

TRAILMARKED

Salt & Stone

W. A. Bales

1

The Sound Before the Water

Jonah heard it before the truck even slowed.

At first he thought it was wind through the trees, the kind that built slowly and stayed. But it didn't fade when the road curved or deepen when they climbed. It stayed exactly the same, a steady presence beneath everything else.

He leaned forward between the seats.

"That's it," he said.

Deb didn't answer, but he saw her mouth shift slightly, like she was holding back a grin.

Eli had already turned sideways in his seat, forehead against the glass. The forest outside had changed in the last mile.

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The trees were thinner. Bent. Their branches grew more in one direction than the other, shaped by years of wind that never stopped pushing.

The sound grew stronger.

Not louder exactly.

Closer.

Deb's dad downshifted without comment, guiding the truck around a final curve and into the gravel lot. Tires crackled over loose stone. Jonah barely waited for the truck to stop rolling before his hand was on the door handle.

He had seen pictures. Maps. Satellite images.

None of them had sound.

None of them moved.

None of them felt like this.

The truck stopped.

Jonah opened the door immediately.

Cold air rushed in, thick with salt and something darker beneath it. Not dirt. Not plants. Stone. Wet stone. Older than anything inland.

He stepped down and turned toward the trees.

W. A. BALES

Through the gaps, he saw motion.

Not waves exactly.

Just surface.

Endless surface shifting against itself.

He laughed quietly, not because anything was funny, but because it was real.

“Okay!” he said.

Deb came around the front of the truck, pulling her pack from the bed. Her tide chart was folded and tucked into the side pocket, edges soft from how many times she had opened it over the past two months.

Eli had not moved far. He crouched beside a slab of exposed rock near the lot’s edge, dragging his fingers across its surface.

He looked at his hand, turning it slightly.

“Not granite,” he said.

Jonah stepped beside him and crouched. The rock was dark red and rough, filled with tiny holes like frozen bubbles.

“Yeah,” Jonah said. “Sharper.”

“Basalt,” Deb replied.

Eli nodded once, already pulling his notebook free.

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He didn't write immediately.

He ran his fingers across the rock again first. Slower this time.
Feeling it instead of just touching it.

He held his fingers up to the light.
Tiny red dust clung to the ridges of his skin.

Only then did he open the notebook.

The wind tugged at the page. He steadied it with his thumb
and wrote for a moment — short lines, no wasted motion.
He paused once, glanced back at the rock, added something
else, then closed the cover with a quiet snap.

“Definitely basalt,” he said.

Deb's dad shut his door.

They all looked up.

He didn't speak immediately. His eyes moved across them.
Not checking. Not evaluating. Just seeing.

“I'll be back tonight,” he said.

Deb nodded.

He started down the trail without another word.

Jonah watched him go for a moment.

Not questioning.

W. A. BALES

Just noticing.

The sound of the ocean filled everything now.

It pulled at him.

Steady. Immense. Alive.

He grabbed his pack.

“Come on,” he said.

He didn’t wait.

He stepped onto the trail first.

The path dropped quickly, narrower than Jonah expected.

The ground was soft at first, layered in needles and damp earth. The trees closed in around them, trunks slick with mist. The sound followed them, no longer distant. It filled the air ahead like something breathing slowly.

Jonah moved faster without realizing it.

Months of waiting had built pressure inside him. Maps spread across Deb’s kitchen table. Tide charts marked and re-marked. Satellite views zoomed until individual rock shelves were visible.

The island only existed twice a day.

Now it was here.

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Real.

Deb came up beside him.

“You hear how steady it is?” she said.

Jonah nodded.

“Obviously.”

He listened another second.

“It doesn’t echo like rivers.”

“No,” she said. “It just keeps going.”

Behind them, Eli stopped.

Jonah turned.

Eli crouched beside a fallen branch, watching a line of ants moving across its surface.

He scribbled something quickly.

Jonah smiled.

“Already?”

Eli didn’t look up.

