



PROMPT #1: Center your story around a character discovering a hidden door or path.

## Speaking with Mountains

by Laura Dixson

*"If it's a boy, I want to name him after you. That way I'll know that he will grow to be a strong and kind man."*

Askani listened to the stone. Noise vibrated through it, indistinct and distant. Like the drum of time thumping as a faint reminder of what was lost. He pressed his hand against it, feeling the ridges and bumps. Memories begging to be known.

Shouts gone rasp, now whimpering.

The Ridgeline palace was carved into the heart of a mountain. Only these halls were born far before humans settled into the area. Even now, the place bore the weight of its artist's extirpation.

Wizard Rhynen watched Askani with mild annoyance. This expedition would take too long, if Askani walked this slowly. "Come, Askani. We can't waste our time here."

Askani didn't reply. He listened intently to humming of stone. It seemed alive... or alive in the way words on a page were. Bland to the eye, but meaningful to the soul.

The wizard rolled his eyes. "Stop staring at the stone, and follow."

Askani let his hand fall to his side. The stone still hummed, swallowing the tapping of their footsteps. Curious, it seemed to investigate them. As the Ridgeline grew, as did the King's palace. Much of it had been uncharted when they named it the official capitol. The King sent expeditions into its depths, but they didn't know what to make of the rocks.

And the rocks didn't know what to make of them.

"I don't understand what we are doing here." Askani said, knowing this looming feeling. People greater than himself should be dealing with the King's rogue tunnel. No doubt some strange Magic slumbered here. "What does the King expect us to do? We're historians, not magicians."

"Those whom he sent before refuse to speak about what they experienced. They've got mad." Rhynen's expression turned. "As for why us, that's not for me to say. The King has his reasons. He may be wiser than me, but he's definitely wiser than you."

Askani accepted that—since that was all he could do—and pulled up short when they reached a simple wooden door.

It was light brown, polished and the metal hinges gleamed in the torchlight. It seemed rather out of place among ancient stone. Rhynen held the light to inspect the door. "This door must be two hundred years old, at least. It should be rotten."

"Sir, please hold the light steady," Askani said, leaning closer to it. There were letters carved into it. Old ones—from a language long dead. Written by the hands of the creatures that lived here centuries ago. "It's the ancestral jakren language."

Rhynen nodded, expecting that. This mountain used to be their home before they moved further into the Ridge. Askani pressed his fingers against the letters as he deciphered them. "*Al' atol en Estanl.*" It was a short phrase. "'Rejoice who Hear'?" Askani winced. "Or maybe 'Beware the Sound'?"

"Those mean very different things," Rhynen muttered. "Why bother bringing a translator, if you can't translate?"

Askani pursed his lips, ignoring the man's jab. "The word for *view* is written with the conjugation that denotes fear or wonder. Sometimes both."

The wizard tapped his finger against the knob. He turned away. "Askani, go down there alone."

Panic came over him. Askani couldn't meet Rhynen's gaze. "Why alone, sir?"

Rhynen eyed the metal shackles dangling from Askani's wrists. "You have more to prove."

"Sir—" Rhynen held up a finger, silencing Askani. The wizard offered the torch.

Reluctantly, Askani took it. Rhynen smiled. “Don’t get lost in the dark, eh?”

Askani watched the flames dance, hoping the light wouldn’t go out... He glanced up at the dark tunnel where they came from, feeling sick. Rhynen’s expression hardened. “It’s been years, Askani. You need to get over your fear of the dark.”

He didn’t see why he had too, but Rhynen didn’t seem keen on listening to him. Askani forced himself to focus on that door, and the humming of stone. As he did, his reluctance faded—he had the torch, after all—and his curiosity thrived.

What was behind that door?

Band Above, he must have been a madman.

Not that he had a choice. The cold metal on his wrists reminded him of that.

Rhynen shrugged and settled on the floor. Resting his back against the wall, he pulled out a book. “You should hurry, though. The longer you stand around, the shorter your torch will burn.”

He was right... he should get moving. Askani turned to the door. No living soul set foot past it in centuries. What beautiful, untampered history lurked within its embrace?

Askani read the door once last time. *Beware—Rejoice. In what is Heard.*

Then he stepped into the sealed mountain.

## II

“*Dada, could we pick some berries?*”

“*—Ansi-la-Talinsai-Esten—*” Nitrish.

“*—Urant-Eneltirol-Erunt—*” Tribal

“*—Kata-Bealt-Est-Alud—*” Jakren

The mountain hummed like monks chanting in a dozen different languages. While Askani couldn’t understand them, he identified their sounds. Repeating with the monotony of pounding rain. Askani focused on those eerie voices, rather than the looming darkness.

The noise thumped against him, vibrating his bones and soul. Listening to it, unmuffled

and undampened, he understood why those who heard it went mad. Though, personally he found it rather fascinating.

He spent much of his life running traps in the Ridgeline valleys, listening to the mountains tell him where to go and when to prepare for a storm. Back then, he listened to the wind's cries and the river's determinism. Now he realized.

Mountains spoke the same language as people.

