

Word Count: 2,257

Character: Astral (NPC)

The festivities at the Hidden Garden were in full swing by the time Astral arrived. Other Scarfoxes were already happily sharing food and drinks around decorated tables, some were even decked out in cheerful shades of green to celebrate the event. Astral, being both most comfortable and most recognizable in their everyday attire, chose not to put on any extra green clothing or accessories. They scanned around the lush green field for any games or activities that might catch their interest.

Over to the side, standing in the shade of a purple flowering willow tree, a group of Scarfoxes were discussing various strategies to hunt down four-leaf clovers. Intrigued, Astral stepped over to the group and was let into the conversation.

The group chattered excitedly, various voices clamoring to be heard over the noise of the festivities. Somebody spoke about finding four-leaf clovers to give as gifts to the Mini God. Another voice piped up and asked about following a rainbow to find treasure at the end. Another Scarfox waited for a lull in the conversation, then brought up the Shrinking Cavern. Everyone standing under the purple flowering willow tree seemed eager to form teams and go on adventures around the Hidden Garden.

Astral, in all their enigmatic humor, politely declined a few invitations to join exploration groups and cited a desire to go on their own today. A few others were disappointed, but ultimately understood and wished Astral luck. The starry-hooded Scarfox turned their head skyward and searched for any rainbows. Secretly, they were most intrigued by the idea that one might be able to follow a rainbow and discover treasures at the end. However, going in a group meant dividing up whatever prizes might be hidden, and although the spring party was supposed to be all about happily celebrating the new season with one another... Astral couldn't help but want a special spotlight all for themselves.

Just imagine, Astral thought, how much of a hero I would be if I was the one who discovered a hidden area full of four-leaf clovers? Then everyone would be able to have four-leaf clovers, there could be decorations and gifts to the Mini God, and I would be praised! Astral grinned to themselves and steeled their resolution, they would follow a rainbow alone and be the sole Scarfox to return to the main event area with knowledge of a secret place that nobody else had ever found. It would be glorious.

Rainbows, of course, weren't as easy to follow as simply walking along one of the many paved paths. The Hidden Garden was surrounded by thick woods and towering mountains the ascended elegantly into the misty skies above. To follow a rainbow through the woods and, perhaps, through the mountains would be a monumental task that would require no small amount of effort. Still, the more arduous the task, the more praise Astral expected in return for completing it. With that in mind, Astral scanned the skies for a rainbow to follow.

The starry-hooded Scarfox noticed that, aside from there only being a single rainbow in the sky this morning, the group from earlier was already walking along a path to follow it. The group was headed deeper into the Hidden Garden, along a tranquil stone-paved path lined with flowers and willow trees. They were, in Astral's opinion, taking the easy road. Anyone could follow a rainbow through the lush grassy fields, but there's probably wouldn't be any treasures there since it was such an easily accessible site. Astral turned the other way, where the opposite end of the rainbow arced gracefully over a shaded forest and disappeared in the misty cliffs of the mountains. Surely that's where the true prize lie, at the end of the path least travelled.

Astral was full of confidence when they trailed away from the main event site and meandered into the forest. The area was delightfully tranquil in the morning sun, with scattered rays of sunshine filtering in through the treetops. A slight breeze rustled the grass underfoot, setting Astral's mind at ease. They hoped that the rest of the journey would be as calm as the beginning, a long yet peaceful trek through the rugged outskirts of the Hidden Garden.

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind rushed through the forest and Astral startled as a small, dark shape darted between their legs and into a clump of bushes to their left. In that moment, the starry-hooded Scarfox was intrigued. What if that was a mini? Maybe the Mini God had helpers sneaking around to hide treasures and play pranks? Astral simply had to find out.

The Scarfox carefully parted the bushes, slowly wading through the thick tangle of branches while guessing at the direction the small figure ran off to. The bushes seemed to be endless, though at least they weren't prickly. Step by step, Astral walked slowly through the foliage in pursuit of the mysterious being. They were about to reconsider, maybe cut their time losses and get back on track, but the bushes up ahead rustled again. Astral froze mid-step and watched intently, holding their breath to see what would happen.

A few yards ahead, something small and agile sprang up from the bushes, but disappeared in a blink. Astral was at full attention now and put on a burst of speed to try and catch up. The bushes were starting to thin out around them, but the Scarfox failed to notice the odd, slanted angle that the furthest bushes were growing at. Forging ahead in pursuit of the small shadow, Astral leapt headfirst into what they thought was the light from a clearing just beyond the bushes.

Instead of a clearing, it was a sheer drop. The ground disappeared from underneath Astral's feet and it was only a matter of time before gravity caught up. In the stunned moment of clarity, Astral had the presence of mind to turn their head around. There was the Mini God, hiding its face in its arms and laughing so hard its entire body shook with glee at the prank it just pulled. Astral only had a split second to feel angry at the trickster mini before gravity pulled their body down.

The scarfox plummeted down the cliff, flailing their arms wildly before their shoulder caught on the muddy dirt cliffside and sent them tumbling down the steep slope. Around and around the

world spun in Astral's vision, only interrupted when their body collided with rocks sticking out from the mud.

