The neikotic debris at the center of Mbetethi’s mind is enormous, but the first thing I notice is its structure at the smallest scale. It’s made of the same jagged tilestuff as its roots, congealed and slower-moving. Its vocabulary of shapes is all sawscrew-corktooth irregularity. Its motion is crepuscular, half-signifying, golden-meaning and onyx-madness. It threatens at once to lash out with its roots, or coil into the interlocking, gyrating Fibonacci spirals that play along its surface. It crawls all over itself.

And it’s reflective. I brush its roughness and it brushes back in the same way, and in its millions of sunflower facets I glimpse the diving-bell’s insectoid hull.It occurs to me that, in loop-lock, thing don't just reflect light. The reflection is something that has to be computed, ray-traced. It takes tiles, cycles, time and energy to do this. Why bother?

I circumnavigate, hewing close as I dare to its roughness, stung now and again by root-whip. This piece of debris (if it can be called that, for it’s larger than anything I’ve ever built in loop-lock) wants to be spherical, but it can’t manage. It’s nothing but caked layers of asymmetry, always sprouting lopsides and frond-probes and petal-eyes. And it’s half-hollow, walnut-ridged, fjordstruck. I can go deep inside.

*{{Hell-o-o-o?}}*

From outside in, I’ve seen parts of Mbetethi ranging from nonchalant to uncooperative to painfully disjointed. Worming my way into a crack in the debris, I wonder whether I’ll find yet another aspect of him inside. I tell myself it’s safer in here, because it’s where the roots aren’t. But even between narrow, twisting walls of saffronoid tilestuff, they lash out. To hurt me? No. To *measure* me.

{{*This whole thing came out of loop-lock with you?}}*

I don’t expect him to answer; his tiles keep a quivering, stilted silence in here. (I slither further inwards, already lost in its maze. There’s no turning back now, only inversion). But a clearer picture of the material is coming into focus. Its reaching, measuring, touching is all to create a simpler model of whatever is placed in front of it. Airgapped and quarantined, this is no doubt very useful in financial modeling, but now it’s loose in Mbetethi’s head, and it’s computing a miniature of his mind, inside his own mind. No wonder he’s in pain. In its interlocking shadowgold, I catch another brief glimpse of the diving-bell’s reflection. The bizarre, concentric, interlocking zebra-glyphs flashing lightning-quick across its surface.

*That's me*, I realize, feeling strange. *That's really me.*

So how do I garbage-collect this massive chunk of debris?

The problem is this: for any construct to survive the roiling chaos of a mind on DMT, it has to be self-duplicating, constantly reasserting itself — the *loop* in *loop-lock*. I fashion the diving-bell into something dangerous, slashing and hacking at the roots that probe me, but they're back within a few ticks. The part contains the whole, brilliantly, dangerously. Sometimes the solution is slashing faster, hacking harder. I've gotten myself out of any number of jams this way, but here I am too small, deep inside this piece of debris but perhaps still far from the center. I need to interrupt its logic and beat it at its own game. I pause in a relatively cavernous space, dizzy and disoriented, a dozen diving-bells watching from a dozen walls. I let it tickle me for a few ticks.

How do these roots work?

Their branching is fractal, self-similar. That seems like a promising place to start; a small wedge in their logic could have recursively large effects. I trace a single root away from the walls, though dozens of branches, but I never really find a tip. Its silkent strands fray into the tile noise in apparently random ways to observe Mbetethi's fine structure. This is where the real intelligence of the algorithm is.

*Intelligence be damned*, I think, bringing one such knot into the diving-bell to sample it.

Its microstructure is wild. Insane. I can hardly imagine a neikonaut keeping track of it. The way it intercepts the fundamental update-rules of Mbetethi's tiles is not quite random, but not quite logical either. Or perhaps the logic exists in some higher dimension, with just enough repetition in its shadow to keep me guessing in here. With each tick, the gnarl of pointers reattaches anew to Mbetethi's memory, almost seems to anticipate its changes.

*In fact, it almost seems like...*

A flash of insight, maybe from watching carefully, maybe from up that last silken strand still joined to my larger self. I act. I'm injecting a burst of fibrous taps into the tiny knot, already doing battle now with the finest roots, trying to interfere, to untangle them. I surround whole swathes of its spindles, detaching and garbage-collecting them, a game of Go played tick-by-tick. I can barely keep up as the battlefield grows, the logic becomes too subtle, *it* surrounds me now — but in a hundred ticks my tingly wildfire has wiped out a volume of the root system the size of the diving-bell, and it grows back slowly enough to watch.

