

# Loneliness

*“Arriba! Arriba! Ándale! Ándale! Yeeha!”*

—Speedy Gonzalez

Consciousness hits you like a brick. Your swollen face still stings from the blow that ended your adrenaline rush last night, and here, cuffed and lying on the floor, you finally feel how weak and fatigued your limbs are. However, sharper and more urgent than any pain or hunger is the bushfire raging within your throat. *Water, water, I NEED WATER!!* you mouth silently. Each breath feels like an infernal torment to your desiccated mouth. The taller of the nearby guards glances at you and motions to the other to bring you a jug of water.

H<sub>2</sub>O never tasted sweeter. With each reviving mouthful, your resolve hardens again: you must save Melbourne’s water. But that’s easier said than done. You still have no idea where Van Rjien is being held, and then there’s the massive pipe that you drove through to get to this mansion—how could you possibly stop that monster from sucking up our water?

First things first, though: you have to escape. You assess your situation. Small room, no adornments, one door, no windows, one table, two guards and what appears to be a game of Go. Surely even James Bond would not be able to charm his way out of this.

Just then, the door bangs open and a voice cries out:

“EMERGENCY MEETING! VAN RJIEN HAS ESCAPED!”

“What? But we tied and locked him up in the basement, there’s no way he could have escaped.”

“Yea, I gagged him myself!”

The tall hooded messenger shrugs.

“Well, it ain’t my problem. You win some, you lose some.”

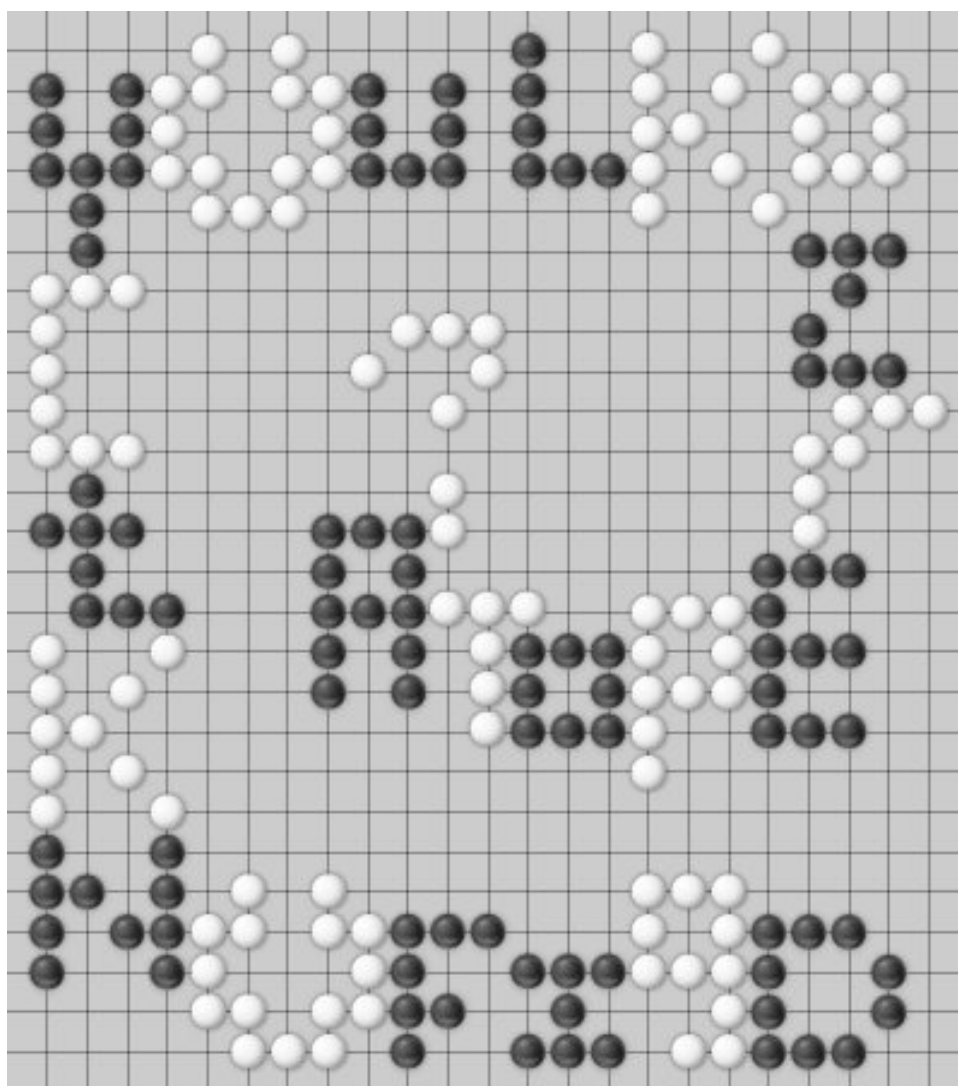
Your two guards hurry out, and as they do so, the messenger steps inside, closes the door and lifts up his hood. You can’t believe your eyes! It’s Van Rjien—but it can’t be... can it?

You snap out of your astonishment as he lets fly a flurry of words:

“Look, there’s no time to explain. I can only stall the meeting for fifteen minutes. The

only reason that they're not looking for me right now is that they know that I can't get far from here. Did you find my note in the library?" *You nod.* "Good, I need you to find the main storage room—everything should become clear when you get there."

With that, he thrusts a key into your hands and runs out, slamming the door behind him. You make out muffled cries of *just making sure that this one is tied up properly* as you shakily undo your manacles. You stagger to your feet, waiting for the sound of footsteps to fade, and that's when you notice that what the guards were playing might not have been a game of Go after all.



—Stephen Muirhead