

Repeat After Me

Iris shuffled down the usual hallway with a single-minded focus, mustering the energy for the barest of waves and grunts of acknowledgment to her crewmates. The bright lights of the ship glared down from above, shining off everybody's white uniforms and straight into her sand-crust-ed eyes. Two hours of sleep was 'all they could afford her,' even though she'd already worked twelve hours straight.

She didn't so much wave her ID card in front of the door scanner as shove it in the thing's inanimate face. The double-layered doors slid open with a familiar hiss, and she immediately turned left upon entering her lab to reach the coffee table near the window. She poured lukewarm coffee into a styrofoam cup, and dumped in an unhealthy amount of an already unhealthy artificial sweetener. "Delicious," she hummed after her first gulp.

A chuckle from across the room. "I don't know how you drink that motor oil," a man's voice said, an Indian accent rounding the edges of the words.

"Can it, Dev," Iris shot back, taking another sip and reveling as the liquid warmed her body. She took a second to mentally prepare herself, glancing out the window before her. Lo and behold, they were still in space. Stars of shining white glinted off in the distance, and the rounded edge of the planet they had been sent to sample took up the rightmost quarter of her view.

Sixth planet was the charm, maybe? But who knew how many other ships were out in the vast expanse doing the same thing: looking for a place for the humans who couldn't fit on the home planet anymore. This was probably more like the six-thousandth time, and it wasn't looking particularly hopeful.

"Anything new?" Iris asked as she turned back to the lab. Devesh stood at a control panel built into the wall of a transparent cage large enough to hold ten men. Inside was a single occupant – a gray humanoid alien with black eyes and no mouth. The thing had used its substantial muscles to put three guards from the landing party in the hospital before the last two managed to contain it. There were scratch marks around the cell from its claws, and the creature's bulky chest rose and fell in slow, steady breaths. It stood stock-still in the middle of the cage, having given up trying to break through the inlaid grid of reinforced metal about seven hours into her shift the other day. Or was it still the same day, technically?

"Actually, yes," Devesh answered. "Come watch this."

Iris joined him at the control panel, and the alien's eyes fixed on her as she moved across the room. "How can I tell it's watching me when it doesn't even have pupils?" she mumbled to herself with a shiver.

"Relax, Iris," Devesh told her, somehow following his own advice. "Nothing can get through this," he said with a rap on the glass.

“Did you see what this thing did to Max and the others?” Iris returned. “I’m not letting my guard down for a second, Dev.”

“Suit yourself,” Devesh said with a shrug. “But watch.”

Devesh punched at a few buttons on the panel, and a holographic projection appeared on the other side of the glass. A pale blue image of a big cat – a mountain lion, to be precise – prowled in place. The alien watched this for a few moments, and then started to change. Matching blue fur sprouted from the alien’s smooth skin, and its spine lengthened into a tail. Iris could see muscle and bone shift and rearrange below the creature’s skin, and its face contorted into the face of the mountain lion. This all happened in eerie silence, the soundproof cage leaving the sick sounds to her imagination.

The alien tested its new form by lunging straight at Iris. Wicked claws scratched at the glass, teeth tried to find purchase, and it threw its muscular body against the walls a few times before returning to its spot in the middle of the room.

Devesh pressed the button that opened up the two-way communication channel between the cell and the lab, but Iris cut in before he could do anything with it. “What was that for?” she asked, her voice clipped. “Did you forget we found out it’s a mimic yesterday?”

“I know, I know, I’m getting there,” Devesh assured her as he punched a few more buttons. “Listen, what do you hear?”

Iris waited. “Nothing,” she said. “Should I? Again, we covered this yesterday.”

“Yes, yes, thank you for scolding” Devesh said. “I just wanted to remind you. It can’t make noise. Nothing all day. Except...” he trailed off, then with a few keypresses, projected the growls and snarls of a mountain lion into the cage. They were tinny, and some corruption of the audio files left a dull static in the background.

Then the same sounds came from the inside of the cage, much clearer and louder. The alien mountain lion bared its teeth in a loud snarl, growling at its captors with obvious agitation.

