

For what reason did he dedicate his life to this fruitless endeavor? That question was lodged deep in the scientist's mind as he mindlessly typed on and on about observations that never seemed to matter. Time and time again he felt himself growing more and more tired and sad and apathetic. And yet, he pressed on.

One would think that a man of forty-one years of age with two separate PhD's would be smart enough to have moved on from an endeavor that was clearly pointless, but the power of his curiosity alone drove him on, causing the last three years to fly by. And on this particular day, as he settled down to rest for the night, he found himself thinking back to what had happened in those years gone by, and exactly where he went wrong.

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From the very beginning, doctor Johnathan Jordes Tiny was a man who believed in his instinct. He was just an average middle-aged man, albeit a bit better educated. He had short black hair and dark brown eyes. The very epitome of "average."

And so, it came as no surprise to his wife of fifteen years, Abigail, when he had come home with a rock that he had obtained from the lab where he worked, claiming that it was of alien origin. She could only sigh, remembering the countless times before when he'd done the same kind of thing. It was always random—completely out of the blue—but every once in a while Johnathan would find some excuse to bring home an item that was to be discarded and study it intensely himself. That's just what his instinct did to him.

"Honey," she had complained while brushing her long, brown hair that evening, "aliens don't exist. Someone like *you* should know that."

"Yes, ordinarily," he replied, "but I'm sure there's *something* alive on this rock and it sure as hell isn't going to discover itself! There are traces of life coming from it, and it crash landed on Earth only two days ago! There must be a reason for it." Abigail let out a sigh, knowing that there was nothing she could do to convince her husband to give up. And so, she resolved to let him test the rock for a few days, assuring herself that he'd find nothing peculiar about it in time, as always.

Just like that, three months came and went. Johnathan studied the rock at every opportunity. He was absolutely certain that something would be there. He *knew* something had to exist. It just had to.

Whenever his son would come and ask him to play catch outside, he'd always reply with "not now, Conner, not now. Daddy's busy."

"But daddy, we haven't played catch in ages!" the boy cried.

"I know, I know," his father replied apathetically. "Daddy's very busy, though. You'll understand when you're older, I promise. I'm doing this is for your good too."

Tears began to well up in Conner's eyes, but the boy remained silent. Without another word, he left the room. And Johnathan returned to his work without a second thought. He didn't even know that his son was on the verge of tears.

Time after time, Johnathan turned his son down when the boy asked to play catch with him. And soon, the boy stopped coming to him. But that was okay with Johnathan.

He knew that, once he made the breakthrough he was waiting for, he'd strike it rich. He'd never have to work again, and he'd be able to play catch with Conner all day if he liked. Sometimes Johnathan wondered why his son turned out so differently from him, despite *looking* like a younger version of himself. But it didn't matter. He loved his son. He was working himself to the bone for his family. All because he valued them.

The rock he studied seemed completely normal to the naked eye. It was a light grey. It was abnormally round and smooth, but what fascinated Johnathan were the rock's other traits, such as the sounds he heard from it. For one, it sounded hollow when he tapped on it. But when he put it through an x-ray, Johnathan noticed that it was clearly not just a shell.

There was also the temperature. The rock emitted heat signatures, but felt ice cold to the touch. And no matter how much he heated the outside, Johnathan found that the surface of the rock always felt cold. He knew there was a reason for it that human science couldn't explain. He wasn't sure *how* or *why* he knew. He just...kind of knew.

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One year after Johnathan had started to study the rock, Abigail finally came to confront him. "John," she said sternly to her husband, "that rock is killing you. I swear to God, it is. You're in your room from the moment you get home from work. You're skipping meals and sleeping close to midnight every night! You'll destroy your body. I want you to get rid of that thing *right now*. Come spend some time with your family. We deserve that much."

"Not now, honey," Johnathan replied, staring into her emerald eyes. In them, he saw a mix of frustration and sadness. And it hurt him. But he knew what he was doing was for the best. Over time, he'd gotten used to drowning out whatever his wife and son say to him and replying with the exact same phrase each and every time, although he knew that seeing her upset didn't exactly make him *happy*.

His wife narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me?" she snapped. "It's been one damn *year* and instead of spending time with your family, you're giving all your attention to a stupid rock that came from absolutely nowhere? I've had enough of your crap!" And with that, she stormed out of the room.

Johnathan, however, did not react. No, he barely noticed as Abigail slammed the door shut behind her. His mind was solely focused on his research. It would be better if he was left alone. Then he could finally focus on his work. He didn't mind the idea of being left to his own devices. He was a grown man. He knew how to take care of himself. And he knew that once his research was complete, everything would return to normal. He'd be rich and famous, sure, but his family would be happy again.