“Different species.”

Jonah laughed.

W. A. BALES

“Of course.”

Deb waited, not rushing him.

Eli stood and jogged to catch up.

The trees thinned without warning.

Light shifted ahead.

The wind reached them before the view did.

Not strong.

Constant.

It moved past them instead of around them.

Jonah felt it press lightly against his jacket, steady as a hand.

The sound was louder here.

Not sharper.

Closer to its source.

Alive in a way rivers never were.

Jonah slowed.

Not because he wanted to.

Because something in him needed to take it in.

He stepped past the last line of trees.

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And stopped.

The ocean filled everything.

Not blue.

Not like pictures.

Gray and silver and darker where the surface folded inward on itself.

It stretched past distance.

Past scale.

Past understanding.

Deb stepped beside him.

“Yeah,” she said softly.

Eli stood on Jonah’s other side.

None of them spoke for a moment.

The rock below them was not sand.

It was deep reddish-black.

Broken.

Layered into shelves and ledges that stepped downward toward the water.

Waves moved across it in pulses, filling channels and draining them again.

W. A. BALES

Jonah watched the motion.

Timing it.

Learning it.

Something rose in his chest.

Not fear.

Recognition.

This was different.

And he wanted to be in it.

He started down immediately.

2

Basalt

The trail didn't end so much as dissolve.

Packed earth gave way to exposed roots, then to scattered stone, then to nothing at all.

Jonah stepped onto the first stretch of lava without hesitation.

It felt completely different underfoot.

Not smooth.

Not flat.

Sharp.

Every surface broke into edges and ridges and frozen folds. Tiny holes filled the rock everywhere, like air had tried to escape while it was still liquid and never quite made it.

He shifted his weight experimentally.

W. A. BALES

His boots gripped harder than granite ever had.

But the surface wasn't forgiving.

It didn't compress.

It didn't adjust.

It simply existed.

Behind him, Eli dropped to his knees immediately.

"Look at this."

Jonah turned back.

A tidepool sat in a shallow depression, no wider than a kitchen sink. Clear water revealed tiny fish darting between strands of dark green seaweed.

A hermit crab dragged itself slowly across the bottom, shell oversized for its body.

Eli reached toward it carefully.

The crab froze.

Then retreated inside its shell.

Eli grinned.

He pulled out his notebook.

Water droplets struck the page and darkened the paper instantly. He angled his body to block the wind and wrote.

FIELD NOTES — ENTRY 2

Hermit crab using shell significantly larger than necessary.

Maximum protection.

Minimum dignity.

Movement slow but committed.

Immediate retreat when shadow crossed.

Remained hidden longer than socially required.

Eventually resumed eating as if nothing happened.

Conclusion: shell size influences confidence.

Possibly also personality.

He paused.

Watched the crab again.

Then added one more line.

Water here never stays still long enough to belong to anything.

He closed the notebook carefully.

Deb stepped past them, scanning ahead.

“Watch the sets,” she said.

“Obviously.”

W. A. BALES

Jonah was already watching.

Waves moved toward the rock in uneven intervals. Some stopped short of where they stood. Others climbed higher, spilling into narrow channels before retreating again.

He stepped forward.

The lava rose and fell unpredictably. Some sections formed ridges. Others dipped into sudden gaps that could catch a careless foot.

He moved faster anyway.

Not reckless.

Responsive.

Alive.

Behind him, Eli stood suddenly.

“Starfish.”

Jonah turned again.

A bright orange sea star clung to a vertical wall of rock near a deeper pool.

Eli crouched beside it, reaching out carefully.

He touched one arm.

It didn't move.

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He tried to lift it gently.

It didn't budge.

"It's locked on," Eli said.

Deb crouched beside him.

"Tube feet," she said. "Hundreds of them."

Eli opened his notebook again.

He didn't kneel this time. He stood, studying it from above, eyes moving from one arm to the next. He made a quick note. Then another. Paused.

