




An extract from

*The Secrets of the Stormforest*

by L.D. Lapinski

There were three suns, all blazing brightly in a line, against a lilac sky. There were so many trees and plants around, Flick felt as though she was walking through a colossal greenhouse. She'd never been to the Eden Project, but she'd seen it on TV, and this felt just like that looked. Despite the triple suns, the air was moderately cool, like early autumn. Flick zipped her jacket up a little.

For all the beauty of the world around her, Flick felt nervous. Unlocking the suitcase to get there had been difficult, requiring so much concentration that Flick had a headache by the time the catches finally released. Her nerves weren't helped by the fact that Tristyan had decided to bring his magic bottle- slung belt with him,



buckling it over his old brown apron, Daniel Mercator's waterproof jacket on top.

'Why the apron?' Flick had asked, trying to think about that rather than why her grandfather had brought a belt- full of potential weapons with him.

'Aprons are useful,' he replied. 'Big pockets, for one. And they protect your clothes. Never underestimate the value of a good apron.' He smiled the same smile Flick's dad gave when he was teasing her, and Flick felt a little better.


'Be careful where you step,' Jonathan said, flipping his guidebook open as Avery pulled the suitcase through into the lush green world. 'The plants here are alive.'

'All plants are alive, Jonathan,' Flick pointed out. 'The plants here are *sentient*,' he said, with an eye-roll. 'They have feelings. They can communicate.' He passed the handbook over. 'Plants back home don't have much social structure.'

Flick read out loud:

World: Foresta Major Pendularbor

People: Tree-folk. Refer to themselves as 'the people'. Although the people in Foresta appear humanoid, they are actually plants rather than



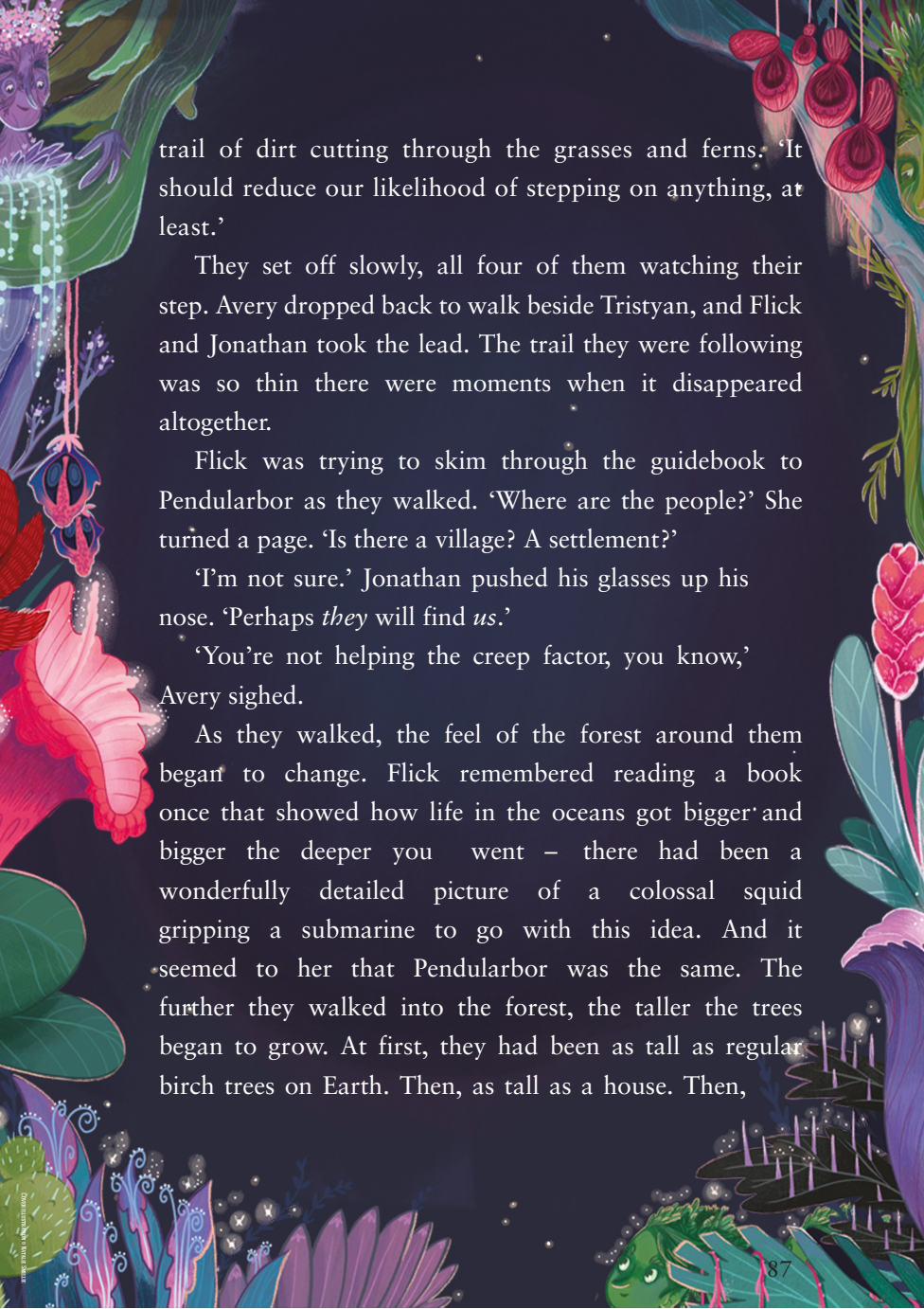
animals, and appreciate being referred to as such. Their life-cycle is complex and detailed overleaf.

