

LAST STAR STANDING by Spaulding Taylor

EXCERPT

Nothing. Clean as a whistle. Until my massive hand grasped hold of something, something which must have blended into its background so perfectly that I hadn't even spotted it. Something alive, nestling under the co-pilot's seat. I couldn't believe it. A live gromeline. Trembling, possibly with fury, and trying in vain to squeeze back. Grabbing my trophy – I could feel its hot little heart throbbing like an injury against my palm – I hopped out of the plane so fast that my wound protested.

'Bully!'

Bully raised one eyebrow. Two would have been overkill.

'Bully, you are not going to believe this. I found a gromeline!' The gromeline – only about fifteen centimetres – bit my finger, hard, even though I could have easily crushed its entire body with my fist – and probably would have, had I been a tester, and not merely disguised as one.

Feisty little gromeline. I flicked it lightly with my sausage-sized finger. When it protested, I growled, 'Cheese it, munchkin,' though I could feel it struggling obstreperously against my palm.

Bully was intrigued. 'Is it genuine?'

'Of course it's genuine. It just bit me, didn't it?'

Bully probably considered this no proof. But they're rarer than clean air these days and his fascination was obvious. Now gromelines come from the farthest galaxy so far discovered, can speak any tongue and own enviable mental powers. They are also brave to the point of stupidity and ludicrously small. This one was mouse-coloured – they can be spectacular – with tiny red eyes. Few humans have ever seen one.