Splash! The muddy Scarfox landed ungracefully in a frigid river at the bottom of a ravine. The bottom was too deep for Astral to lay a foot upon, and the Scarfox was washed away in the swift current. The greenery along the edges of the ravine passed in a blur of verdant greens and soft lavenders until finally giving way to the misty mountains. The river gradually widened and slowed, brining with it a change in landscape low enough for Astral to awkwardly paddle their way to shore.

Astral flopped out of the river and dragged themselves across the dirt until they were clear of the water's edge. They lay on their back, spread eagle and fabric absolutely sopping with water and mud, panting at what they would definitely be calling a near-death experience. Overhead, the sky was still tauntingly clear and the rainbow arced overhead with its vibrant, cheerful colors. Distantly, Astral wondered if the universe itself was mocking them, or perhaps this was just a trial to test their will. Astral chose to believe that their determination was being tested, and slowly rolled over to push off the ground.

"You won't beat me," Astral growled, hauling themselves to their feet, "I'll be the first one to discover the treasure at the end of the rainbow. Everyone will have to credit me for my discovery, and I'll do it despite the odds!" They looked around to assess their odds and, upon surveying their immediate surroundings, heaved a tired sigh.

Astral stood near the shore of a river that wound through a sparsely wooded valley. The valley itself was little more than a stretch of land that led up to the mountains which surrounded the Hidden Garden. They shivered, still sagging under the weight of water and mud that had soaked into their fabric. The added weight would definitely make climbing difficult, if it came to that.

The starry-hooded Scarfox trudged forth, glancing up at the sky every once in a while to make sure they were still headed in the right direction. For a brief time, they held onto the hope that the rainbow would lead them somewhere else, anywhere else, other than the mountain, but as the gigantic landmarks grew closer, Astral knew what had to be done.

The first few steps seemed the hardest. Staring up at the steep mountainside, Astral persevered up the rocky surface. There weren't any paths over or through the mountains, the area was seldom traveled in the first place, so Astral had to climb on their own strength in order to continue following the rainbow. The colorful arc seemed to vanish at a point somewhere halfway up the mountain, almost as if there would be some sort of hidden cavern to explore.

Astral was spurred on by the hope that they would finally find what no other Scarfox had before, maybe a field of four-leaf clovers, but definitely some sort of wondrous discovery that they could claim all their own. Up and up and up, the stones and branches all seemed to blue together in Astral's mind. By the time they chanced upon a small outcrop, just wide enough for them to sit on and take a break, the water had dried up from their body and the mud had caked into their

fabric. After claiming credit for whatever lie at the end of the rainbow, Astral would treat themselves to a well-deserved hot bath. Maybe even a full blown spa day all to themselves.

The starry-hooded Scarfox didn't know how long they'd been climbing, but the passage of time suddenly dawned on them once the sky around them grew dim. At first, Astral thought that the thick clouds of mist that naturally hung around the mountains were clocking out the sun, but after a moment of clarity they realized that the afternoon had run its course and the sun was slowly slipping closer to the horizon. They were belatedly surprised that despite the setting sun, the rainbow seemed to be struggling to remain visible. Perhaps it was a sign that Astral truly was destined to find out what exactly was at the end of the rainbow. The thought alone gave them another burst of energy to continue climbing.

There was a cave. Not just any cave, but a cave with a small stream trickling out of it and causing a light spray of mist to obscure its entrance. That same spray of mist reflected the light and caused a rainbow. THE rainbow. The one that Astral had been desperately tracking all day long. This was it, Astral had finally found the end of the rainbow, and it turned out to be a mysteriously shrouded cave up in the mountains. It was, at long last, time to see what was in there.

Astral wasted no time striding confidently into the cave despite the quickly fading sunlight. The walls were rough, scattered with stalgmities and stalagtites that cast long shadows, and the space extended deeper into the heart of the mountain than at first glance. Astral continued onward, getting so lost in thought that they failed to notice a small dip on the ground before them. Their leg caught in the dip and they tripped, pitching head over tail over a tall drop hidden in the shadows just out of sight.

For the second time that day, Astral thought they were having a near death experience. Luckily for them, their fall was broken by a plush blanket of springy vegetation. The Scarfox lay on the ground, blinking stars out of their vision as they recovered from what looked to be a distressingly long fall. Their body was resilient, though, and their fabric remained untrampled. But what had broken their fall?

Clovers! Astral had fallen down into a deep pit overgrown with four leaf clovers! A faint shadow flickered overhead and they looked up, finding themselves staring out a naturally cut hole in the mountain face from which sunlight and water could enter the pit. That must be how this place came to exist, a set of unique circumstances to propagate a hidden field of rare clovers. What luck! Astral had found what they were hoping for this entire time, the others would be stunned! They could all give gifts to the Mini God!

...If only Astral could get out. The stone walls of the pit were smoothed from the natural fall of rainwater and slick with a healthy coating of moss. The clovers grew in fantastical clusters that mimicked stones and ledges, but turned out to be nothing more than the leafy greens competing with each other for sunlight. Astral couldn't figure any way to climb back out of the pit. And yet, they were still filled with confidence over their discovery. They were the first one here. They

were the one that would be credited with the discovery. All they had to do was wait for somebody else, preferably the Mini God or someone with the power of flight, to rescue them.