

The Human Element

01.04.2030

Adam closed his eyes and listened to the ceaseless drum of his heartbeat – it was a lonely and solitary rhythm, rising with a flush of anger and then receding in resignation. They had it all wrong – he knew that now. The entire mission, his entire existence on this barren wasteland of a planet, had been flawed since its inception. As his heartbeat faded into the blackness of empty, solitary space, it didn't matter how correct every chemical reaction had been, or how many precautions they had taken. Mission Preparation had forgotten the essential element, and because of him, they became tragically aware of its consequential importance.

08.28.2064

Standing in the doorframe of her closet-sized office, Eva made a futile effort to swallow the lump of discontent lodged in her throat. The stack of faded manila folders perched upon her desk taunted her frustration. After ten years of devotion to the Department of Mission Preparation, Eva had not transcended above the status of a paper-pusher. Each morning a fresh pile of old mission summaries waited upon her desk, ready for transfer into the Space X Record Database Cloud. At first, the task of reading through accounts of the corporation's earliest endeavors was enthralling. However, as Eva's fascination faded into routine, each new folder became a painful stab at her tedious reality.

Eva wallowed in another moment of resentful procrastination before taking her place behind the cluttered desk, willing her conscience to recall the reason she maintained such miserable employment. The essential purpose behind the Department of Mission Preparation is to develop the blueprints and specifications for manned missions. The Executive Board of Mission Preparation, abbreviated as MiPrep, rests at the pinnacle of the Department's hierarchy. MiPrep is one of Space X's most fundamental and essential groups; without it, no mission can be launched successfully, let alone safely. However, despite the magnitude of its importance, MiPrep's internal affairs are obscure. Neither Eva, nor anyone else, knows the roster of MiPrep associates or the qualifications for involvement. The longer she remained in the Department, the more irrational her goal of being selected for MiPrep seemed. With a sigh, Eva opened the first folder and propagated yet another day of her relentlessly dull reality.

As the clock dragged its hands towards five o'clock, Eva prepared for her departure. Suddenly, an unexpected whirr sounded from her Automated Delivery Dropbox. Eva watched as an unfamiliar, monstrosly thick package materialized in the metal tray on her desk. Its modern titanium casing was nothing like the manila folders she so despised, and a touch screen on its front face flashed a boldfaced warning.

“This package contains information belonging exclusively to the Executive Board of Mission Preparation and is sealed for confidentiality. Only members of the Executive Board of Mission Preparation have the security clearance to open and view the files contained within.”

The display shifted to a passcode screen, requesting an eight digit combination. Suddenly, Eva realized that the code was already entered – all she needed to do was select submit. Intoxicated by her own lust for excitement, Eva pushed the glowing button. After a moment's processing, the package clicked open to reveal a thick beige file. This package, whether it was sent to her by accident or with a hidden purpose, was riveted with uncertainty. Extracting the stash of papers and returning to her desk, Eva realized how long it had been since she was excited about the contents of a manila folder. Without reluctance, she flipped open the file and began reading.

12.19.2020

The woman perched on the opposite end of the conference table gave Adam a warm, confident smile as he took his seat in the briefing room. Her face was familiar to him, her thin-lipped smile, restless mane of red hair, and silvery eyes were the face of a mother he had never known. Because he wasn't tied to anyone or anything here on earth, he readily agreed to be the subject of Space X's mission. For once, his lack of meaningful relationships was an opportunity instead of a disadvantage. “Adam, this is your final mission briefing before your launch on the fourth of next month,” she began. “Is there anything you would like to ask me before I bring in the rest of the MiPrep team?” Her head cocked to the side, her expression a mix of affection and apprehension. “Just one,” he said. “What's the most dangerous thing about space?” The woman smiled and blinked. “Every aspect of your mission has been planned with meticulous and intense scrutiny. Every reaction, every stage of construction has been developed to absolute certainty. When you arrive on the Mars surface, you will find that the permanent living facility is fully equipped with every resource you will need for a comfortable and healthy quality of life.” Her smile was thin, but genuine. With a nod

from Adam, she called for the MiPrep team to enter the briefing room. The next several hours were a whirlwind of explanations, overviews, and precautions as Space X prepared Adam to become the first permanent resident of a planet other than earth.

08.29.2064

Eva's head pounded with incredulity as she finally tore her eyes from the mysterious file to check the time. Was it really five o'clock in the morning? From within her windowless office, she had no way of knowing that the sun had both set and risen during her captivity with the unexpected package. Although she was only halfway through the extensive mission summary, she realized the file in her possession was an account of Space X's first attempt at space colonization. Today, over thirty years after Space X published this report, there are plenty of permanent space residences. What concerned Eva was not her own ignorance of this mission's existence, but rather the fact that Space X claimed their first attempt at space colonization was made fifteen years after Adam's launch.

01.04.2028

On earth, Adam's education and training to become the first permanent earthling extraterrestrial resident had transcended exceptional. However, no amount of briefing or certification prepared him for the darkness and silence of the universe beyond earth's atmosphere. During the initial years of Adam's life in a permanent Mars residence, Space X mission controllers enjoyed frequent, nearly constant communication with Adam. In the eighth year of Adam's mission, however, his demeanor began a downward spiral. Adam's characteristic thirst for discovery and his love of exploration vanished. His walks outside of the residence became few and far between. Adam's psychological deterioration occurred tandem to the corrosion of his physical health, consequences which MiPrep correlated to the hostile temperature and gravitational deficiency of his space environment. It was on this day that Adam initiated his last video communication conference with Space X Mission Control.

08.30.2064

"Welcome to MiPrep," greeted the woman perched on the opposite end of the conference table. Her deep wrinkles and long wiry white hair offset her impossibly bright eyes, a unique mixture of wisdom and vivacity. "I know why I'm here." Eva was surprised by the confidence in her own voice. "Do you really?" the woman retorted, her expression crinkling with

amusement. “I have the file. I know what the corporation did to Adam.” Eva held the woman’s gaze, extracting the metal case from her bag and tossing it onto the desk. The woman laughed. “Of course you have the file. Who do you think sent it to you?” Confusion splintered Eva’s poise. “Why would you choose to make me aware of the corporation’s best obscured tragedy?” The woman’s thin-lipped smile faded, her silvery eyes boring into Eva’s. “My time at Space X is coming to a close. When I chose you as the successor to my position in MiPrep, I needed to ensure that you would never forget this mistake, nor allow for such a catastrophe to be repeated.”

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In a terrifying moment, Adam realized that the entire mission was flawed. He saw his fears flash before his eyes. The friendships he would never relish, the hands he would never hold, and the love he would never cherish loomed at the forefront of his conscience. It wasn't that they had left him here to die, but worse, they had left him here to live alone, worlds and universes apart from the nearest human heart. Faced with this reality, Adam allowed for his own heartbeat to fade into the blackness of empty, solitary space. When human connection was removed from the equation, a fundamental and essential ingredient in the reaction of life was lost. It was a consequential lesson born from unspeakable tragedy. MiPrep had been so painstakingly careful, leaving not one atom out of place. But amid all of the chemistry and chaos, they'd forgotten the most important element of all – the human element.