump truck backing up. I'd never heard it make that noise before. "What the heck?" I said, sitting down at a monitor.

The monitor said, "DNA Mismatch."

"What the hell?" I punched up the DNA screen. I knew that screen. I knew what human DNA looked like, and what I was looking at was not human. "Jesus Christ!" I jumped up and started pacing around the lab tables. "Oh, my God."

Finally I looked at the screen again. It wasn't displaying the sample of Ashley Brown. It was displaying the sample of someone else. "What the hell?" Was the machine broken? I didn't see how; I'd tested it just this morning and it was fine then.

I found Ashley's sample and displayed the DNA.

It wasn't human.

And it didn't match the other nonhuman DNA. I jumped off the lab stool like it was on fire. "What the hell is going on here?!"

Back at the gym, I found Ashley still practicing, and stalked up to her. She saw me coming and stopped dancing on the beam. "So I guess that new test of yours does include DNA. Damn. I've done such a good job of avoiding them up until now. All of us have."

"What the hell are you?" I asked her, my voice low.

She got off the beam, tugging at her leotard. She looked at me silently. Finally she said, "Fey."

"What?" I said.

"You know, fey. Fairy," she said. "Well, technically, half-fairy, or I wouldn't be this big."

She must have been all of four feet eight inches.

"But I'm an American citizen and I qualified for the Olympics fair and square."

"But you're not human!" I said. "The Olympics are for humans!"

"I disagree." She crossed her arms. "Nowhere in the rules does it say anything about athletes having to be homo sapiens."

"But you're not human," I said.

"Good grief, Michael. It's Michael, isn't it? This had been going on for years. I'm hardly the only one. Didn't you notice the guys practicing the shot-put out on the track? Did they look big to you?"

"Well, yeah." I nodded and thought about that other weird sample.

"My buddy Brian is half troll," she said, "and my friend Hans is like twenty percent giant. There's all kinds of us around."

My mind was reeling. It was too much to take in.

"But none of us have taken any drugs," she said. "We're clean. I swear." She smiled, showing off her dimples.

Wow, she was cute. My resolve was weakening.

"Please let us compete," she said. "We've been working for years to get here and represent our countries. We deserve a chance to participate in a little friendly international competition, don't we?" She smiled. "Doesn't everyone deserve a chance?"

I couldn't turn her in, and it wasn't because she was cute or she had a good chance of winning my adopted country a medal. She made a lot of good points. And besides, none of the blood samples did show performance enhancing drugs.

My report that night was interesting--to say the least. My bosses were going to be shocked that earth had multiple sentient species. We'd had anthropologists here for years and had no idea.

I was still shaking my head thinking about it as I laced up my running shoes. Since I'd grown up on a planet with a lower atmospheric oxygen content, I figured I'd have a good chance at making the 2012 U.S. track team if I started training now.

As I started running down the street in the cool night air, under my home star, I felt better than I had in years. Things were about to get interesting. Friendly interstellar competition, anyone?