“No way, it made noise!” Iris gasped, leaning forward. Their whole purpose for capturing the creature was to communicate with it, maybe make peace, but at least try to determine a weakness or more about the planet. Yet after numerous hours of tests and ideas after it had calmed down, it hadn’t so much as made a sound.

“Yes, it can copy anything it hears as long as its form has the capability to do so,” Devesh confirmed, releasing his finger from the communication button. “I’ve been playing noises into the cell for a while now, but the form with no mouth can’t replicate them. Go figure.”

“Still, at least we have something to work with,” Iris said. “We could try to teach it morse code, or some basic signals, or—”

“English,” Devesh interrupted. “Why not just English?”

Iris frowned at him. “That’s not protocol.”

“Forget protocol!” he exclaimed, his sunny facade faltering for the first time. “I’m tired of this thing wasting our time. You know as well as I do it’s not going to be cooperative. Let’s teach it ‘yes’ and ‘no’, ask the standard questions, and be rid of it.”

Iris looked away from Devesh to stare at the creature. It had returned to its alien form, and everything about it set her on edge. It stood too still, its eyes were too dark, the lines of its body too unnatural. “Alright,” she relented. “Let’s get this over with. I have an idea.”

She gestured for Devesh to move, and he slid out of the way with a relenting gesture of his own. She typed at the panel for a few moments, and another projection appeared in the cage. It was a parrot this time, and the alien was quick to mimic it. Just like the big cat before, the finer points of the color were lost on the alien. Though its demeanor made even the usually unconcerning beak and talons of the bird seem fearsome as it dove at the glass.

“Clever,” Devesh complimented as Iris pressed down the communication button.

“Hello,” she said into the microphone.

The parrot squawked in agitation. “Hello, hello,” it returned in an imitation of her voice.

“My name is Jane,” she introduced, trying to stick to their procedure as much as possible by concealing information.

“Iris! Iris!” the parrot croaked.

Iris felt a chill run down her spine. “What the hell?” she murmured.

“It must have heard more than I intended from us talking earlier,” Devesh suggested quietly, scratching at the back of his neck. “You know my communicator discipline isn’t the best.”

She shot him a glare, and hesitantly reopened the channel. “You know my name, then. Can you tell me yours?”

The parrot screeched at her, and cocked its head.

“What do we call you?”

“Nothing,” the bird returned in Devesh’s accent. “Nothing.”

“Let’s move on,” Devesh whispered to her.

She nodded. “We’re looking for a new home. We don’t want to fight, we come in peace.”

The bird made a noise that sounded like choking, or maybe laughing? It used a new voice for its next words, the voice of Max, one of the guards who had encountered the creature down on the surface. “Shoot it! Take it down!”

“I’m sorry about that,” Iris said, hoping the alien hadn’t learned enough yet to tell that she wasn’t sorry at all.

“It attacked first, but they still left it alive. It should be grateful,” Devesh muttered.

Iris ignored him. “My people were probably just scared.”

“Should be scared,” the parrot said, a mishmash of voices and inflections. “Be scared.”

The alien started to shift and twist, returning to its base state, and Iris removed her finger from the button before any of those sounds could come through. “That’s enough, right?” Devesh prompted. “It’s uncooperative, and threatening us. That’s good enough for me to toss it out the airlock and get away from this planet.”

“Dev,” she said, unable to stop herself from pointing. “Dev, look.”

The alien only remained in its base form for a moment before shifting again. This transformation was the least drastic, yet most unsettling of them all. After a few seconds of rippling skin and shrinking muscle, an exact replica of Devesh stood inside the cage. The alien no longer stood still – it shifted its weight and scratched at its neck in a precise imitation of Devesh’s mannerisms.

“Personnel recognized: Devesh Agarwal,” a canned voice announced over the loudspeaker. “Releasing containment.”

“No, no, no!” Iris screamed back, but the door on the side of the cage was already hissing and sliding open. The alien moved in a blur, darting out of the new opening and rounding the corner with unnatural speed. Devesh pushed Iris out of the way just in time to avoid its dive at her. The mimic crashed into Devesh, sending them both tumbling to the floor. One of them screamed.