He tried again — this time not pulling straight back but twisting slightly.

The sea star released all at once.

Jonah blinked. "Whoa."

Eli turned it carefully in his hand, examining the underside. His pencil moved again — faster now. Short strokes. Intent.

He lowered the sea star back against the rock.

For a second it hung loose.

Then it tightened. Settled. Sealed itself in place.

Eli watched a few seconds longer. Wrote one last line. Underlined something. Closed the notebook.

Satisfied.

Jonah leaned over his shoulder.

“You giving it a personality profile?”

Eli didn't look up.

“It already has one.”

A sudden surge of water rushed into the channel beside them.

Jonah grabbed Eli's backpack instinctively and pulled him back just as water surged over the rock where his hand had been.

Cold spray soaked their legs.

Jonah laughed.

“Okay. That was faster.”

Deb grinned.

“You weren't watching the rebound.”

Eli wiped water off his notebook.

Still smiling.

“Worth it.”

Jonah stepped forward again, watching the water more closely now.

Timing it.

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Learning its rhythm.

He noticed patterns.

Not repetition.

Sequences.

A larger wave.

Then two smaller.

Pause.

Then another surge from a slightly different angle.

The water didn't move randomly.

It negotiated with the rock.

And the rock never moved at all.

The next section dipped lower.

Water drained away briefly, exposing sharp ridges beneath.

Jonah moved immediately.

Three quick steps.

Across.

Behind him, water surged back in, filling the space he had just crossed.

Deb followed easily.

Eli came last, pausing halfway to look into another tidepool.

Jonah shook his head, smiling.

“Focus.”

Eli pointed.

“Sea anemone.”

Jonah stepped back beside him.

The anemone looked like a soft flower attached to the rock.

Eli poked it gently with a small stick.

It collapsed instantly, folding inward.

Jonah laughed.

“No way.”

Eli poked it again.

It stayed closed.

He wrote quickly.

Above them, seagulls cried, circling in wide arcs.

Jonah reached into his pack and pulled out the crust of his sandwich.

He tossed it upward.

A gull dove instantly, snatching it midair.

Eli watched closely.

Salt & Stone

“Did you see the wing adjustment?”

Jonah threw another piece.

Two gulls collided midair, fighting for it.

Deb laughed.

“They learn fast.”

Jonah tossed another piece higher.

The gull caught it cleanly.

Perfect.

He turned back toward the lava.

It stretched endlessly ahead.

More tidepools.

More channels.

More unknown terrain.

The same pressure rose in his chest again.

Not fear.

Pull.

He stepped forward.

And the others followed.

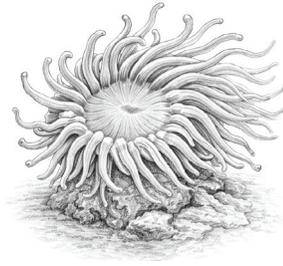
Behind them, water filled the space they had just crossed.

W. A. BALES

Right on schedule.

Erasing their path.

Leaving no mark they had ever been there at all.



3

Where People Stop

The rock didn't level out as they climbed.

It broke upward in jagged steps, each shelf slightly higher than the last, like frozen waves pushing inland and stopping mid-motion.

Jonah moved faster now.

Not running.

But no longer cautious.

His boots found holds instinctively, edges and ridges that locked under his weight. The basalt wasn't smooth anywhere. Every surface was fractured, pitted, sharp with frozen air pockets that had never collapsed.

Behind him, Eli stopped suddenly.

“Hold on.”

Jonah turned.

Eli crouched beside a narrow crack filled with water. Tiny silver fish flickered inside, vanishing and reappearing between shadows.

Eli reached slowly.

They scattered instantly.

He laughed under his breath and pulled out his notebook.

Deb stepped back beside him.

“They’re using the crack for cover.”

Eli nodded, already writing.

Jonah shifted his weight impatiently, scanning ahead.

The rock rose higher there.

More exposed.

More open.

He wanted to see what was beyond it.

