

Response 2, for lack of a better name.

And I don't really expect you to record files too. That was never part of the deal, and in addition to everything I was saying last recording, there's something cathartic about being able to say these things. Not just think them. Not just write them down. But to say them. It's proven to be important and cathartic, which is a bit of a surprise to me, but you know, maybe you knew about that, but it's just news to me. I never really gave much weight or value to talking or speaking or that sort of thing. I'm an awkward person by nature, so it doesn't always go well for me. Hence the hesitation.

But this might be the sort of situation where context does matter. Like, sometimes talking is a part of an argument or becomes that. And I hate fighting. Sometimes, speaking up is useless, and then you feel useless. Sometimes it's hard. Sometimes it feels easy, but your brain can't come up with anything good to say. And that also makes you feel bad and useless. Then again, most of the talking that I do is me trying to justify my own existence. So that's fun, she says sarcastically.

But anyway, the investigators weren't as bad as other people have been, especially those from the US embassy. But I guess they were just excited to have some excitement. Some harmless excitement, you know. Not 'extracting a US Citizen from a situation of their own creation' sort of excitement. And by then, they had the hospital report that said I was fine. And that same report also confirmed that my hip is as good as it's ever going to be. And the kicks of old age are going to land extra hard now that they've got this strength modifier. *(Pause)* That's a TTRPG reference.

Anyway, most of the investigation is done, I think. It was fairly straightforward, and there was no other cause for concern. It turns out the mountain reopened for

visitors soon after because tourism and the wealth it can bring, but nothing has happened to anybody since then.

Consequently, I'm going to go ahead and call my lie justified. Oh, and we're still going to spend that extra time out here because why pay for the flight change when we were never having a visa issue in the first place. So no consequences on that front. No consequences expect for the fact that I am upset about the entire situation still.

Or not upset just torn because I still firmly believe I wasn't lying. I was just telling the truth that I don't recall experiencing.

But you know, (*Sigh*) well, what do I recall, you're about to ask. Because I'm dancing around that, and that's the root of why I'm upset. But we know what I recall. I recall talking to that woman. Maria Makiling. Or I think that's who she was. She's supposed to be a goddess so that conjures up the image of raw power and a willingness to smite people who deserve it, which--by some arguments--includes me. Though that does raise the question of 'is mercy spiting a thing?' But maybe that's the comic book fan in me talking because how many of those stories borrow from mythologies of some sort? Never this one, mind you, but I don't know if there's any material here that could be adapted like that, so a temporary fair enough on that front.

Whatever was happening in my head, she wasn't what I was expecting. Sure, I'd read that she was reportedly obscenely beautiful, which she was. But it--But it wasn't the typical notion of beauty. She was also warm and welcoming. Even though I had read a couple accounts of her turning on people, she didn't seem capable of that. Or that wasn't built into the illusion or hallucination I was realistically having.

It just didn't make sense, though. Why did I imagine her in such an aesthetically pleasing way. Why did I make her the sort of person I was socialized to trust and approach. Heck, it--it didn't even feel like socialization at work but an inevitability.

She told me she could see the resemblance between my grandfather and I in my eyes. Which I didn't understand. She noticed, so I had to tell her that I did not remember him at all.

"He's been gone for a long time," I think I said. Something along those lines, but then I added. "And I was raised in the US."

And I know I mentioned the US because cue immediate panic. Pretty sure ethereal spirits aren't going to care about global affairs, but there's potential for me to be wrong and a very good reason to not want to be. But regardless of a potentially tense history, she didn't seem to know anything about it. She could understand that I was raised far away. But that was about it.

Speaking of away, I still can't piece together how I got to where my family found me. I still have a map of the trails, and I've been checking it. And there's no easy way to get to that spot. In fact, it's why they took so long to find me; they didn't look over there right away. My mom knew my condition well enough and was able to explain it enough that everyone knew my walking over there was impossible. They didn't start looking there until they were desperate.

It's like... Well, say you couldn't find your cell phone, so you go through all your pockets and bags and your car. But do you check the fridge? Nope. Not until you realize that the last time you saw it, you were making a sandwich, and sure enough, you left it

in the fridge when you put the mustard away. Except you know when you opened the fridge, and that's all it took for your phone to get in there.

I had to do some serious climbing, or serious relative to me, to get to where I was. We'd already done enough walking that I had to be a little weak, and I hadn't slept the night before. Also, I was upset about the entire extended family situation. Or 'family' in quotes. But the point is, I had a lot working against me, so how did I get there?

Even if I actually was talking to Maria Makiling, which was impossible, I know, but we were walking while we were talking, and we didn't take a route that was hard for me. The ground was flat and level, almost like a pavement, but there was grass beneath my feet. I could feel it.

While we were walking, she offered me some fruit from a plant, but I didn't take it because I know you aren't supposed to take food from the fae, which was the closest reference point I had. Still wasn't a great one, but it made sense in the moment. A lot of things made sense in the moment. But some things didn't and--

*(Sigh)* I need to take a break. Um... I hope you understand, but I'm hungry now that I'm thinking about food. I don't remember the last time I ate. I think my Lola is making prawns for dinner, but if I go out there and ask now, she'll let me have some. After she takes the shells off. Yes, sometimes she does act like I'm helpless but in a different way. Like 'tiny child still learning how to use a fork' way. She didn't get to see me when I was at that stage, so this is her way of making up for lost time.

I might try to ask her about Lolo's time on the mountain. Maybe now that I also got lost, she'll be more forthcoming about it. What reason is there to hide it now?

But I'm okay, I promise. Shaken up and confused but okay. And I guess that's all I can hope for.

*(Pause. Music fades in)*

The Mountain's Heart is a production of Hugot Podcasting. And this end song comes from the Sounds like an Earful music supply. See you in two weeks.