Iris scrambled across the floor, making a beeline for the glass emergency case near the door. She threw her elbow into the glass and slapped the big red emergency button inside. A heavy shutter clanged down in front of the door and the faint sounds of an alarm rang from the other side.

She grabbed one of the two disintegrator handguns hanging next to the button and whirled back around. The two Deveshes were still on the floor, straining against each other and exchanging blows when possible. “Stop!” she cried, flipping the safety on the firearm and pointing it at the two combatants.

One froze instantly, the other a lifetime of a second later. “Separate,” she ordered crisply, her voice sounding detached from her body. They obeyed. “Stand up.” They obeyed again.

The Devesh on the right had an eye that was already turning black, and blood seeping from scrapes on his arms. The left had red scratches across his face, and was putting his weight as much on one foot as possible. But aside from their injuries, they still looked exactly the same.

“Iris, thank you,” the left said. “You saved me.”

“No way!” the right exclaimed. “Iris, I’m Devesh.”

Iris moved the weapon back and forth between the two of them. The adrenaline and panic finally caught up to her, and her hands started to shake. “There’s no protocol for this,” she muttered.

“Shoot it!” the right called.

“No, take it down!” the left returned.

“Shut up!” Iris cried. God, she just woke up, she did not have the brainpower for this. “How did you even fight back, Devesh? We saw what it did to the others.”

“It’s a mimic,” the right answered.

“It’s a copy of me,” the left answered a fraction of a second later. “Can’t you tell it’s me?”

“Don’t listen to it!” from the right again.

“Devesh, stop!” she cried. “You’re just giving it more words to use. So be quiet while I try to think of something,” she ordered. Both of the Deveshes sealed their lips, and Iris racked her brain trying to remember every word that was spoken, and then compare it to every word that both of the Deveshes had said.

She closed her eyes for just a few moments, trying to process, and when she opened them the Deveshes were closer together. Not a lot, but enough for her to notice. It was the one with the injured leg. Was it the alien, trying to move closer? Or was it the real Devesh, shifting to better support his injured limb?

The pressure building in her head didn’t make thinking any easier. There was just too much information for her brain to parse. “I can’t tell you apart,” she admitted with a groan.

“Ask us something,” the right said.

“I know you can do it, Iris,” the left added.

“Alright,” Iris said, making a conscious effort to level out her breathing. “When’s my birthday?”

“August 22nd,” came the reply.

From both of the Deveshes at once. They spoke totally in sync, and each reacted with the same look of surprise at each other after the simultaneous answer.

“Iris, it’s learning too fast!” the Deveshes cried, matching each other down to the inflection and nervous hand wringing. “You have to make a decision, now!”

Actually, their sync wasn’t a perfect, one was speaking ever so slightly after the other in an unnatural echo. But which one was it? They were too far apart for her to watch both of their mouths at once, and if she asked them to get closer the real Devesh would be in even more danger.

“Security will be here soon,” she said, just as much to herself as Devesh. “They can help tell you two apart.”

“You know that’s not protocol,” the Deveshes said. “They’ll kill us both. But they don’t know me like you do,” they continued. “You can do it, Iris, please,” they pleaded, each taking a step forward.

“Stay back!” she ordered, thrusting the gun forward. They both put their hands up at the same time, both wore the same look of panicked pain. She wanted to cry. She wanted to sit down and cover her eyes and wake up from this nightmare.

“Please don’t shoot me,” the Devesh on the left said, tears welling in his eyes.

“Take it out,” the right mouthed to her, jerking his head towards the other.

Iris looked from one to the other, back and forth a few times, but there was still no obvious difference. There was too much pressure and too much noise to try to logic her way out of this. She had to trust her gut.

She reviewed their conversations again in her head, not looking for facts, but searching for signs of which one felt more like Devesh. Not which words he used, but how he used them, how he put his sentences together, the person behind the words themselves.

Iris lined up her sights with the Devesh on the left and pulled the trigger before she had a chance to second guess. That Devesh disappeared in a flash, leaving behind hardly more than a smoking spot on the floor.

“You did it,” Devesh breathed. “It’s over.”

But Iris couldn’t bring herself to lower the gun. “How can I know for sure?”