THE SPECTRUM OF PREP

by Justin Alexander – August 12th, 2021

At the beginning of *Legacy of the Crystal Shard*, there is an encounter with a crag cat. At some length, here is how that encounter is presented:

> These hills are hunting grounds for **crag cats**, a cold-weather breed of tiger that is notorious for hunting humans as prey (a job to which it is uniquely suited thanks to its natural immunity to all forms of detection magic). Normally these predators stalk lone travelers, but the crag cats have recently taken to ambushing even large, well-armed companies due to the growing influence of the Ice Witch. One such creature lies in wait near an outcropping of boulders near the trail that the caravan is passing. It waits until most of the wagons have passed, attacking the last band in the train.
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> Ask the players what part of the train their characters are guarding. In addition, if any of the players have indicated that their characters are watching for danger, allow them to make a DC 20 Wisdom check to notice the crag cat.
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> **If the heroes spot the crag cat, read:**
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> *As the caravan steers around the base of one hill, you notice movement in a nearby outcropping of boulders. Through the flurries of snow, you can make out the form of a great sabertooth cat creeping forward, ready to pounce.*

The encounter begins with a surprise round. Only the crag cat and any characters who succeeded at spotting the cat roll initiative. If a character attacks the crag cat before it acts, the crag cat attempts to target that character when it takes its turn. If the character is out of reach, or if no one attacks the crag cat, it attacks one of the caravan guards instead, hitting automatically and knocking the guard unconscious. In either event, the crag cat's appearance scares a team of nearby draft animals, causing one of the wagons to crash on its side as the beasts attempt to flee.

After the surprise round, have the rest of the characters roll for initiative and continue with the encounter.

If the heroes do not spot the crag cat, read:

As the caravan steers around the base of one hill, you suddenly hear the cream of horses and the shouting of riders coming from the back of the train. Through the snow, you can make out the figure of giant saber-toothed cat looming over a caravan guard, who is weaponless and pinned to the ground. The teamster of a nearby wagon fights to regain control of his panicked horses, but the beasts pull wildly at their harnesses as they attempt to flee, and with a lurch the wagon tips and crashes to the ground.

Starting Locations: Have the players roll for initiative and describe their characters' response to the attack. No tactical map is provided for this encounter, so you will need to use your judgment in deciding whether the players' desired actions are feasible. As a guideline, any characters near the back of the train can close to melee with the crag cat during the first round of combat, while characters in the front of the train must either use ranged attacks or spend a round moving in order to join the melee during the second round of combat. The snowfall is light enough that it does not hamper visibility or ranged attacks.

Meanwhile, Beorne Steelstrike, Helda Silverstream, and the other three caravan guards try to calm the animals while keeping an eye out for more cats.

Crag Cat Tactics: If ever on the crag cat's turn it has no one engaging it in melee, it performs a coup de grace and kills the fallen guard. The creature then attempts to drag the body back to the outcropping of boulders. Otherwise, the crag cat stands its ground, attacking anyone who engages it in melee. It shows no interest in attacking the draft animals or any non-humanoid prey, and prefers to target small or lightly armored foes. Once reduced to a quarter of its hit points, the crag cat attempts to flee.

So that's one way of prepping this encounter.

Here's a different way of prepping the same encounter:

A **crag cat** attacks the caravan.

… that's it.

ON THE SPECTRUM

To be clear, what I'm saying is that BOTH of these encounters – despite the radically different approaches to prep – can ultimately play out in exactly the same way at the gaming table. In fact, these are not different encounters at all. They are the SAME encounter, prepped in different ways.

Which one would you rather prep?

Which one would you rather run at the table?

In thinking about these questions, however, we should recognize that this is not a dichotomy. These two versions of the crag cat encounter exist on extreme opposite ends of a spectrum of prep, ranging from *lots* of details being laid down on the page to virtually no details being prepped. And the latter, let us say "minimalist," version of the encounter is one which can only come fully and smoothly to life in the hands of an experienced GM.

To be clear, while my own predilections are usually closer to the minimalist approach, it's not actually how I would typically prep this encounter. For example, a tool I'd like in my prep notes would be the crag cat's stat block, so that I'd have that information at my fingertips while running the encounter.

That's really what this is about: What information do you need/want to have when you're running your prep?

As such, this is a practical example of one of the central principles of *Smart Prep*: Don't duplicate in your prep what you can improvise at the table.

The reason the minimalist presentation of the crag cat encounter can work is because so much of the lengthier presentation can be trivially intuited by a GM who is actively playing the crag cat at the table.