“Don’t take forever,” he said.

Eli didn’t look up.

“Not forever.”

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Jonah grinned and turned back uphill.

Deb fell into step beside him.

“They’re smaller than creek fish,” he said.

“Different predators.”

“Obviously.”

“Different everything.”

Behind them, Eli snapped his notebook shut and jogged to catch up.

The sound of voices drifted faintly from behind.

Jonah glanced back.

People stood near the trailhead far above them now, bright jackets clustered safely on wide, predictable rock. Some held cameras. Some didn’t move at all.

None of them came down here.

Jonah faced forward again.

Good.

He could see why.

From above, it looked the same.

Just rock.

Flat enough. Safe enough.

But from here, the difference was obvious.

The surface wasn't continuous.

It was broken into decisions.

Every step required attention.

Every gap carried consequences.

The trail hadn't ended.

It had simply stopped telling people where to go.

Jonah stepped forward anyway.

The basalt ahead rose into a series of narrow shelves, each separated by cracks where water surged in and drained away again. The pattern wasn't regular. Some gaps stayed dry longer. Others filled suddenly.

Jonah stepped across the first gap cleanly.

Deb followed.

Eli came behind them, already slowing again.

"Another anemone," he said.

Jonah groaned.

"You just saw one."

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“This one’s bigger.”

Jonah turned back.

It was.

Nearly the size of his palm, tentacles drifting slowly in clear water.

Eli reached toward it with a stick.

It collapsed instantly.

He laughed.

“Still works.”

Deb crouched beside him.

“They respond faster when exposed.”

Eli nodded and pulled out his notebook, writing quickly while the anemone slowly reopened. His pencil moved in short bursts, then paused as he glanced back at the water.

A flicker of silver caught his eye.

He stilled.

A narrow crack in the basalt wall — empty at first glance. Then movement. A small fish slipped out, hovered, vanished again.

Eli leaned closer, watching.

A shadow passed over the pool.

W. A. BALES

Every fish disappeared at once.

He raised his eyebrows slightly and wrote again. Slower this time. He looked up once more, waiting.

One returned. Then another. Then three together, keeping low to the rock.

He added another line beneath the others.

Closed the notebook.

Satisfied.

Jonah stepped higher onto the next shelf and turned in a slow circle.

The view had changed completely.

The trail was no longer visible.

The people were gone.

The only sound now was wind and water.

He smiled.

“This is where it starts.”

Deb looked up at him.

“Started back there.”

Jonah shook his head.

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“No. That was the entrance.”

He pointed ahead.

“This is it.”

Eli stood and followed his gaze.

The basalt stretched endlessly forward, broken into ridges and shelves and tidepools that caught the sky in fragments.

No footprints.

No path.

Just terrain waiting to be read.

Nothing here had been arranged for them.

Nothing had been made easier.

It existed exactly as it was.

Not hostile.

Just indifferent.

Jonah stepped forward.

The ocean waited.

4

Grip

The basalt changed as they moved farther out.

Not flatter.

Just more continuous.

The fractures ran longer now, forming ridges that rose and fell like frozen waves. Some sections angled sharply toward the ocean. Others formed narrow spines that forced careful placement.

Jonah lengthened his stride anyway.

He trusted it now.

The grip was incredible. His boots locked into the rough surface like it had been built for it.

It didn't shift.

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Didn't crumble.

Didn't lie.

Every edge held exactly where it appeared to hold.

Granite demanded balance.

Basalt demanded commitment.

Jonah moved faster.

Behind him, Eli stopped again.

"Jonah."

Jonah turned.

Eli pointed toward a tidepool tucked into a depression beside the ridge.

A cluster of mussels clung to the vertical wall, dark shells packed tightly together.

Jonah stepped down beside him.

Eli grabbed one and pulled.

It didn't move.

He pulled harder.

Nothing.

Deb crouched beside him.

"They anchor with fibers," she said. "You have to twist."

Eli adjusted his grip and twisted gently.

