

ASK THE ALEXANDRIAN #12: IMPROVISING DATA TRAILS

[by Justin Alexander – February 27th, 2024](#)



SPOILERS FOR DRAGON HEIST

Matu67 asks:

I'm running [Waterdeep: Dragon Heist](#) (Alexandrian remix), and I'm wondering: How do you improvise sources of information?

For example, a faction knows that character X did Y, but the DM hasn't written down the reason why the faction knows this. When the players ask the faction, "How did you come across this piece of info?", what do I say as the DM?

In Dragon Heist, for example, the Cassalanter know that Dalakhar was carrying the Stone of Golorr, and the DM is encouraged to give this information to the PCs if the PCs ally with them. Then the PCs ask, "Hey, Cassalanter, how do you know that?" And then I freeze up.

We can start here by getting down to the most basic ontology of the question:

How do we know things?

In this case, how does a faction in an RPG scenario – like the Cassalanter – know stuff? Where does that information come from?

Well, broadly speaking, they will have agents. (In an espionage campaign like *Dragon Heist* these might be literal secret agents, but generally we just anyone who's a member of the faction or working with the faction.) For a faction to "know" something, it means that these agents will have either witnessed it directly or they'll have learned the information from someone who did.

For example, "How do you know the Potenska Apocrypha can be found in the Ebon Library?"

Either someone saw the book in the Ebon Library themselves, or they've spoken to a scholar / read a reference to the Apocrypha in another book / cast a *commune* spell and been informed by the gods that the book is there.

To forge that connection, start with; Who definitely knows about the thing you're trying to source?

For example, who knows that Dalakhar has the Stone of Golorr? Well, Dalakhar, obviously. But also, since he stole the Stone from Xanathar, members of Xanathar's gang would know.

Who knows that the Potenska Papers are in the Ebon Library? Well... librarians, right? And probably other scholars who have seen it there? (To this general list, you could potentially also add any specific NPCs who you know have visited the Ebon Library.)

At this point, you have two options for creating the data trail.

First: If it's possible the agents could have directly witnessed the information, then problem solved. You're done. (e.g., "When I visited the Ebon Library, I saw the Potenska Papers in their collection.")

You can flesh this out by providing an explanation for why they were there. (e.g., "When I was at the Ebon Library researching a summoning ritual for Demogorgon, I saw the Potenska Papers in their collection.") The great thing is that, in an espionage scenario, you can almost always default to "...because they were spying on them" as the explanation. (e.g., "Our spy in Xanathar's hideout was there because they were spying on Xanathar.")

Second: If agents couldn't have directly witnessed the information, then you just need to connect the agents to the people who do.

In some cases, it will be easier - or more fun! - if you imagine this happening in multiple steps. (For example, X talked to Y and the conversation was overheard by Z. Or the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence intercepted communication between a US Senator and the Lytekkas Corporation, which was scooped up from a vulnerable server during a Mossad operation, and we grabbed it from them because we've got a worm installed in their Tel Aviv data center.)

But you don't usually need to over-complicate it. A single step is usually more than enough.

For example, "We have an informant in Xanathar's gang, and he was sent out as part of a team to find Dalakhar and retrieve the Stone." Or, "One of our agents intercepted written orders that were sent to Xanatharian agents to be on the look out for Dalakhar and to retrieve the Stone he carried." Or, "I hired a Sage of Orthoria to research the Potenska Papers, and they found a reference to a copy that was given to the Ebon Library."

If the players want to dig even deeper - e.g., "Who is this agent?" - an espionage campaign usually gives you the luxury of waving them off. ("Their identity is confidential. I'm sure you can understand that revealing it could potentially put them in danger.") On the other hand, there's often no harm in satisfying their curiosity: If you know who the agent is, great. If not, then it's time to reach for [your list of NPC names](#) and spin somebody up.

This may also be a good point to figure out *why* the players are so insistent about digging into this data trail. (This is a slightly hidden case of [making sure you know the intention of an action before resolving the action](#).) For example, maybe they want to question the Cassalanters' informant; or maybe they just want to make sure they don't accidentally kill them when they raid Xanathar's hideout. Maybe the reason they want access to the original Tel Aviv intercept is because they want to run a data analysis and see if they can identify the location of the IP address the message was originally sent from.

Once you know what they're actually looking for, it becomes a lot easier to aim your improv.

The way to do this, of course, is to simply ask them!

You might be able to do that in character – for example, the Cassalanters ask them why it's so important for them to know the identity of their informant. But, as the GM, you can also just ask the players directly what their goal is.