Points to note: All plant-life in this world is capable of communicating. Some leaves change colour, some flowers make noises. Vines are capable of grasping hold of anything and anyone they take a dislike to. Make yourselves known to the people on arrival. Beware of anything with thorns and prickles – the plants here see attack as the best form of defence and will actively reach out to try and scratch you. Assume everything you see is venomous, and do not eat any of the vegetation.

Flick winced at the thought of being dragged into the looming trees by some vines that had decided she wasn't supposed to be there. 'This place just got a lot more frightening, thanks for that.'

'Yeah . . .' Avery looked around uncomfortably. 'Love to be walking through a forest where everything is either poisonous or venomous.'

'Nothing wrong with a healthy dose of fear,' Jonathan said, though he glanced nervously at a squat bush covered in white berries beside him as though it might be getting ideas. 'Perhaps we should stick to the path, such as it is.' He indicated a thin



trail of dirt cutting through the grasses and ferns. ‘It should reduce our likelihood of stepping on anything, at least.’

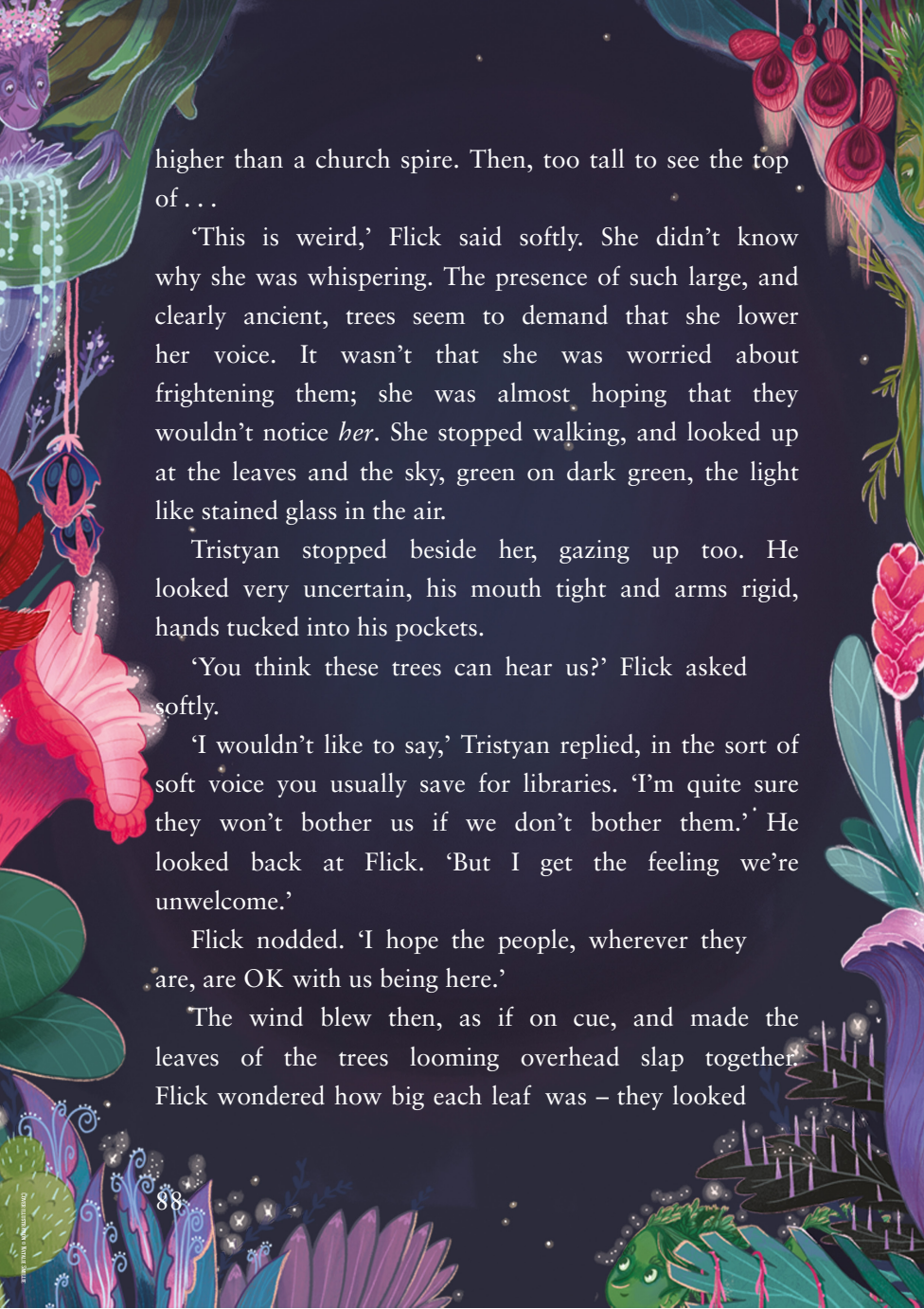
They set off slowly, all four of them watching their step. Avery dropped back to walk beside Tristyan, and Flick and Jonathan took the lead. The trail they were following was so thin there were moments when it disappeared altogether.

Flick was trying to skim through the guidebook to Pendularbor as they walked. ‘Where are the people?’ She turned a page. ‘Is there a village? A settlement?’

‘I’m not sure.’ Jonathan pushed his glasses up his nose. ‘Perhaps *they* will find *us*.’

‘You’re not helping the creep factor, you know,’ Avery sighed.

As they walked, the feel of the forest around them began to change. Flick remembered reading a book once that showed how life in the oceans got bigger and bigger the deeper you went – there had been a wonderfully detailed picture of a colossal squid gripping a submarine to go with this idea. And it seemed to her that Pendularbor was the same. The further they walked into the forest, the taller the trees began to grow. At first, they had been as tall as regular birch trees on Earth. Then, as tall as a house. Then,



higher than a church spire. Then, too tall to see the top of . . .

‘This is weird,’ Flick said softly. She didn’t know why she was whispering. The presence of such large, and clearly ancient, trees seem to demand that she lower her voice. It wasn’t that she was worried about frightening them; she was almost hoping that they wouldn’t notice *her*. She stopped walking, and looked up at the leaves and the sky, green on dark green, the light like stained glass in the air.

