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Dads and Dragons  
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Adult Age Category

For just a moment, think back to your earliest memories. Filter out all the noise of a life spent forming memories through sight or sound or touch or taste or smell. What's left there in the deepest places within you when all other experiences are removed?

For Kennedy Harson, there were three: Mom, Dad, and the blue glow of a television.

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Her parents had met in their first year at college. Dad was a computer science major, and Mom was pre-med whose aspiration of the month at the time was pediatric neurology, but she wasn't ready to limit herself until the time came. She just wanted to help people.

He was a hopeless nerd who said he was planning a career as a technical writer, a bland but safe front he put up for strangers and grandparents and girls he was trying to impress.

By Dad's account, the two of them never should have met in the first place. She was pretty and peppy. He was socially inept and introverted. "I'll never know how I managed to marry so far out of my league," he'd later say.

If she were around to hear it, Mom would roll her eyes and remind him, "that's just because you didn't know that extroverts could be nerds, too." Or, for that matter, that awkward, skinny boys could grow into handsome young men without realizing it. "We did, after all, meet playing *Dungeons and Dragons* in the game club."

They were midway through their sophomore years when they got married, and even though they had planned to delay starting a family until after Mom was done with med school, Kenny was born the December after.

After they got her home, Dad would set a small crib beside him as he finished the last of the semester's coursework and when he was done, he'd cradle her in a bent arm, a controller in his outstretched hands, and he'd talk to her as he played video games. "Did you see that?" He'd ask her as enemy ships exploded around him. And, "thanks for the help, Ken," as he finished some new challenge. "Couldn't have done it without you."

Mom decided to take the following couple of semesters off even though Dad argued it wasn't fair to her. It wasn't. But it would be a long time until she was done with med school, and they needed to pay bills now.

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When Mom did resume school, she often took night classes, leaving Dad to handle bedtime. "Seven o'clock on the dot," she'd remind him, "and she has to stay in bed. Don't let her fall asleep on the couch again."

"She sneaks out," he'd swear.

"Mhm. Don't you want the evening to yourself anyway?"

He didn't. What he wanted was to unwind with a controller in his hand and his daughter at his side as they talked about the new role-playing game he was currently obsessed with.

"Did you see that?" Kenny cried out as her dad's character would climb atop a dragon to deliver a killing blow.

And as Dad would carry her back to her bed after she'd finally drifted off on the couch, he'd whisper to her, "thanks for the help, Ken. Couldn't have done it without you."

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“I picked the wrong specialization,” Mom said after he got sick. “I should have stuck with oncology.”

Dad peeked over his shoulder at Kennedy lying on the couch in front of the TV, another dragon frozen briefly in time behind the pause screen. She wasn't quite snoring, but her breathing was steady and deep. “We caught it early thanks to you, Elise. They say it's a long shot, but I'd probably be dead already if it weren't for you.

At the mere mention of the thought, she collapsed into sobs. “I just want to help you.”

“You are helping me. You and Kennedy both.” He put his arm around her then, and they cried together, their eyes shut so tight against the tears that they didn't see that their daughter was crying too.

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If ever there had been a cause for celebration, Kennedy was certain that Dad coming home was it. But Mom's eyes were swollen with tears, and her lips were dry and chapped despite the thick spit that clung to her teeth as she tried to explain the meaning of the word “hospice.”

They set him up in the living room where it was easier for his care team to get to him and where they felt he'd be most comfortable. He slept a lot, but when he wasn't sleeping, Kennedy would carefully climb up beside him in his bed, and they'd play games together. There's a type of magic in gaming with a loved one, and it wasn't ever long before they were laughing and shouting as they always had. As if he wasn't dying.

When it was her turn to watch and his to play, Dad typically still threw on the dragon game.

“I can’t believe you haven’t finished this one yet,” she said one night. “You’ve been playing it since before I can remember.”

“It’s my favorite! And who says I haven’t finished it?”

She looked up at him from her pillow, which rested against his shoulder, his arm wrapped around her, a controller in his outstretched hands. She was bigger then, nearly ten years old. But she still fit. “Have you?”

“No.” He laughed weakly. “Who knows how many hundreds of hours we’ve poured into it over the years.”

“Does it even *have* an ending?”