Johnathan didn't see his wife again until bedtime that night. She didn't even say a word to him as entered the room. They didn't speak again.

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One day, Abigail just disappeared. She didn't come home. Not that Johnathan had realized. It was his son Conner who wondered where his mother was, although he knew

not to ask his father. His father would just brush it off. "She's just running late," he'd surely say.

For three days, Abigail didn't come home. Her son worried that she was in danger, but he'd heard nothing from the police so he decided to keep waiting. Despite his age, Conner had learned a little bit of cooking from his mother, and he used that knowledge to make his meals. He made enough for two people and delivered the meals to his father, who seemed not to even notice the difference in cooking.

On the third day after Abigail's disappearance, she suddenly returned home, much to her son's relief. "We're leaving, dear," she said to the boy. "I've had enough of your father's self-centered nonsense." And Conner agreed. He followed his mother out of the house without a single complaint.

Johnathan had realized his wife wasn't coming home, of course. How could he not? But he didn't question it. Perhaps she was busy at work like he was. Or perhaps she just needed some time away from him. That was acceptable too. Either way, she stayed out of the way of his research, so he respected whatever she wished to do.

His work had come a long way, too. He'd finally discovered traces of moisture within the rock, which seemed impossible because it wasn't hollow. He knew the sacrifice he would have to make in order to finally make a breakthrough would be great, but all miracles require some sort of sacrifice! For the sake of his family, he would do anything.

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Abigail sent Johnathan the divorce papers in the mail, along with a short letter. She made it clear that she didn't want to see him in person. She just wanted him to sign the papers and mail them back to her. From the address, Johnathan knew she and their son were living safely with her parents. And although he knew Abigail's father was going to be furious with him, after his research resulted in a success, he'd easily be able to explain himself. They, too, would surely forgive him.

Knowing that, Johnathan had nothing to fear. He took a few moments out of his day for what seemed like the first time in ages and signed the papers before mailing them right back to Abigail, all to show how confident he was in his ability to win her back when the time came.

Naturally, Johnathan realized that he was all alone. But that was exactly what he wanted. He could focus on his work at home. He no longer had any obligations to distract him. He had lots of money from his well-paying job, so he'd just order his meals using his phone. It would surely save him time and let him get further in his research.

He couldn't explain why he was so drawn to this mysterious rock. He knew there was something a little strange going on. Perhaps it was pure scientific curiosity? Surely, that had to be it. That and the desire for fame and fortune. But wasn't that natural for all human beings? Shouldn't all people seek to better themselves through the pursuit of knowledge?

Johnathan steeled himself, assuring himself that everything he did was for the best. Things could only get better from where he was.

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A few months passed. Johnathan found his time slowly being consumed more and more by his research. He spent his mornings at work, half-heartedly doing whatever was asked of him whilst thinking of new ways he could experiment with the rock. Then, he got home in the afternoon and carried out those plans meticulously until early morning, when he'd finally rest for a few short hours before he had to go to work once more.

The divorce proceedings went smoothly. Johnathan agreed with whatever conditions Abigail had put forth. She didn't ask for much, really—virtually none of his money or property, though she insisted on having custody of their son. Which was fine with Johnathan. He couldn't find the time to look after the boy anyways. And, perhaps purely out of respect and kindness towards his now ex-wife, Johnathan always made himself available when they needed to meet for the legal procedures regarding the divorce. But once that passed, everything returned to normal in Johnathan's life. Sort of.

One day, his boss called him into his office. "John," the old man said, "we need to talk about your performance at work as of late." Johnathan sat down in front of his boss' desk. He stared at the man's balding head and nodded.

"Yes, sir," he replied, already knowing what was about to come.

"There are many young workers who are just as enthusiastic as you once were," his boss said. "They're waiting for a position that you've held for very long. And although you have the benefit of experience, your work has started to grow incredibly sloppy. You come in every day looking like you've slept only two or three hours the previous night, and you half-ass everything I ask you to do. I know you're upset about your divorce, but that was four months ago. I simply can't tolerate it anymore. I'm sorry, John. You're fired."

Johnathan nodded. "Okay," he said in response before standing up. Without another word, he left the room.

That night, Johnathan returned to working on the rock. His life had pretty much fallen apart, but he still had money from his savings, and he only ate cheap meals so they'd last him quite a while. He could easily last two or three more years on end without work, and still pay for meals and all of his bills and taxes. All he needed to do in that time was finally make a breakthrough. That's all, and he knew he could do it. He was certain.

