

# ASK THE ALEXANDRIAN #4: A PLAGUE OF PATRONS

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[by Justin Alexander - September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021](#)



V. writes:

In the current 5E adventure I'm running, I've attempted to apply many of the concepts I've learned from the Alexandrian... Generally, multiple clues have been available to transition PCs between [nodes](#). Now the players are about to experience a [party scenario](#). One planned event will be a senior member of the faction that players belong to showing up unexpectedly at the feast. That NPC is going to give a specific mission to the players that would push them towards a particular node. Would this be considered overt railroading? Something to absolutely avoid?

I guess my mind is really spinning after having just re-read the node series. I don't remember you mentioning a node structure without multiple entry points to a specific node.

The key thing to understand is that, generally speaking, a node with only one potential point of entry is fragile. That doesn't mean it shouldn't exist, it just means that you - as the adventure designer - should be aware that it's quite possible the PCs won't go to that node. (Because, following the principle of the [Three Clue Rule](#), they either won't find the lead, won't understand the lead, or won't follow the lead.)

The exception to this is a [proactive node](#). These are the nodes that come looking for the PCs. They don't need multiple leads pointing to them (although they *can*) because the PCs don't need to go to them in order for them to enter play.

Scenario hooks, in particular, are often rendered as a proactive node. And a very common form of this, particularly in published adventures, is the job offer: Somebody wants the PCs to do something and they tell them what that is.

This is, of course, that situation you're looking at here.

One thing to note here from a structural viewpoint is that, while the job offer may be proactive, the next step (of taking the job and going to do whatever the patron asks) is theoretically fragile (because you only have one lead; i.e., accepting the job offer).

In actual practice, however, this tends not to be the case: First, you have an NPC literally saying, "Do this," which eliminates most of the ways in which a lead can fail (by the PCs missing it or misinterpreting it), leaving the only fragility the possibility that the PCs will just outright refuse to follow the lead (i.e., turn down the job). And this is comparatively less likely because, in most campaign, scenario hooks are considered something that the players are *expected* to follow, so as long as the players recognize that this job offer is a scenario hook, it becomes much more likely that they'll accept it. Also, as in your current scenario, such job offers often come from organizations or patrons that the PCs have an established relationship with, making it more likely they'll do it for in-character reasons.

Yes, the expectation that the PCs will take a scenario hook when it's offered by the GM is very light [railroading](#). But the "scenario of the week" format in play is quite common and not particularly objectionable, and even in campaigns where that's not the case, in practice explicit/obvious scenario hooks are just treated as having more "weight" than other leads.

With that being said, the advanced technique to understand here is that the patron's job offer — i.e., the thing the patron wants the PCs to do — IS NOT THE SCENARIO.

The scenario is whatever situation (e.g., a collection of nodes) the patron's job offer is pointing the PCs towards.

For example, the patron says, "I'd like you to steal four hundred *cure disease* potions from this Imperial caravan." The PCs might do that. They might also steal the potions and fence them. Or warn the caravan guards and then help them protect the shipment so that it reaches the plague victims in Vilheim safely. Or steal them and redirect them to the poor people in the Cataris district instead of the self-serving 1% in Vilheim. Or take the patron's intel and use it to steal something else from the caravan. Or sell the intel itself. Or... well, lots of things. When you're [designing scenarios instead of plots](#), the possibilities become almost limitless.

It also becomes easier at this point to recognize that the job offer from the patron doesn't have to be the only scenario hook pointing at that caravan, the *cure disease* potions, and/or the plague victims in Vilheim and Cataris.

This moves us towards material I cover more fully in [Juggling Scenario Hooks in the Sandbox](#) and the [Running the Sandbox](#) video, but it obviously removes the theoretical fragility of having the job offer as the only lead pointing the PCs towards the scenario.

(Of course, in the sandbox the players will know that they *aren't* expected to follow every scenario hook. So, paradoxically, it may become more likely that they never go on that caravan raid. On the other hand, that's just fine because, in sandbox, the fallout from them NOT raiding the caravan may be even more interesting than if they had. But I digress.)

Once you have multiple scenario hooks in play, the next design revelation you may have is that these hooks don't all need to point at the same node! For example, the patron's job offer is "raid the caravan" (which points them at the caravan, from which they can learn about where the *cure disease* potions are being sent and why). But the PCs might also have an ally whose mother lives in Cataris and has become sick (leading the PCs to start in Cataris, learn about the plague, and then potentially discover the *cure*

*disease* caravan as a possible solution). Or they pass on the job, the patron hires someone else to hit the caravan, and now a wealthy uncle who lives in Vilheim wants them to track down the culprits and recover the cure.

If you stop thinking in terms of plot, you'll discover that a scenario can often engage the PCs from lots of different angles, which will, in turn, give them lots of meaningful choices about how *they* want to engage with *it*.

The short version is this: No, there's absolutely nothing wrong with the PCs getting job offers. In fact, it would be weird if they didn't. Most PCs are hyper-competent and rapidly accumulate a resume of high-profile accomplishments. They're exactly the sort of people you want solving your problems for you.