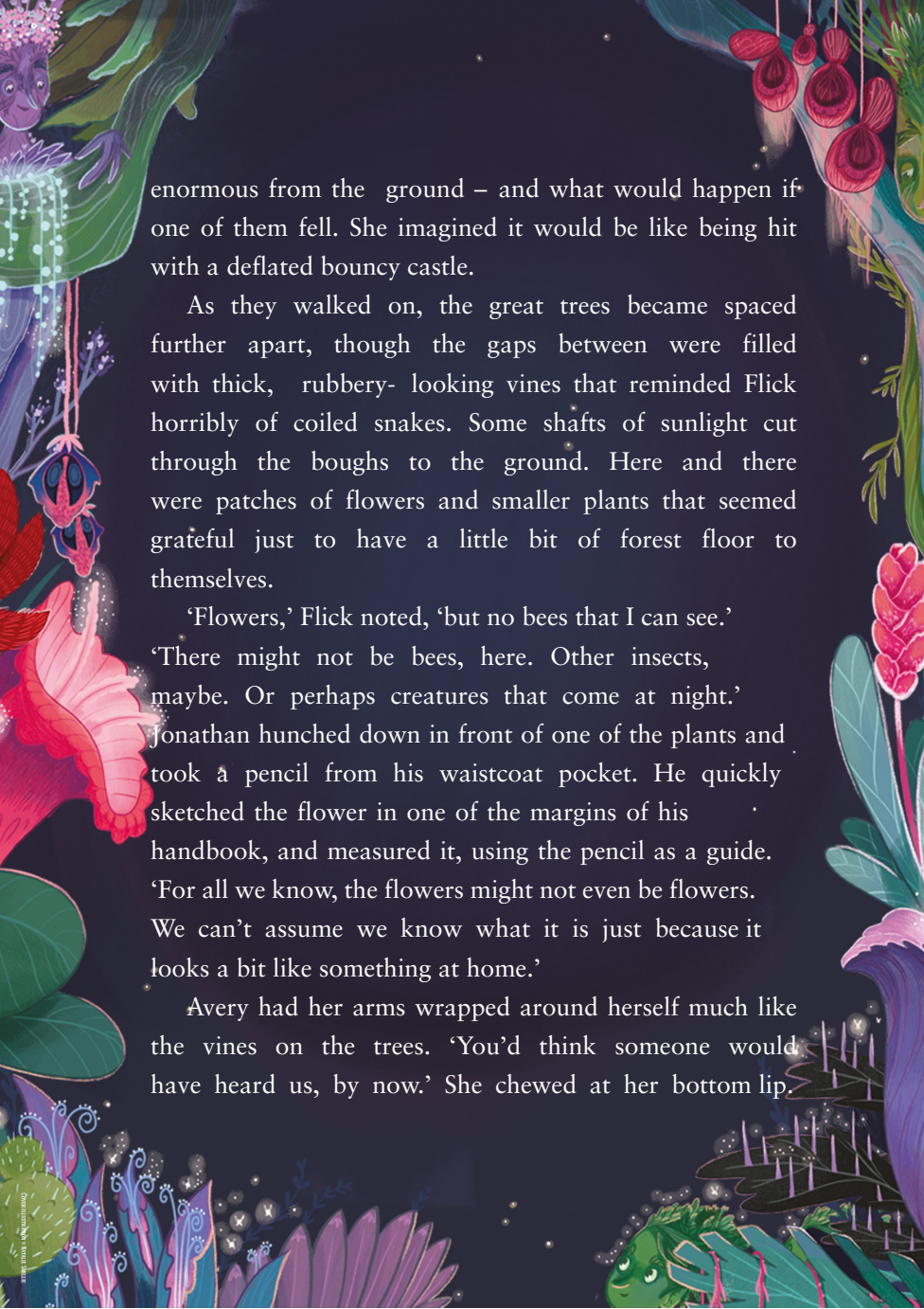
Tristyan stopped beside her, gazing up too. He looked very uncertain, his mouth tight and arms rigid, hands tucked into his pockets.

‘You think these trees can hear us?’ Flick asked softly.

‘I wouldn’t like to say,’ Tristyan replied, in the sort of soft voice you usually save for libraries. ‘I’m quite sure they won’t bother us if we don’t bother them.’ He looked back at Flick. ‘But I get the feeling we’re unwelcome.’