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It was the first anniversary of Johnathan's divorce. Even he knew that much, although the entire event didn't really matter to him anymore. Although he didn't expect anything particularly inspiring to happen on that day, he woke up to a pleasant surprise. The unemployed doctor walked over to his desk to examine the rock he'd dedicated two years of his life to one more time before he ordered breakfast. And it was then that he discovered a tiny hole on the surface of the rock. From within, he could see a strange blue light. It was tiny, but he was certain there was something coming from within. He knew he had to crack it open. He'd been afraid to do so thus far, but he absolutely *knew* he had to.

Johnathan went into his garage and retrieved a big hammer. He'd once used it to build his son a treehouse, which still hangs out in his backyard. He had seldom used it otherwise, and though the treehouse wasn't particularly *incredible*, it did make Conner happy. And Johnathan was proud of it. Even though he had no use for it anymore, he hadn't the heart to tear it down. He needed to keep it for when Conner came back. And for when he and Abigail were to be married once more. Of course, he was certain that would happen when he makes his breakthrough.

With all his strength, Johnathan struck the rock time and time again. He thought briefly that it could be the shell to an egg of sorts, but he quickly found that it wasn't likely to be the case. The rock was too thick to be an egg. The hammer slowly chipped away at it, and bit by bit, the light seemed to grow brighter. Johnathan excitedly worked away, forgetting all about breakfast. This was it! His big breakthrough!

And as he finally cracked a hole in the rock, revealing a blinding amount of blue light, the whole thing split into two pieces. It opened, revealing that it was indeed not hollow. But it wasn't all rock either. At the center of each half of the stone was a blue, moss-like substance. And it glowed with a gentle light. Johnathan was ecstatic. He immediately retrieved a tiny sample of the substance and began running tests late into the night.

Unfortunately, he came up short. There was no sign of life from the moss-like substance. In fact, all signs pointed to it being entirely inorganic. Johnathan felt dismayed. He felt *betrayed*. He'd thrown everything away for some weird, blue moss! Returning to his desk, he tossed the two halves of the rock into the garbage can sitting by his desk, and he laid down in his bed, decided to finally sleep early again.

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When Johnathan woke up again, he instinctively looked over to his desk. The rock was no longer there, of course. When Johnathan turned to his garbage can out of sheer curiosity, however, he was shocked to find that it was coated in a thin film of the blue, glowing moss. He ran over to it, retrieving the two halves of the rock. They, too, were covered in this pseudo-moss. Immediately placing the halves back on his desk, Johnathan moved to get dressed before retrieving another sample and running tests. He barely ate the day before, so he felt hungry, but it wasn't important to him. He found something! Despite still coming up as inorganic according to the tests, it grew! He knew it grew. He was certain.

Determined to try and replicate the results, Johnathan placed the two halves of the rock on either end of the desk where he had researched for so long. And then, he went about his day, finally finding time to take a break from everything. He noticed little difference when he returned, but he was sure something could happen. And so, he went to sleep.

Sure enough, the next morning, the moss coated his desk. He excitedly cheered, laughing to himself about his discovery. But he wasn't ready to share it yet. He didn't want this just to be a "cool" sort of thing. He wanted it to have a purpose. And so, over

the next few days, he started to coat various items in the moss, trying to see how it would react with the elements used by scientists day by day.

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Two more months passed with seemingly no results. Johnathan had begun preparing to submit his findings to a scientific journal. He knew that he wouldn't get very far with such a useless discovery, but it was still new. It could still garner him *some* recognition.

However, three days before he had planned to submit it, something strange happened. When he woke that morning, the moss from within the rock was gone, as was all the substance that had coated the various objects Johnathan had prepared. He was shocked, and immediately got out of bed, determined to find his lost test subject. But he didn't have to look very far. Right as he climbed out of his bed, he noticed a little blob of slime lying before him. The blob moved on its own, dancing about excitedly as Johnathan knelt down to touch it. It accepted his touch. The slime felt cool and smooth, and had the same vibrant blue glow of the moss. Johnathan laughed happily. "I can't believe it!" he cried.

The slime responded with a sound akin to a confused whimper from a dog. Johnathan jumped at the sound. The slime had no vocal chords—it was almost completely transparent, so he could tell—so how did it make the sound? He knew it was to have some sort of method. It just had to.

After ordering his breakfast, Johnathan decided to test something. He took a pencil and reached it out to the slime. The slime, upon making contact, absorbed the pencil into its center before spitting it back out and moving in a motion similar to that of a shaking head. Deciding upon one more experiment, Johnathan waited for his breakfast to arrive. It was a simple hamburger with fries. He took one of the fries and, once again, gave it to the slime, who absorbed it once more. However, this time, the slime dissolved the food once it reached the center. Johnathan was fascinated. He knew he had to test it more—both its reaction to food and to sound. He wanted to see if the slime could speak.