“—*Ekita-Al-Dephra*—” Tribal, as well.

“—*Salhat-Oul-Esten*—” A Northern Ridgeline dialect.

“*AL’ATOL EN ESTANL*.” He never heard that before, but it sounded like some archaic form of jakren.

The noise grew louder, more demanding—as if to shout *LISSEN TO MY WORDS*. It screamed in his mind, startling him.

The torch struck the ground as Askani stumbled forward. The light wavered. *Wavered—Band Above*— the darkness seeped in around him. Askani lunged for the torch, salvaging it before it died. He blew on it gently, cradling the embers.

His heart raced as a gust of wind came up from the mountain’s lungs. The torch died. “No, no—” His hands trembled as the light went out.

“*AL’ATOL EN ESTANL*.”

Darkness closed in around him, locking like metal grate. Askani crumbled. His wrists ached as the coldness seeped into his arms. The light abandoned him, just as the wizard had. Like how everyone had... The stone creaked— its voice booming in his mind, unrelenting.

“*ANAKI-OUL-ANAKI-ESTEN*.

*KATA-BEALT-EST-ALUD*.”

He cradled his head and squeezed his eyes shut to avoid the darkness. “Please,” Askani whimpered. “Give me some light.”

“*AL’ATOL EN ESTANL*.”

Beware what is Heard.

The door had been a warning. Band Above, humanity must have been full of fools, to dare such obvious danger. The warning was given, and left unheeded- *Dada, could we pick some berries?*

He cringed and whispered, “Forgive me, please.”

“*AL’ ATOL EN ESTANL.*”

He panicked. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead. Buzzing filled the silence. He tried to grab hold of the wall or floor, but his limbs felt sluggish. When he found the torch again, it had completely gone cold.

Stones scratched his skin.

Horrid, horrid stones.

*...I'll know that he will grow to be a strong and kind man...*

He scrambled in the direction of the exit, only to strike a wall. Tears fell from his cheeks as he froze, then trembled.

*Dada... berries...?*

“*AL’ ATOL EN ESTANL.*”

Askani begged in the ancient language. “Please, have mercy.” Broken and fumbling with the words, as he wasn’t entirely certain how to pronounce them.

Silence.

He gulped, speaking slowly. “I don’t... understand you. Help me too.”

The rocks said something else—uncertain like a chick taking flight for the first time. It fumbled through the sentences. Until it spoke... *modern jakren?* Askani raised his head and listened to the foreign language.

“*You killed my people.*” The rocks trembled beneath Askani. He pressed his back against the stone wall, squeezing his eyes shut as he waited for the rock’s ire to pass.

How did it know so many modern languages, if it had been sealed away for so long? Though to Askani, that question didn’t seem terribly important. It did not matter where a language came from or where it was acquired. Only that it performed its purpose. “What happened?” He asked.

The rumbling grew. “*You sent them away and replaced them. Who are you to do such a thing?*” The chanting churned into booming of cracking boulders.

History was written by the victors, but Askani knew the truth of the palace. Rhynen studied the forgotten history of the Ridge... which was why his work went mostly ignored. Humans conquered this area from the jakren. Their bodies burned and buried.

That was centuries ago. Generations ago.

But for a mountain, centuries were but a second.

The mountain quaked, and rubble fell from the ceiling. A rock struck Askani’s head, but he gritted his teeth and bore the pain. “I’m sorry,” Askani whispered in the jakren’s tongue.

Silence.

The mountain hesitated, seeming to realize that Askani was *not* afraid of its voice, but the darkness. “*Why are you afraid of the dark, human?*”

The mountain said in *Ridgeline*.

### III

“*You know me! Please, why would I ever hurt them?*”

The mountain pulsed to Askani’s heartbeat. The rocks, warm against his skin, hummed to him with a quiet resonance. Like a stream trickling between mighty roots and leaves singing among the trees.

He rubbed his wrists. “You won’t believe me,” he murmured.

The mountain spoke quietly this time. Its ire subsided. “*Did you believe me?*”

“I knew what happened.” Askani explained. “My people slaughtered the jakren who once lived here, but that isn’t taught anymore. Most assume my ancestors built this city.”

“*You speak our language.*” The mountain said.

Askani shook his head. “I work for a historian. He... hired me because I speak jakren. Knowing it is rare, considering the hostility.” He picked at the stone floor. “That’s probably why they sent me here. They want to open the whole palace for use.”

The mountain rumbled, and Askani cringed. He hurried to explain. "I think... they want you gone. They sent me here to make you... disappear."

The mountain was quiet a moment, considering this. "*You have not answered my question. Why are you afraid of the dark?*"

*I want to name him after you—*

*Dada—*

Askani hung his head, picking at his wrists and the cuffs that were locked around them. "I spent time in prison." Askani replied simply. "There were no lights."

The mountain rumbled. "*For what?*"

Askani pulled his knees to his chest. "I don't know how to hurt you, mountain. Neither do I want to. But... I don't think my people will be satisfied if I return a failure." Band Above, he tugged at the shackles on his wrists.

No, they wouldn't be.

