The plane swooped lower as they neared the Austin airport. Soo-Lin stared out the window, fascinated. Coming from verdant Palo Alto, where every lawn was green and manicured, these dry Texas hills were a change. She switched her focus back to the computer in front of her, skimming through her presentation one more time as if she didn’t know all of the PowerPoint slides by heart already, after three weeks of practice. Still, Soo-Lin dutifully clicked through the slides one by one, carefully reading the words, looking for nuances that she could highlight, and thinking about how to craft her speech. Soo-Lin believed that preparation could fix almost any problem. She could still remember the first time, at six years old, that she had heard the Boy Scout motto: “Always be prepared.” She had wanted so desperately to join. She’d cried herself to sleep that night when her mother told her they didn’t let girls in.

Preparation had helped Soo-Lin make stellar grades and gotten her into a good college. And now, preparation landed her a challenging job at a startup that was on the verge of revolutionizing the payments industry. Her mother still didn’t understand exactly what a “startup” was. Soo-Lin had tried to explain several times: startups were small companies, they worked with technology, and they were funded by rich venture capitalists who liked to bet big. But every time her mother just waved off Soo-Lin’s explanation. “It impresses all the ladies at the bridge club,” she said. “That’s all I need to know.” Soo-Lin shuddered. That the opinions of the bored ladies at her mother’s bridge club could serve as a metric of success was deeply depressing.

Soo-Lin shut her computer reluctantly. At least there would be time to review the slides again; the presentation wasn’t until the end of the South by Southwest interactive conference in five days. Soo-Lin navigated Austin’s tiny airport easily and grabbed a taxi to her hotel. This was her first time at South by Southwest (known as SXSW), but everyone else at her company had been there before. In fact, it seemed like every March the entire San Francisco Bay Area migrated to Austin for the conference, a week of networking, live music, and spicy Texan food. SXSW was where a number of incredibly successful technology products had launched. It was where big deals were made. It was a happening at which you could walk into a restaurant and find yourself between one of the top guys at Google and a rock star. For an ambitious person wanting to make their mark in the technology world, SXSW was a good place to be. That’s why Soo-Lin was there.
She met up with the rest of her team at the hotel. They were already congregating in the lobby. She looked at the group—they were a small company, only ten people. She was the only woman, and the awareness of that fact made her work twice as hard. But she knew the company needed her. Everyone else on the team was an engineer or a designer, while Soo-Lin came from a business background. She was the one who had the vision to decipher how and where their product would fit into the market and the management skills to make sure everything got done.

“Hi guys, how’s it looking?” she asked. The team looked up and smiled, relaxed. Soo-Lin felt a tinge of irritation that they could be so laissez-faire when she was so tense about the presentation.

“Looks great,” said Rameet, the head engineer. “The prototype is ready. Matt worked out the last bugs in the program last night.” Matt leaned over and high-fived Rameet. Her team was developing a mobile application that would let people pay for anything—from bills to Chinese take-out to babysitters—with the push of a single button on their phone. Many people had tried to do this before, but they hadn’t been able to gain traction. Soo-Lin hoped that her team wouldn’t add to the ever-growing list of startup failures.

“How are you feeling?” asked Xiao, the designer. “Ready for the big presentation?” Soo-Lin would be doing the presentation on stage, alone. She would be representing their product in front of some of the most influential companies and investors in the world.

“I still want to do some preparation,” Soo-Lin responded. The team collectively rolled their eyes. They knew how much Soo-Lin liked to prepare: about twenty times more than any rational person.

“You’ll do great,” said Rameet. “Just get up there and show them how amazing our product is. Besides, you have five more days to relax. Just enjoy the conference talks, meet some interesting people, and do your preparation in between.” Easy for Rameet to say, thought Soo-Lin. Rameet was one of those child geniuses who had built his first computer at age seven. The normal rules didn’t apply to people like Rameet. He compensated for his lack of preparation with sheer brilliance.

“Yeah, I know,” Soo-Lin shrugged. “I’ve got to go unpack. I’ll meet up with you guys for dinner later.”

Soo-Lin went to her room, but it only took her a few minutes to unpack. She paced around the room, her body humming with anxious energy. “Get a grip,” she told herself. At this rate, she would be a nervous wreck by the day of the actual presentation. She decided to go for a walk by the water to clear her head.
An hour walking along Lady Bird Lake, watching the kayakers and the runners, did make her feel better. The rest of the team had already left for dinner by the time she got back, so Soo-Lin decided to just eat at the hotel restaurant. She ordered the macaroni and cheese—all of that walking had made her voraciously hungry. The man beside her leaned over: “It’s good. I recommend it.” He was in his thirties and dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt.

“Thanks,” Soo-Lin smiled.

“Is this your first time at SXSW?” the man asked. “Are you here with a company?”

Soo-Lin nodded as she bit into her mac and cheese—the man was right, it was creamy and delicious. “I’m presenting our payments product at the big pitch competition on the final day.” She paused. “I’m incredibly nervous.”

The man nodded, slowly. “Why don’t you pitch it to me right now?” he said. “Just walk me through the whole thing. Sometimes it’s easier to practice with a stranger.”

Soo-Lin thought about it… “Okay,” she said. She took a big breath, and then she walked him through everything: how the product worked, its revolutionary security, how easy it was to use, and the company’s business model. The man nodded when she finished. Soo-Lin glanced at her watch; she had been speaking for twenty minutes.

“Well,” said the man as he stood up from the bar, “I think you’re going to do great. All I can say is that you’d be my top pick.” Soo-Lin smiled, pleased with the praise from this stranger.

Over the next five days, Soo-Lin attended a whirlwind of talks, panels, and networking events. She looked for her friend from the bar but didn’t see him anywhere. Finally, the day of the presentation arrived. Soo-Lin met Rameet and Xiao at the side of the stage, where they were scanning the panel of judges.

“Whoa!” said Rameet. “That’s Eyal Smith. He was one of the first investors in Facebook. He has billions to spend but is a recluse—he almost never comes to these events.” Soo-Lin followed Rameet’s gaze. It was the man from the bar. He smiled at Soo-Lin and gave her a thumbs-up.

Rameet and Xiao looked at her in wonder: “Do you know him?! Suddenly, she felt much less nervous about her presentation.
1. In this story, what is Soo-Lin preparing for?

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2. The main setting of this story is South by Southwest, or SXSW. According to the text, what is launched at SXSW?

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3. The SXSW presentation is very important to Soo-Lin’s company’s success. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

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4. Why might Soo-Lin believe so strongly in the importance of preparation? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

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5. What is the main theme of this story?

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6. Read the sentences from the text and answer the question.

"Soo-Lin believed that preparation could fix almost any problem. She could still remember the first time, at six years old, that she had heard the Boy Scout motto: 'Always be prepared.' She had wanted so desperately to join. She’d cried herself to sleep that night when her mother told her they didn’t let girls in."

Why might the author have chosen to include this information about six-year-old Soo-Lin in the story?

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7. What word or phrase would best complete this sentence?

Soo-Lin has spent three weeks preparing for her presentation, ______ she is still very nervous.

____________________________________

8. What does Soo-Lin do to prepare for her presentation? Use details from the text to support your answer.

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9. Predict whether Soo-Lin will do better at the competition than she would have if she hadn’t practiced her speech with the man at the bar. Why or why not? Explain your answer using evidence from the text.

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10. The first paragraph of the text says that “Soo-Lin believed that preparation could fix almost any problem.” Argue for or against this belief, using evidence from the text to support your argument.

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