- "The crag cat will attempt to ambush the caravan." This seems like essential framing, but answering the questions, "How would this encounter start?" or, more specifically, "How would a crag cat choose to attack?" is clearly something a GM can do during play. (And the nature of the crag cat likely to suggest an ambush approach.)
- "The encounter begins with a surprise round." This is simply a reminder of how the mechanics of the game work. Nothing wrong with this. If you're still learning the rules of a game and need mechanical reminders, it's a great idea to put them in your prep notes. But obviously an experienced GM who has learned these rules wouldn't need to repeat them in their prep notes.
- "If ever on the crag cat's turn it has no one engaging it in melee, it performs a coup de grace and kills the fallen guard." This is a tactical option. These can, once again, be useful, but are obviously not needed in order to run an encounter. (For the same reason that, for example, the players don't need a list of tactical options before going into combat: The GM can actively play their NPCs the same way that the players actively play their PCs.)
- "The crag cat's appearance scares a team of nearby draft animals, causing one of the wagons to crash on its side as the beasts attempt to flee." This is a cool idea for something that could happen during the encounter. Such cool ideas can obviously be improvised, but jotting down particularly cool ideas that occur to you during prep can make a lot of sense.

And so forth.

Something else I talk about in *Smart Prep* is in the hierarchy of reference: The rules you know and what you can effectively improvise will change over time, depending on both circumstance and your level of skill. Which means that what you need to prep and put into your notes will *also* change over time.

For example, if you're running D&D for the first time, maybe you need to remind yourself how surprise works:

> **Surprise**. Wisdom (Perception) vs. Dexterity (Stealth). Surprised characters can't move, take action, or take reaction until end of 1st turn. (Determine individually, not by group.)

Later you've mastered the rules for stealth and some other aspects of surprise, but you're always forgetting exactly what a surprised character can and cannot do. So the next crag cat-like encounter you run includes a much shorter note:

> **Surprised** = No move, action, reaction.

And then, eventually, you realize that you've learned this rule, too, and you no longer need to include that reminder in your crag cat encounters.

The same principle applies more abstractly to other facets of prep, too. Maybe you struggle to describe battlefields that aren't just featureless plains, so it makes sense to fully prep what the encounter area looks like. Later you may find you only need to jot down one or two ideas.

(Of course, there are also other factors to identifying high-value prep. For example, if you're using a virtual tabletop with battlemaps, you'll obviously want to prep the encounter area for that. You're generally not going to be able to improvise that in the middle of a session.)

ADD WHAT YOU NEED

Even as we consciously choose to avoid over-prepping and move towards the minimalist end of the spectrum of prep, I think there's still a temptation to start with EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW. That in order to prep an encounter, for example, you must start by fully actualizing the encounter and then identify which elements of that completely realized encounter need to be written down as some kind of mnemonic for remembering the rest of it.

This can seem super-logical, in particular, if you're already over-prepping: You look what you typically do and think, "What can I get rid of?

What I'd suggest is that you may be better off starting with nothing more than, "A **crag cat** attacks the caravan," and then really trying to focus exclusively on the high-value information that it's useful to add.

Often even the element you're adding doesn't have to be fully fleshed out. You only need to take the idea to the point where your improvisation can bring it to life. I've found that using bullet points can be a great way of keeping your thoughts brief. (Plus it often makes it easier to find and use the information during play.)

For example:

> **Crag Cat Ambush**:
>
> - Frightens draft animals.
> - Attacks unarmored caravan members first.
> - Drags first dead foe away to eat.

Each of these is a distinct idea, but you can also think of each as a seed that will grow to fruition when you plant it into the game during actual play.

Something to note here (and which can almost be used as a check to see whether or not you're prepping too much) is that, because each idea is waiting to discover its final form during actual play, you have much greater flexibility in how each idea can be used (and, as a result, what its final form will be).

For example, consider the idea that the crag cat "frightens draft animals." This might play out with the crag cat causing a specific animal to panic and tip over a wagon (as described in the heavily prepped version of this encounter). But it might also cause an animal to panic and throw a PC. Or panic and race off across the icy tundra. You could even reach in and grab this idea when the PCs make their Wisdom (Perception) checks: On a success, you might describe that as them noticing that their axebeak has gotten suddenly skittish, causing them to look up in time to spot the crag cat getting ready to pounce. Or on a near miss, you might describe a [partial failure](#) by simply mentioning that the axebeak has gotten skittish (leaving to the players to try to figure out what might be wrong).

Not only does this result in varied outcomes, but, as we've seen here, it often means that a single idea can be used *multiple* times to different effect.

In other words, as you begin experimenting with minimalist prep, you'll probably find that you're also naturally moving away from specific, pre-scripted ideas and towards fun toys that can be used in lots of different ways to respond to the evolving situation that develops at your table during actual play.