The mussel came free suddenly.

He stared at it.

“No way.”

Thin fibers stretched from the shell to the rock.

Almost invisible.

Still attached.

Eli leaned closer.

“They grow their own anchors.”

Deb nodded.

“Byssal threads.”

Eli repeated the term under his breath once, testing it, then pulled out his notebook and wrote it down immediately. Carefully. He pressed harder than usual, making sure he spelled it right.

He glanced at the mussels again — the dark shells fused to the basalt. He tried pulling one straight out.

Nothing.

He adjusted his grip and twisted.

This time it released.

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Jonah made a small impressed sound.

Eli turned the mussel in his hand, examining the fine fibers still clinging to the rock. He wrote again, slower now. Studying. Comparing what he saw to what he'd expected.

He ran his thumb across the threads. They looked delicate. They had not been.

He sniffed his fingers, frowned slightly, and added one more line. That earned the faintest corner smile.

He closed the notebook.

Satisfied.

Jonah laughed.

"Dinner."

Eli grinned and set the mussel carefully beside his pack.

"Maybe."

Ahead, the basalt dipped suddenly, forming a narrow crossing point where water surged through every few seconds.

Jonah stepped to the edge and watched.

A wave filled the channel completely.

Then drained.

He counted silently.

Another wave came.

Lower.

Drained again.

He waited.

Deb stepped beside him.

“You can make it between sets.”

“Obviously.” He smiled.

The next drain exposed the rock fully.

He moved instantly.

Three quick steps.

Across.

Water surged back just behind his heels.

He turned and raised his arms.

“Perfect.”

Deb crossed next, smooth and precise.

Eli came last, pausing halfway to glance into another tidepool.

Jonah grabbed his pack strap and pulled him forward just as water surged over the rock again.

Cold spray soaked all three of them.

Jonah laughed.

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Eli laughed too.

Deb wiped water from her face, smiling.

“Timing.”

Jonah climbed higher onto the next ridge, energized now.

The basalt formed a narrow spine here, dropping into deeper channels on both sides. Water surged through them with force, white foam exploding upward when waves struck the rock walls.

Jonah stepped onto the spine without hesitation.

The exposure didn't bother him.

It sharpened him.

The risk clarified everything.

Noise disappeared.

Doubt disappeared.

Only placement remained.

Rock.

Step.

Rock.

Step.

Behind him, Eli crossed carefully.

Deb followed last.

W. A. BALES

The spine widened suddenly into a broad field of tidepools.

Starfish clung everywhere.

Orange.

Purple.

Black.

Anemones opened and closed.

Hermit crabs scrambled between shadows.

Eli dropped immediately to his knees.

“Oh wow.”

He reached toward a sea star, touching one arm gently.

It didn't release.

He tried to lift it.

It held firm.

Jonah crouched beside him.

“They're stronger than they look.”

Eli nodded.

Jonah turned back toward the basalt ahead.

It stretched forward in fractured shelves and shifting water.

More terrain.

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More decisions.

He felt completely awake.

Completely present.

He stepped forward.

The basalt held.

And he didn't slow.

5

Where People Stop

The basalt ahead turned into a maze.

Not ridges anymore.

Not channels.

A field.

Depressions everywhere, overlapping, merging, splitting apart again. Some shallow enough to step over. Others deep enough that the rock beneath them disappeared into black.

Jonah slowed. Not from hesitation. From overload.

There wasn't a path anymore.

There were only decisions.

He stepped onto a narrow rise between two pools and stopped.

He exhaled softly.

Salt & Stone

“This is unreal.”

Eli didn't answer. He was already somewhere else entirely.

He'd found a pool deeper than the rest, its sides nearly vertical, water so clear it didn't look like it was there at all. Mussels covered one wall in a solid black mass, layered over each other like armor.

Eli ran his fingers gently across them.

They didn't move.

He pressed harder.

Nothing.

He leaned closer.

“They're fused.”

Deb crouched beside him.