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A long ten months passed. Johnathan was absolutely amazed at the slime. About eight months after the initial change, it had already grown to take the shape of a human. It was still entirely blue and still glowed brightly, but it held its shape perfectly. The slime couldn't be injured, and one could safely reach their hand through it, should it not wish to devour them. It had learned to speak quite fluently, although its voice was still a little gurgly. It learned all of its speech and mannerisms from Johnathan.

It reminded the doctor of his son.

From the slime's words, Johnathan learned briefly of the creature's backstory. It was indeed what humans considered an "alien," though it had no bad intentions. It crash landed on Earth by accident. It didn't have any extraordinary abilities other than what Johnathan had already discovered, and the slime itself didn't believe any of that to be extraordinary at all.

The slime took the form of a moss when it crash landed because the rock—which was the equivalent of a snail’s shell—came into contact with the grass where it landed. The slime wanted to be as similar to its new surroundings as possible in order to protect itself. And the moss-like substance was the closest thing to grass that the slime had the ability to turn into.

In exchange for this information, Johnathan told the slime about his own life. He recounted stories of his wife and son, and he explained what had happened in the three years that had passed. The slime listened intently, never once interrupting the doctor. And just like that, days passed. Johnathan was finally ready to show his discovery to the world. He planned on showing this slime to the world. It would make him rich. It would make him famous. And it would bring Conner and Abigail back.

The day before Johnathan was scheduled to make an appearance before his entire city to talk about his discovery, the slime came to him and asked, “doctor, what do you intend to do with me from now on?”

“Well, I need to share you with the world, of course!” Johnathan replied. “We’ll both be famous! We’ll have money and we’ll have opportunities! My family will come back, and everything will be fine. And it’ll all be thanks to you: my discovery!”

The slime seemed a little upset at that. “Doctor, am I just a discovery to you?” it asked.

“Well, no offense, but kind of,” Johnathan replied. “I studied you for three years! You’re certainly my greatest subject and my pride and joy, but you *are* still my discovery.”

The slime shook its head. “No, doctor,” it said. “I am a living being, as are you. You intend to use me to garner yourself fame and fortune. You don’t really care what happens to me. You didn’t care what happened to your wife and son either. That’s why you let them leave. That’s why you focused on me. From your stories, I can tell how much you lack empathy. I have grown—no, *evolved*. I used to be an organism with no emotions who did next to no thinking, but you taught me to *feel* and to *think*. But now that I can, I see that you’re not the person I once thought you were.”

“What do you mean?” Johnathan asked, confused.

“The only reason you cared for me was for fame. For *money*. You’d give anything up for your *ego*, not your family. In the end, I’m sure they have moved on. But you haven’t. You still arrogantly believe that having fame will solve the world’s problems. In truth, your wife and son matured through leaving you. And over the last ten months, I’ve evolved thanks to you. But ultimately, you’re the only one who hasn’t grown one bit. And that is your weakness.” The slime turned. “I’m sorry, but I’m leaving, doctor. Forget your fame. Nothing good would come out of it anyways.” And without another word, the slime turned and left before Johnathan could stop it.

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The sound of the doorbell returned the doctor to the present. His food had arrived. His eyes were wet with tears thanks to the memory of what his discovery had told him. But he knew that in reality, it wasn’t his discovery any longer. It was the alien that knew humanity better than he himself did.

The doctor looked over at the two empty halves of the rock which once housed the alien. He knew that he was cracking on at a fruitless endeavor. He knew that he could type up a million different observations about this unchanging rock and nothing would ever happen. He knew that he was wasting his time. And all of a sudden, a sense of realization came to him. He wasn't continuing his work because of the power of curiosity. He was continuing his work because he wanted *redemption*. He wanted to feel as if what he had done was *worth it*. Time and time again, he'd see his former wife in his dreams, staring at him with an expression of pity of her face, and her emerald green eyes downcast and teary. He'd see his son calling for him, running towards him, but never reaching him. And he could only cry.

The words uttered by the alien creature echoed once more through his head. And as if the dam holding it back had burst, wave after wave of realization flooded the doctor's mind. A mixture of sadness and regret and anger filled him to the very brim. But the doctor knew that he deserved every bit of it. He was at fault. He gave up everything. He forced his family away so that he could be alone with his research. And even his research—the alien—abandoned him.

In the end, he was destroyed by his work.

He was all alone.

He was *always* alone.