

The Things That Took Time

A short story by Nooruloyoon Alsoori



The last time Kora lost a game, she laughed so hard that milk came out of her nose.

She was six.

Her father was hiding behind a curtain, his feet plainly visible underneath.

The kitchen smelled of cardamom and warm bread.

Her grandmother was pretending not to know where he was.

“Close your eyes,” her father said.

“Count to twenty.”

Kora pressed her hands over her face.

“One.

Two.

Three.”

At eleven, she forgot what came next.

Her father laughed.

“Take your time, habibti.”

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When she opened her eyes, she was nine, and nobody said that anymore.

A silver dot rested between her eyebrows.

Everyone had one.

They called it the Link.

Think of light, and the room brightened.

Think of breakfast, and the kitchen prepared it.

Think of a question, and the answer arrived before you had finished asking.

Her father had thrown away his phone.

Her mother no longer carried keys.

At school, children sat before empty desks while answers passed silently through their heads.

Every morning, the Link required a ten-second Shield renewal to keep unwanted signals out.

Kora’s mother reminded her to renew it while brushing her hair.

Until her tenth birthday, her parents also received notices about her thoughts.

Once, Kora wondered what would happen if she ran away.

Her mother appeared at her bedroom door before she had decided where to go.

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The first thing Kora missed was being surprised.

For her birthday, the Link discovered what she wanted before she knew she wanted it.

A perfect silver bicycle waited downstairs.

She had been planning to ask for a red one.

But the Link knew she would prefer silver.

Apparently, she did.

The second thing she missed was her father's terrible singing.

Now, when he sang, the Link corrected every note.

The third thing was harder to explain.

She tried explaining it at school.

"I liked finding answers."

Her teacher smiled.

"You still find them."

"No.

They find me."

Several children laughed.

A pale notification appeared above her desk.

Independent processing: below recommended efficiency.

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Kora began keeping things the Link could not finish for her.

A crooked clay bird.

A shoelace she was learning to tie.

A notebook full of sums.

She worked beneath her blanket because her mother worried whenever the parental notices mentioned frustration.

"Why make yourself upset?" her mother asked.

"You have help."

"Because I nearly got it."

“You could have got it immediately.”

Kora could not explain why nearly mattered.

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The first warning came from her grandmother.

She was making the bread she had made every Thursday for forty years.

Then she stopped.

Her hands hovered above the bowl.

“What comes next?”

“Ask your Link,” Kora’s mother said.

Her grandmother did.

The bread came out perfectly.

The following Thursday, she asked again.

By winter, she could no longer begin.

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At school, Kora asked what happened to the things people stopped practising.

“Like muscles,” she said.

“If you never use them.”

“The Link expands your abilities,” her teacher replied.

“But what happens to ours?”

The teacher sent a concern notice home.

That evening, her parents sat beside her.

They were frightened that she was falling behind.

Kora was frightened that everybody else was.

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The hospital announcement arrived on an ordinary Tuesday.

At first, it was called a measurement error.

Then an unexpected adaptation.

Then Link-associated neural atrophy.

Behind the unfamiliar words were scans showing that certain parts of heavily dependent users’ brains were shrinking.

The Link still supplied their answers.
Their results still looked excellent.
The changes had been easy to miss.
Kora's scan showed no sign of the same damage.
A doctor asked her to solve a sum without assistance.
She took a long time.
Nobody interrupted.

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The emergency update began at midnight.
It was meant to restore independent pathways while preserving essential services.
By morning, millions of Links were caught in a restart loop.
The city filled with people waiting for thoughts that would not complete.
At the crossing, a man stared at the dark traffic signal.
In a shop, the owner could not calculate change.
In Kora's kitchen, her father stood before the bread machine.
He touched the dot between his eyebrows.
Nothing happened.
He touched it again.
"Ali?" her mother said.
He turned toward her.
"I know I should do something."
His voice was small.
Kora had never heard it small before.

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They walked to the clinic because nobody could summon a car.
Her father held her hand too tightly.
At the entrance, the registration screens were frozen.
A nurse had found paper but could not remember which questions belonged on it.
People crowded around her, asking the same thing.
When would it come back?

A little boy began to cry.
His father kept tapping his forehead.
Kora crouched beside him.
“Let’s play something.”
“I don’t know how.”
“I’ll show you.”
She covered her eyes.
“One.
Two.
Three.”
He stopped crying.
“Hide,” she whispered.
He slipped behind a chair.
His shoes stuck out.
For the first time that morning, someone laughed.

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Recovery began with small, awkward things.
Paper signs.
Handwritten names.
People helping other people remember.
Kora showed the nurse how she kept columns in her notebook.
An older porter, who had rarely used his Link, helped organise the queue.
Her father sat beside her, ashamed of the blank page in his hands.
“Don’t look,” he said.
She looked anyway.
He was trying to write her name.
The letters leaned into one another.
She placed her hand over his.
“Take your time, Baba.”
He stared at her.
Then he cried.

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The Links returned three days later.

Recovery took much longer.

Some people needed months of rehabilitation.

Some abilities never fully returned.

New settings left questions unanswered until people chose to request help.

Schools put desks back into classrooms.

Children were allowed thoughts their parents could not inspect.

Kora kept her Link.

She used it when she needed it.

She also kept the crooked bird.

One evening, she found her father in the kitchen, trying to make her grandmother's bread.

Flour covered his sleeves.

The first loaf was hard enough to knock against the table.

The second was burnt underneath.

He looked at the machine.

Then at Kora.

"Shall we try once more?"

They ate the third loaf warm.

It was a little uneven.

He sang while cutting it.

He missed almost every note.

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Later, her father hid behind the curtain.

His feet were visible.

Kora closed her eyes.

"One.

Two.

Three."

At eleven, she paused.

From behind the curtain, he waited.

This time, she remembered.