Although he could not see it, a quake sent a boulder crashing at his feet. The floor and walls trembled as a primeval anger consumed the mountain.

Askani fell backward as the creature roared. "Please, I won't hurt you—" He stammered.

*"But, they hurt you."* The mountain rumbled. Askani stilled as he felt a strange power graze against his soul. Powerful, and knowing. He recoiled, but calmness came over him. *"They betrayed you."*

"No," Askani murmured. "My wife and son are dead, and they locked away the man they believed did the deed."

*"But they ignored your pleas."*

Askani nodded.

*"They ignored your cries."*

Tears formed in his eyes. He wiped them away quickly. "She was beautiful, and my son's hands always dyed blue with berries." He found himself smiling, faintly. "It's been almost six years. The man who did it is free... and here I am." He picked at the metal, sickened. "My reputation gone."

The creature's power grew around him like a blanket of warm wind descending. "They ignore the past."

"They don't know it. How can you blame them, mountain?" Askani questioned. "The jakren were killed centuries ago. Those here now are not to blame."

"*Except for their ignorance.*" The mountain replied.

Askani nodded, then struggled to his feet. "I'm sorry for entering your home, mountain. I will tell them about your dangers. Hopefully, they will stay away."

The mountain let him go. Somehow, he knew which way to go to find the door. He gripped the knob and felt his fear spiking. Obviously, Rhynen and King wanted him to take care of this issue. Why else bring him here?

His wrists stung, but what was there to do? Destroy the stone? Burn the hall? Perhaps that would work, but he would not tell them to do so. Whatever punishment would come, he would bear it. He had all this time.

Perhaps the noose was for the best.

The mountain's power grew closer to him, patient as time. "*What is your name, human?*"

Askani hesitated. No one asked him that in a long while. "Askani," he replied. "Do you have one?"

The rocks popped. "*My name is the Witness, young human. For I have watched the Ridge rise, and I will watch it fall.*"

Askani nodded, glum and uncertain how to respond to that. "It was good meeting you, Witness. Farewell—"

"*My people would be pleased, knowing that you speak our tongue.*" The Witness said. "*Would you like to know others, Askani?*"

Askani wasn't sure what good that would do. Given his situation, he would likely be dead soon. If a murderer wasn't of use, he should be hanged. Still, he had always enjoyed languages. Perhaps he deserved a little levity. "I'm not sure what use I would have of them, though... that does sound nice."

The Witness's presence grew closer to him. "*Then pass through the door and leave it open.*"

## IV

*“Oh, you speak jakren? I may have a use for that.”*

As Askani passed through the doorway, he felt the Witness descend upon him. The humming of stone and rocks grew louder. Pounding, relentless, and drowning. Yet like the ocean, it could not have been a more peaceful sound. He did as the Witness instructed—and did not close the door.

He glanced back at it, finding that he could read the inscription without issue.

*“Al’ atol en Estani.”*

Rejoice in the Voices.

He released the door, letting it hang ajar. When he did, the thumping grew quieter, tamer. Askani smiled in awe as he felt a strange power bubble inside of him. He seemed to... Hear better now.

The stone had their own chorus, as did the water dripping between their cracks. They spoke eagerly to one another, as did the crystal slowly growing alongside them.

Most of all, he could Hear all the language rambling inside his mind, and he realized he understood them. He would listen, and they would be understood.

The metal shackles spoke too—vibrating, like a beetle trying and failing to take flight. He tugged at them, then the vibrating stopped.

And they clanged to the floor.

Amazed—and unsure how he did that—he rubbed his calloused wrists. “What did you do? happened?” Askani jumped, forgetting Rhynen had been waiting for him. The man approached the door and tapped it.

It rotted away into dust. Rhynen frowned. “How strange.”

“Sir, I—” Askani stopped himself, realizing he Heard Rhynen differently. The words made sense, but he could feel the man’s intentions. What he *truly* meant. An unspoken language that could not be hidden by tricks of the tongue.

Although rough and spiteful, Rhynen’s Voice gleamed with understanding. The wizard turned down the hall and motioned for Askani to follow. “Come, I think the king will want to speak with you.”

Askani didn't follow. "Sir, I can't. He'll... have me executed."

"I doubt that," Rhynen motioned for him to follow. His lips curled into a mischievous smile. "Someone with your gifts? Well, he's more likely to pardon you."

His Voice... he *knew* what was beyond that door. Askani pursed his lips, still uncertain. "Sir, why did you send me in there?"

Rhynen glanced back at him, then at the rotten door and empty cavern. He shrugged. "You spoke jakren. I told you I had a use for that."

That wasn't an answer, but Askani doubted he would ever get one out of Rhynen. The man had always been stubborn. Sighing, Askani followed him, hearing no signs of distress in Rhynen's Voice. He Sounded truthful, even optimistic. Somehow, Rhynen knew the Witness would cling to him. Dare he hope his fate would be changed?

The Witness pulsed inside him reassuringly.

For once, Askani let his body relax as he followed Rhynen out of the tunnels. "For what its worth, sir. Thank you."

Rhynen scoffed. "I don't know what you mean."