This could be the inversion. I reach in and try again —

*{{ — — STOP! — — }}*

Mbetethi roars this, unmistakably, into the diving-bell on a wave of raw fear. Now I see what I was missing.

{{ *STOP! — STOP! — — }}*

The debris isn't holding on to Mbetethi at all. He’s holding on, for dear life, to the debris.

{{*It's okay. It's okay! I need you to please calm down.}}*

*{{ — — KILL — BOTH — — ! }}*

*{{Do you feel this?}}* I struggle to stay calm against his high tide of viscous panic, directing his attention to a little velcro-knot of pointers where he grasps at the roots. I magnify this structure, flatten it across the diving-bell, playing it on a loop for him to observe.

*{{Do you see what you’re doing? Do you think you could let go?}}*

A long nothing. Now the hair-thin microtubules around me are decoupling, slowly at first and then alarmingly fast. But then, with a whip-crack of tiles, they snap back into place.

*{{ NO. No. No — — can't. No. }}*

*{{Why not?}}*

Four hundred ticks go by. I can sense tiles shuffling, Mbetethi collecting his own thoughts. His response, when it comes, is little more than a magnification of his own silence. Subtle tileflash draws my attention to the diving-bells reflected all over the cavern walls. He says nothing, but his meaning is perfectly clear. *What are the odds,* he asks, *that you’re the real one? What are the odds that I am?* The roots are all-permeating, all-measuring. My insides and outs. Nothing mere about these reflections: in the unhollow half of the debris, a toy model of this same conversation is playing out. Me: the diving bell, only even smaller and simpler. Mbetethi: himself, only more panicked and confused.

Or…?

No heart, no throat, but something very much like all that. A downward semiprime spiral of dread. Mbetethi watching my every move. I press myself up against one of the cavern walls, against the diving-bell reflected therein, and flash a question across my surface tiles. *{{What are you like in there. What are you feeling.}}* And what else could I possibly expect in return? Yet I linger there against that golden-doppel, knowing that if it’s feeling anything at all, it’s exactly this: this rising panic, this *just-what-do-I-really-remember?* I press myself against my reflection for a long time. Maybe I’m looking for a telltale lack, a certain simplicity. Or maybe I’m daring it to move first.

*{{Right,}}* I finally tell Mbetethi. *{{Enough of this. One of two things is true.}}*

*{{One: you’re not the reflection. You let go, the debris disappears, you remain. You survive this.}}*

*{{Two: you are the reflection. You let go, you’re gone, yeah? But you never actually let go. You’re just the thing in the mirror. You never really had the choice.}}*

Yeah, of course I know about the third thing.

Judging by Mbetethi’s silence, so does he. But...

*{{Okay — — try — just — }}*

I give him time enough to change his mind, and a few ticks besides. Then...

*{{We'll both do it,}}* I tell him, expanding the diving-bell, allowing my fringes to succumb to his logic, allowing it to overtake me, offering just the faintest nudges to his tile-paths. His — our — grip on the debris begins to loosen.

*{{If I'm wrong, we'll go together,}}* I insist. He insists. No — the distinction is there, but only just...Mbetethi is the willpower, and I'm the detailed grasp of our fine structure. He courses through me in waves, and I feel ourselves untangling tilewise from the root system. I'm growing larger and vaguer now, the diving-bell just a faint membrane between he and I, worming manyways to fill the entire interior of the massive chunk of debris.

The structure of our fear unfurls, revealed in the unmeshing of billions of pointers. The tantalizing impossibility that we could be making the decision to let go from behind the mirror. *Because...because...*discretized flashes of soberspace memories course through our tiles now — standing in front of mirrors for too long too high too late, watching for *something*, daring *it* to happen, *it can be true if you believe it*. We reach out — not to bloody our hands tonight, but to place a single finger on the surface, pushing hard, willing the bubble to pop.

The unmeshing has reached a critical point. Couldn't stop it if we wanted to. With what's left of the diving-bell I move to encircle the debris, to carry back its shriveled remains. I'm not leaving without my prize. We cut loose a particularly thick segment of roots. {{*See? Nothing to worry about,}}* we lie to ourselves.

And everything goes black. Maybe I expected it to be more gradual.

But this is how it always goes in here. I don't know if there's sound in loop-lock, exactly, but there's an overwhelming roar of nothingness as the final pointer breaks; for a few ticks we're just decaying chunks of stray tile in a cache. Somewhere on the outside of the mirror, the real diving-bell executes a long-planned, highly-optimized maneuver: it serializes a model of the debris and sends it back up the wire through the Deng Bridge. I go through the same motions in here. Jerky, spidery death throes. Now I am the debris, empty, hollow, thoughtless...just...*just*.