Flick nodded. ‘I hope the people, wherever they are, are OK with us being here.’

The wind blew then, as if on cue, and made the leaves of the trees looming overhead slap together. Flick wondered how big each leaf was – they looked




enormous from the ground – and what would happen if one of them fell. She imagined it would be like being hit with a deflated bouncy castle.

As they walked on, the great trees became spaced further apart, though the gaps between were filled with thick, rubbery-looking vines that reminded Flick horribly of coiled snakes. Some shafts of sunlight cut through the boughs to the ground. Here and there were patches of flowers and smaller plants that seemed grateful just to have a little bit of forest floor to themselves.

‘Flowers,’ Flick noted, ‘but no bees that I can see.’  
‘There might not be bees, here. Other insects, maybe. Or perhaps creatures that come at night.’  
Jonathan hunched down in front of one of the plants and took a pencil from his waistcoat pocket. He quickly sketched the flower in one of the margins of his handbook, and measured it, using the pencil as a guide. ‘For all we know, the flowers might not even be flowers. We can’t assume we know what it is just because it looks a bit like something at home.’

Avery had her arms wrapped around herself much like the vines on the trees. ‘You’d think someone would have heard us, by now.’ She chewed at her bottom lip.



‘I know,’ Flick said. ‘I can’t think of a time we’ve arrived in a world and gone so long without being noticed. People usually can’t miss us.’

‘Especially Avery,’ Jonathan said, without looking up.

‘Hey!’

Flick laughed, and so did Tristyran, making Avery stick her tongue out at them both. But then she grinned at Flick, who smiled back and felt her nerves soften, just a little bit.

Jonathan gave the plant a gentle stroke with the pink eraser- end of the pencil, and then stood back up. ‘Perhaps we should shout, or something?’

No one seemed keen on the idea, and if anything their surroundings seemed even quieter after the suggestion.

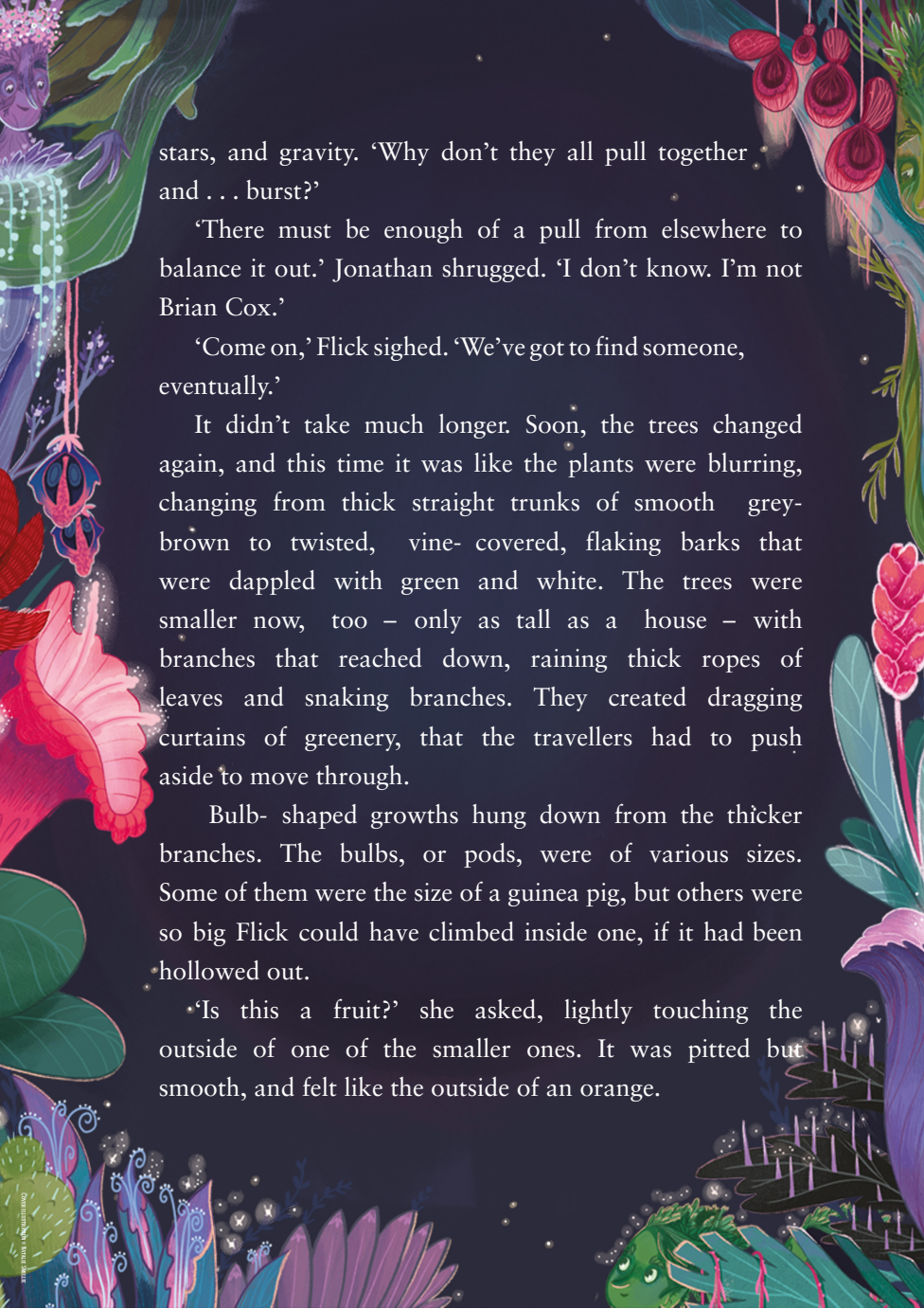
‘I wonder how long the days are here,’ Flick said. It seemed important to keep talking, as though conversation might work as a shield against danger.

