

“But there aren’t any. Not one ephemeral. No ephemerals, no non-sapient mobiles, no nothing. Not even non-sapient immobiles. This is just a stupid, empty rock. Homework done, empty rock result duly recorded. I’ll be playing multiverses now, OK?”

Norendrum performs the dark energy entity equivalent of holding its breath. If instructor Schwarzberlem doesn’t react, it won’t ask for permission again.

Homework is such a futile invention. Absolute waste of time. There is perfectly no need to progress towards what the instructors call a fully structured state. Norendrum doesn’t share such antiquated notions. It’s a perfectly viable, alternatively structured entity. And longs to go beat Blackantaman now. The opponent is currently leading twelve multiverses to nine. But four of these are so unstable they’re sure to autoterminate on the first shock. Time to win!

“Don’t be stupid, Norendrum. And don’t you even dream of wasting time on that silly game before I have reviewed and accepted your homework. Stop wobbling like that, not prepared to discuss this. You will now focus on this wonderful specimen of alternate matter and record ephemeral activity. Thirty storage units of data, and no debate. Just do it.”

Damn. Instructor Schwarzberlem is such an authoritarian. A real dictator. There is nothing on that bloody rock. Norendrum did check. Twice. One and a half times, at least. Trying for a third time once and for all proves it right. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“There aren’t any. Really now, instructor. Just you check for yourself. Nothing...”

Norendrum would have whined on. It gets cut short by the instructor conjuring up a hole. A pretty big one, spinning menacingly. Swallows two solar systems right away. A dozen more get badly shaken. Instructor Schwarzberlem must be seriously pissed off. Time to climb down.

“OK, OK, got the message. No need to freak out, OK? No, I don’t want to spend a time unit in detention. Yes, I will look at the stupid rock again. If you insist there are ephemerals, I will find ephemerals. Thirty storage units, as you wish. Satisfied now?”

The hole vanishing suggests Norendrum’s surrender was accepted. So far, so good. But how do you find ephemerals on a perfectly empty rock?

Examining the tiny ball once again, much more closely, Norendrum does notice the rocky surface comes in variations. Solid rock. Ground rock. Liquid rock. The solid rock comes in variants. Some of them displaying surprisingly regular patterns.

This was supposed to be important. A sign of something. You had to ask yourself something, on encountering patterns. It was a word with an A. Artistic? No, longer. Arithmetical? No, too easy. The concept in question was far more complicated.

Artificial. Artifacts. Regular patterns in a rocky surface signal it was treated, by something forcing it into a specific shape. Artifacts signal a cavi..., a cera..., a civilization.

Ephemerals, if left to their own devices, form civilizations that litter the surface of a planet with artifacts. Finding artifacts does not necessarily imply the ephemerals are still around. They come and go, are mostly gone, really. Both individually and at the aggregate level. But if you find artifacts there is a chance of them crawling around. Worth a look.

Norendrum tries to recall the instruction. Hopeless. It didn’t pay attention. There were no resources to focus on irrelevant information perfectly retrievable from a library.

Of late, Norendrum has started to experience sudden pattern reconfigurations. Like your whole you shifting inside out, and back again. Feels awesome. Awesomely bad. And imaging what it must look like, to others, makes you feel even worse. That’s far more important than stupid rocks supposed to crawl with hard to identify ephemerals.

The library. Norendrum hates the idea. Doing research to find out how to perform the homework, on top of the actual exercise, that's more waste of more precious time. On the per hand...

Instructor Schwarzberlem is not exactly known for empty threats. More like the opposite, really. And ending up in detention would provide Blackantaman with a chance to fiddle with their ongoing game. Being confined inside a hole cuts you off, from everything.

Norendrum gawps at the recorded instruction. What the quantum state? If this weird crap is true, ephemerals are walking bags of liquid rock. Infinitely small blobs of liquid rock.

This is real hard. This is impossible. Norendrum tangles its perceptive waves so thoroughly it momentarily destructures. That's not working. Not at all.

But there was something. Not a perception yet. More like a shadow of hint of one.

Intrigued, Norendrum tries again. Bloody quantum leaps. Lots. Lots and lots, and lots more. The rock is swarming with ephemerals, in some places. Most of them are so impossibly minuscule the little rock must feel like overwhelmingly huge to them.

There is a bigger one. That size is easier to study. And the shape is more familiar, too. One has one's expectations, when it comes to sapient. What they should look like. A proper sapient needs an identifiable wave structure. Norendrum doesn't mind aliens, but there are limits.

Fascinating, to imagine how ephemerals just like this one achieved to create all these civilization artifacts. Must be hard, to conjure limbs out of liquid rock. This is still stupid homework, but Norendrum feels some of the pride of the true explorer.

Twenty two storage units on the ephemeral it now calls BigWave, that should be sufficient. Less than thirty, but close enough. The other two instructees will have failed to perceive the ephemerals. Norendrum should be on the safe side.

"Schwarzberlem? I'm done, Schwarzberlem. Found the ephemerals, recorded a bucketful of how they behave, all done. I'll be playing multiverses now, OK?"

The instructor must be busy. No answer. Still none. This waiting sucks. Still no reply. Ask again? No. No need. We've got universal perception. Still no response. That's a permission. No answer is as good as an explicit permission, for all practical purposes.

"Detention? Me? But you can't, Schwarzberlem, it's not fair, I was just..."

It takes a resentful Norendrum a while to notice it has already been cut off.

This is all so unfair. First Blackantaman beating it at multiverses. Five to six. It had been leading seven to six, until the very last moment. That last trick, the tackling, that was practically cheating. Even if it doesn't count as such.

Next Schwarzberlem's reprimand, for playing without permission. Even though Norendrum did ask. Loud and clear, for all interested parties to hear. If they were interested. Norendrum argued, of course. Pleaded lack of fairness and seemed well on its way to swaying the instructor.

Until the choleric despot looked at the homework.

Such a perfectly suitable piece, and nearly long enough. But judged insufficient. Just because BigWave turns out to be a non-sapient surface structure supposed to be called a "river".

OK, point taken, minor details do count, in homework. BigWave is not one of the ephemerals after all, had no part in creating the civilization. OK. But it's made of pretty much exactly the same weird stuff as the ephemerals. That should count.

"That's it. I won't have you dare talk back to me like this. You stay right in there and reconsider."

Those were the last words Norendrum heard, for a couple of time units.

Currently, it's pondering to rid the universe of ephemerals. Once it gets out, it will do something, about the pests. It was all their fault, after all. Calls for revenge.