“Oh, sure. There’s one last big dragon at the end: the World Eater. I’m at the point where I could go and fight it whenever, but there are still so many side quests left to do.” He went quiet long enough that Kenny almost forgot that they had been talking about it when he said, “so much I still wanted to see.” He handed her the controller then. “Why don’t you play for a bit while I rest my eyes?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to ruin your save.”

Dad’s eyes were closed, and his head was back. “You won’t, but you can play something else if you want.”

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Kennedy was ten when she lost him.

When it happened, a thought occurred to her that, somehow, time should have stopped. The whole world should have slowed down long enough for her and Mom to adjust to the new, cruel reality. But life doesn’t have pause buttons.

If anything, time marched on with more urgency, more frenetic speed than ever

before. Maybe they had been living in the eye of some terrible storm for the past months, and now the winds and the rain and the thunder were hammering down on them from everywhere at once. There were funerals and services and family and friends who offered support or well wishes or shoulders to cry on.

But it was even worse when the storm subsided. The visits stopped and time moved on as if none of it had ever happened. Mom went back to work. Kenny went back to school.

For the first day or two, her classmates stepped on egg shells around her, which she hated. Some of them approached her directly to ask if she was OK (she wasn't) or to tell her how they knew what she was going through (they didn't). After the novelty of her return to school wore off, they didn't really pay her any attention at all, which she also hated if not quite as much.

It wasn't that they were unkind. They just couldn't understand: why she kept to herself at recess; why she didn't speak up in class; why she didn't want to play after school and chose to walk home alone every day instead.

Only Mom understood. She'd come home to find Kenny blank-faced and staring at the TV without watching it or with a book splayed across her chest, unread. Drifting like a ship unmoored.

Mom set aside her own grief to become Kenny's harbor. They cooked together and gamed together and re-watched favorite movies and TV shows. And it was only in the small hours of the night that she let herself come untethered and the waves drag her down.

Before Dad got sick, Mom liked to pick up a late-night shift at the hospital every other week or so to help with emergencies and deliveries. To Kenny, it always seemed unfair to her mom, but Dad explained one day that, even if Mom came home drained and exhausted, those shifts were some of the most important to her. It was her quest.

Along with so many things, Mom's quest had been placed on hold while she had a dying husband and a sad, scared daughter to care for.

Now that he was gone, Mom announced or maybe confessed to Kenny one Friday morning before school that she was planning to work late that night. "I'll be home before you get back from school, and we can spend the afternoon together. It'll just be a few hours after dinner. Is that OK?" Her voice was tangled with guilt and a kind of pleading.

Kenny nodded because she couldn't bring herself to answer in any other way.

Mom's face seemed to brighten, and her shoulders relaxed. "Why don't you start a new game? You haven't played in forever, and it's a weekend."

"Maybe," Kenny said. "It's just not the same." She didn't realize she was crying until a tear fell from her cheek and onto the back of her hand.

Mom had her arms around her then. "I know it isn't." She was crying, too. "I'll see if I can get out of it tonight."

"No," Kenny said, a little more alarmed than she meant. "It's fine. I'll figure something out."

"Maybe you could come with me to work."

The hospital was the last place she wanted to see. "No. I'll wait up for you here. I'll see if I can find something new to play."

Mom held Kenny tight against her.

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As she was halfway out the door, after they had said their goodbyes and Kenny had assured her that she would be fine and it was only for a few hours, Mom suggested over her shoulder, “why don’t you play one of Dad’s old favorites? It might help you feel close to him.”

Kenny didn’t know why, but the suggestion irked her, so she simply nodded again as Mom shut and locked the door.

For a long while, she sat home alone in silence spitefully. Then, when the anger inside her had given way to loneliness, she decided that maybe Mom was right, and she picked up a controller, and powered on her console, unsure what, if anything, she felt like playing.

As the operating system was beginning to boot, the lights in the room flashed dim, and the console and TV powered off once more. She sat in eerie, silent dark for a single breath. As the power came back on, she tossed her controller to the side, giving up on the whole endeavor. It had taken everything she had just to attempt it once, and she wouldn’t do it again. She’d wait in silence until mom came back home for all she cared at this point.

But then a peculiar thing happened. Without any intervention of her own, the console beeped to life, and her controller began to rumble on the couch beside her. The television flashed awake, and Dad’s favorite game lit the screen. A dragon was still frozen behind the pause screen.

She lifted the controller curiously, pondering what had just happened. Maybe the

console had gone into rest mode the night he had passed, and his game had been left in suspension?

If Kennedy was hit then with a sudden realization, it was one that occurred to her just beneath the surface of her consciousness, in that place between the front and back of her mind. Here was a piece of Dad left suspended in time waiting to be resumed. Her thumb hovered over the pause button for a moment, and then she resumed the game.

She had never actually played it before and had only ever watched her dad play, but she was an accomplished gamer in her own right now, and it took only a moment to acclimate to the controls.

She swung her sword at the dragon and connected hard with it. It attacked; she dodged and hit it again. It gave flight, and she loosed a lightning bolt from her left hand. It came crashing down. She leaped upon it, and with a final, downward thrust of her sword, she struck the back of its head. The dragon cried out in pain and unleashed one final breath of fire that soared off vainly into the sky.

“No way! Did you see that?” said a familiar voice.

She felt him before she saw him. The weight of him on the cushion beside her. The warmth of his arm around her. “Dad?”

He didn't look the way she had always imagined ghosts would look. If anything, he looked better than he had in months. His face was no longer gaunt or pale, it was rounder and warm, and his hair was thick and brown. He smiled down at her, his eyes wet, and said nothing. He only pulled her into a tight embrace.

There was a whole world's worth of questions she wanted to ask him and things she wanted to tell him, but she only managed a simple, “how?”

He shrugged. "Do you think we can get in one last game night together? I never did beat that World Eater."

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Mom's shift at the hospital ran late, which gave Kenny and her dad ample time to play. Save for the final quest, Dad had done virtually everything else in the game, but actually getting to the final dragon still took several hours. A few times, she offered the controller to her dad, to which he said only, "no thanks. I just want to watch this time."

At last, they came upon the final boss of the game. It filled the entire screen. So large was it that the scores of dragons they had slain along the way were merely overgrown lizards in retrospect. It roared, and the screen shook, before it launched itself into the air. Not a second later, it descended upon them, and a game over screen appeared. Kenny restored a checkpoint.

This time, she immediately dodged to the left and avoided the attack. She struck out with blade and with magic. The World Eater heaved flames at them, and another game over screen appeared. Kenny restored another checkpoint.

On most of her attempts, she got a little farther only to meet some new, grisly fate. But there were some tries that ended earlier than the ones before it, and one premature failure often quickly led to another.

When she got frustrated, Dad would put a hand on her shoulder and then point out some new tactic: "have you tried your shield there?" Or, "take a step back and heal yourself when the dragon's getting ready to take off." And when all else failed, "pause the game, and take a moment to breathe. Dragons like these aren't meant to be slain on the first attempt."

An unwatched clock ticked past midnight, and, although Kenny didn't know it, her mom had just said goodbye to her patients and coworkers and was preparing to head home.

It was then, at last, that Kenny bested the World Eater. It came crashing to the ground at her character's feet, tearing the earth beneath them asunder and carving a trench into the dirt and grass. It breathed heavily and struggled to get up, and Kenny knew that it was time to strike the finishing blow, save the world, and roll the game's credits.

It was also then that Kennedy Harson knew whatever magic it was that had brought her dad back to her for this last night would end. She pressed the pause button and set the controller down.

Dad didn't say anything at first. He just pulled her closer to him, and she looked up and saw that he was both crying and smiling down at her. "I'm not ready for it to end either," he said. "But I think it's time. You've got a whole life of quests ahead of you still."

She shook her head and then buried it in his shirt. She was sobbing. I just got you back, she wanted to say. Or you can't leave me again. All she could manage was a whimper that sounded like, "not yet."

"Even if you can't see me, I'm always going to be watching. I'm always going to be there in the games you play and the challenges you overcome. I'm always going to be watching and cheering and losing my mind over the incredible things you're doing. I'm just glad I got to sneak out this one time and watch you play." He kissed her head and waited.

Kennedy sat upright, pushed herself to the edge of the couch, and resumed the

game. She destroyed the World Eater, and as the credits rolled, her dad pulled her back into one last hug. “Thanks for the help, Ken. I couldn’t have done it without you.”