‘The years must be immense,’ Jonathan said. ‘There’s three suns to go around, after all.’

‘Are they clustered together in space?’ Avery asked. ‘Like grapes?’

‘I’m not sure. They might be.’

Flick frowned. She remembered something about



stars, and gravity. ‘Why don’t they all pull together and . . . burst?’


‘There must be enough of a pull from elsewhere to balance it out.’ Jonathan shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I’m not Brian Cox.’

‘Come on,’ Flick sighed. ‘We’ve got to find someone, eventually.’

It didn’t take much longer. Soon, the trees changed again, and this time it was like the plants were blurring, changing from thick straight trunks of smooth grey-brown to twisted, vine-covered, flaking barks that were dappled with green and white. The trees were smaller now, too – only as tall as a house – with branches that reached down, raining thick ropes of leaves and snaking branches. They created dragging curtains of greenery, that the travellers had to push aside to move through.

Bulb-shaped growths hung down from the thicker branches. The bulbs, or pods, were of various sizes. Some of them were the size of a guinea pig, but others were so big Flick could have climbed inside one, if it had been hollowed out.

‘Is this a fruit?’ she asked, lightly touching the outside of one of the smaller ones. It was pitted but smooth, and felt like the outside of an orange.



‘I suppose it must be. I wonder how big they get . . .’ Jonathan gently touched the one that was as big as Flick. ‘It feels heavy. I wonder what the inside is like.’

Avery cupped one of the smallest ones in two hands. ‘It’s warm.’

‘It’s not in the sun,’ Flick said. Tristyran frowned. He was the only one of them not touching the fleshy bulbs. ‘Are you sure you ought to be touching those? It seems a bit unwise to start touching everything you see, particularly when your book warned about poisons.’

‘Mm.’ Jonathan took his hand away. ‘Good point. Anywhere else, I might suggest taking one down, and cutting it open, but . . . not here. It might hurt the tree. And I do not want to be on the bad side of anything here.’

Despite what Tristyran had said about poisons, Flick couldn’t resist running her hands over the fruit, or whatever it was, once more. ‘It’s got a thick skin. It doesn’t even give when you touch it—’

‘Stop! Stop touching her!’



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