“Some of them are decades old.”

Eli's eyebrows lifted.

He opened his notebook immediately.

Jonah stepped past them, drawn toward motion farther ahead.

A cluster of anemones filled a wide, shallow basin. But these weren't drifting open in still water like the others.

This pool was connected.

W. A. BALES

A narrow channel fed into it from the ocean, barely visible unless you watched carefully. Every few seconds, a small surge pushed through, disturbing the surface.

The anemones responded differently here.

Not just closing.

Leaning.

Their tentacles angled toward the incoming flow.

Jonah crouched at the edge.

He waited.

Another surge came.

The anemones flexed, adjusting instantly.

Not passive.

Responsive.

He dipped his fingers into the channel.

Cold water surged around them, then drained away.

He left his hand there.

Waited.

The next surge hit harder.

Water wrapped around his wrist, pulling slightly before releasing him again.

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He laughed.

“You can feel it grabbing.”

Deb stepped beside him.

“It’s feeding.”

She nodded toward the anemones.

“They’re positioned for flow.”

Eli crouched on Jonah’s other side, watching closely.

Jonah shifted his hand into the current.

The next surge wrapped around it.

He adjusted.

The force changed.

He adjusted again and grinned.

“You can feel exactly where it’s strongest.”

“Obviously,” Eli said.

He was already flipping his notebook open with one hand.

Jonah laughed. “Of course you are.”

“Two seconds,” Eli said, scribbling fast.

Another surge rolled through.

Eli stuck his own hand into the channel, sucked in a sharp breath at the cold, and yanked it back out.

Deb snorted. "Scientific method?"

"Naturally," he repeated, writing something else quickly.

Jonah straightened and started climbing to the next shelf. "You coming?"

Eli shoved the notebook into his pocket and scrambled up after him, boots scraping for traction.

"I'm coming," he said, grinning.

"Uh-huh."

Above them, a shadow crossed the rock.

A gull landed nearby.

Not circling.

Watching.

Jonah stood slowly.

The gull didn't move.

It tilted its head, studying him.

Jonah crouched and picked up a small mussel shell.

He tossed it lightly upward.

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The gull flinched but didn't pursue it.

He tossed another, higher this time.

The gull tracked it carefully but didn't commit.

Jonah picked up a tiny pebble and dropped it into a nearby pool.

The splash snapped the gull's attention instantly.

Jonah froze.

The gull stepped closer.

Curious now.

Testing him.

Jonah reached slowly into his pack and pulled out a small piece of sandwich.

He didn't throw it.

He held it out.

The gull took two careful steps forward.

Paused.

Then another.

Deb stood silently behind him.

Eli watched without writing.

The gull leaned forward and snatched it cleanly from Jonah's fingers.

Jonah burst out laughing.

"No way."

The gull jumped backward immediately, swallowing.

Then waited.

Expectant.

Jonah shook his head.

"That's incredible. It wasn't afraid."

Eli opened his notebook again.

FIELD NOTES

Western gull landed approximately eight feet away.

Maintained eye contact.

Ignored thrown shell.

Responded immediately to food.

Took food directly from Jonah's hand.

Minimal retreat distance.

Did not leave.

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*Behavior suggests prior success with humans.
Possibly conducting training exercises.*

Behind them, a wave surged farther inland than the last.

Water flooded several pools at once, connecting systems that had been isolated moments before.

Small fish appeared where there had been none.

Hermit crabs climbed higher.

Everything shifted.

Deb stepped onto a narrow rise.

“Water’s pushing farther now.”

Jonah climbed beside her.

It had been lower when they arrived.

From here, the entire field of tidepools looked alive.

Nothing static.

Everything responding.

He stepped forward again, faster now.

Not just observing.

Inside it.

W. A. BALES

Eli moved with them, still noticing, still writing, still reaching down to touch whatever he could.

Deb kept pace beside them.

Equal.

Present.

Together.

The basalt stretched ahead.

And they kept moving.