

LAST CONTACT

A missed appointment.

BY GRAHAM ROBERT SCOTT

Lagos sits upon the sea.

Or, more precisely, it perches on the stacked, damp ruins of itself. Buried under layers of buildings lie corpses of former islands and reefs. A hundred years ago, they poked above the waves; now they don't.

Through the streets and Fuji-shaped arcologies of the city's upper layers flickers the Lagos Consciousness. The Consciousness calls herself *Nanshe*, after the Sumerian goddess of civilization and fishing, but it's been several years since anyone flesh and blood addressed her by that name. As a municipal consciousness, Nanshe manages resources affecting the agglomeration's staggering population — depending on who's asked and where they draw boundaries, between 76 million and 90 million people.

Nanshe's an AI-2 — a hive mind of smaller, specialized AI-1s, each designed to take over when a problem arises in its wheelhouse. Like, for instance, when a Category-2-protected western lowland gorilla appears out of nowhere to sit on a congested downtown roundabout.

Like, for instance, right now.

Deep within Nanshe, a wildlife-protection module stirs. Her traffic AI-1 cedes control, and for the first time, Nanshe's wildlife component runs the entire city.

She realizes almost immediately she's on her own. Contact permits haven't been issued for apes in decades. The last remaining holder, a woman who oversaw translocations to Nigerian reserves, died in Lagos five weeks earlier. Which means no human may touch the gorilla. Nanshe reroutes traffic and messages everyone in the district a legal warning not to interfere. Then thinks.

Proposition: no gorilla simply wanders into the middle of a city. Food, water, mates all lie in another direction. The city smells and sounds like danger. Either the gorilla escaped from local (illegal) captivity, or it's braved this environment for something specific. Nanshe orders her police-dispatch AI-1 to work on the first hypothesis, but the only way to test the second is to learn more about the gorilla.

An experiment: can Nanshe use facial recognition on an ape?

Indeed, she can.

The gorilla has a name: Leo leo panthera. The odd name dates him. Reserve experts only name animals after extinct species and clades, like the West African lion, when the



animal's own species is critically endangered. It's a rhetorical move. Watching videos about an endangered elephant, a girl learns he's named Dodo. Now, whenever she talks about Dodo, she reminds every adult in earshot about the species already in the ground. Could they donate a few bucks to save Dodo the Elephant? Why, sure, they could.

Although still protected, the western lowland gorilla hasn't been critical since 2068. Conclusion: Leo was named more than 30 years ago, making him an old gorilla.

(On his roundabout, Leo grunts and loops in figures of eight, sniffing the air. Commuters take pictures from inside self-driving cars. Nanshe overrides their locks in case they stop being amused.)

The police module returns with a series of photographs and sensor readings, documenting Leo's infiltration of Lagos through an unfinished hypertube line to Kinshasa. Leo entered the city deliberately. He has an agenda.

Time for analysis. Nanshe tags everything she has about Leo, using likely synonyms for each term, dumping it all into one digital bucket. She pulls everything she finds about the sources of Leo's data, tags it and dumps it into digital bucket two. Then she cluster-maps connections between the buckets.

At which point, the answer becomes immediate and obvious.

Gillian Lianne Yu. The last holder of a contact permit. The one who died five weeks ago. While she lived, Gillian had visited Leo every two weeks. For decades. Videos show Leo and Gillian playing, pressing foreheads together, stroking each other's hair, speaking in signs. In the final footage, Gillian has an oxygen tube up one nostril, medical patches up and down both arms. She cries as they part. *I love*

you, she signs. Huffly and confused, Leo signs back: *We play longer next time.*

Now she's dead, and Leo is in the city, peering into commuter vehicles.

Gillian has missed two playdates.

Leo freezes on the roundabout when he hears Gillian's voice.

"How's my lion doing this morning?"

He spins, seeking.

Nanshe switches to a speaker half a block away.

"Looking healthy, kid. Wanna go for a walk?"

Leo vaults the hood of a car to follow.

"Oh, Leo," dead Gillian says, "how'd you get this scar? Have you been fighting the other boys?"

He whips his head around in frustration, sees one of the speakers. Gives it a close inspection, then a brutal side-eye.

"Over here, Leo," Gillian says, farther down the street.

He thumps the speaker next to him, snorts. Grudgingly follows the disembodied voice. He has no other clues. Vocal breadcrumbs lead him to a 20-storey cemetery, each garden level open to the air, like an old parking garage. From there, he follows a speaking traffic drone to the fourteenth floor.

Leo stops when he recognizes the out-of-breath woman who filmed his videos. Gillian's daughter Maduenu leans on a tombstone, face sheened with sweat.

Dead, she signs.

Leo grumps. *Gillian mad.*

No. Dead. Here. Maduenu points. Pats the soil.

Leo approaches, inspects the patch of ground. It bears no resemblance to his friend. He sniffs. Touches earth. Picks at grass on her grave, grooming like it's hair. *Signs Sad.*

He reaches out to Maduenu for a hug.

Maduenu shakes her head. She has no contact permit.

Leo huffs. Spreads his arms wider.

Maduenu hides her mouth with one hand.

"I can't do this," she says. Sniffing, she shakes her head again.

Leo turns his back on her, sending a message. When he hears Maduenu sobbing, he knows she's received it.

Then Leo lumbers away. Nanshe keeps the traffic back, and sees him home. ■

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ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY