LET THEM WIN THE WRONG THING

Most of the advice you'll read about running a game is about how to let the players win. How to pitch the difficulty so they squeak through. How to fudge the die behind the screen so the beloved character lives. How to make sure everyone goes home happy.

I think a lot of that is cowardice dressed up as kindness. The best night I ever ran, the players executed a flawless plan, succeeded at every single thing they attempted, and went home wrecked. Nobody got cheated. That's the whole craft. Here's how I think about it.

THE FIGHT HAS TO BE REAL

This is the rule everything else hangs on, so it comes first: I never cheat them. The odds are honest. The monster does what the monster does. If they out-think it, it dies; if they don't, they bleed. No secret fudging, no rubber-band difficulty, no taking it easy because I feel bad.

You cannot hollow someone out with a hollow fight. The grief only lands if the victory you're about to deny them was a victory worth having. So I give them the best, fairest, most brutal fight I can build. I earn the right to break their hearts by first refusing to break the rules.

LET THEM BUILD THE PLAN THEMSELVES

The most painful agency is the agency they use *fully*, correctly, with everyone nodding around the table, that turns out not to have mattered.

So I don't hand them the plan. I lay out the clues and let them assemble it, and I make sure every step they take is *right*. They read the lore correctly. They draw the correct conclusion. They are not wrong about a single link in the chain. The trap is never a step they got wrong. The trap is the one step nobody ever said out loud: the quiet assumption that solving the puzzle solves the problem. They author that assumption themselves, because that's what heroes do, and I just let them.

> *I'm not withholding the truth. I'm letting them write their own irrelevance, in their own handwriting, and feel proud doing it.*

THE WIN AND THE WORLD ARE TWO DIFFERENT DIALS

Here is the thing most rulebooks never tell you: whether the players *succeed* and whether the story *turns out okay* are independent variables. You can wire them together. You usually should. But you don't have to, and the moment you stop assuming you must, a whole register of feeling opens up.

They can shatter the cursed thing exactly as planned, and the sky keeps falling. They can roll the perfect number, and watch it not be enough. Mechanical triumph and narrative fate, pulled apart and both true at once. A spell that works perfectly and changes nothing is more unsettling than a spell that fizzles. Failure they understand. *Success that doesn't matter* is the one that follows them out to the car.

TAKE COMFORT AWAY EXACTLY WHEN IT WOULD HELP MOST

Comfort is the enemy of weight. If they can always rest, they're never desperate. If healing is infinite, attrition is a number, not a fear. So I let the safety nets exist right up until the moment they'd actually save someone, and then I cut them. No rest from here on. Three potions, no more, and each one tied to a place they loved earlier in the night, so that running out *costs* something more than hit points.

Scarcity isn't me being stingy. Scarcity is me making the situation something they have to *feel* instead of something they can just play through.

DON'T EXPLAIN THE THING IN THE CORNER

I leave question marks in. The shrine nobody understands. The old custom no one quite remembers the reason for. The carving on the door. Modern design wants every mystery to be a puzzle with a solution in the back of the book. I'd rather the players sit with a thing they can't solve. The unsaid is heavier than the said. A world that answers all its own questions is a world you can finish; I want one that keeps a little of itself.

SOME THINGS DON'T GET A STAT BLOCK

The biggest thing in the story (the one that actually ends everything) gets no numbers at all. It can't be fought, because fighting it is a category error, like trying to arm-wrestle a season. If a player insists on swinging, the answer is always the same shape: *the attack lands perfectly, and it does not matter.*

This is the hardest lesson I've learned about running games. Not every force at the table belongs inside the rules. Some are there to be witnessed. And sometimes the only real move left (the dodge that actually works) is to stop running away from the thing and walk straight toward it.

When it's over, I don't do an epilogue. No debrief, no "so how do you think it went." The lights stay low and the room goes quiet and I let the silence be the review.

The best fantasy isn't the one you win. It's the one you earn the right to mourn. Give them a victory worth having, honor every choice they make to get it, and then, in silence, let it cost what it was always going to cost.

I'm running the next one in two weeks. Same rules. Be fair. Be merciless.