

The horn's blast hit Jon's chest, and fifty men surged forward in a wave of steel and fury. His first breath tasted of dust kicked up by a hundred boots, grit coating his tongue as bodies crashed together in the center of the field. Jon held back, letting the eager fools spend their strength on each other while he circled the edge of chaos like a wolf stalking sheep.

His sword arm already ached—not from fighting, but from holding it ready, muscles coiled tight as bowstrings. Sweat gathered beneath his helm despite the morning cool, trickling down his temple in a maddening path he couldn't wipe away.

A hedge knight in rust-spotted mail lunged at him from the left, more enthusiasm than skill in his wild swing. Jon's body moved before his mind caught up—Ser Rodrik's voice echoing from a thousand morning drills. *Parry, step, counter.* His blade caught the knight's poorly balanced strike and redirected it, sending the man stumbling past. Jon's pommel found the back of his helm with a dull clang. The knight dropped, and Jon was already moving, not waiting to see if he'd rise.

The melee was a living thing, breathing and shifting, alliances forming and dissolving in heartbeats. Three Reach knights had cornered a Riverlander against the barrier, taking turns battering his guard until his shield arm dropped and a mace found his ribs. The crack carried even over the din of combat.

"Behind you, Snow!"

Jon spun, bringing his blade up just as another fighter's sword crashed down. The impact jarred through his arms, rattling teeth. This one knew his business—a scarred sellsword by his mismatched armor, pressing forward with short, economical strikes that gave Jon no room to breathe. Their blades locked at the hilts, and Jon could smell the wine on the man's breath, see the calculation in his eyes.

"Heard about you," the sellsword grunted, trying to force Jon's blade down. "Stark's bastard who thinks he's—"

Jon's knee drove into his thigh, buckling his stance. The man's words became a wheeze as Jon's crossguard caught his jaw, spinning him into the dirt. No time for clever words. Save your breath for breathing—another of Ser Rodrik's lessons.

Through the press of bodies, Jon glimpsed Loras, his white armor somehow still pristine as he danced between two opponents, making it look effortless. Further across the field, a space had opened—fighters flowing away from something like water from oil. The Mountain. Even at distance, Ser Gregor made other men look like children, his massive sword carving arcs that no one dared enter.

Jon's chest burned, and they were barely minutes into this. He forced himself to breathe steady, measuring each intake. The eager ones would tire first, then the angry ones. Patience would kill more men today than steel.

A Stormlander with a war hammer came at him with an overhead strike that would've crushed Jon's skull like an egg. Jon sidestepped, feeling wind from the weapon's passage, and put his blade through the gap under the man's arm where the plates didn't quite meet. Not deep—just enough to make him drop the hammer and yield.

"You fight like you're afraid to get dirty," someone called out.

Jon turned to find Thoros of Myr grinning at him through his wild beard, his sword wreathed in flames that made the air shimmer. "Pretty footwork won't save you from everything, boy."

"Seems to be working so far," Jon replied, settling into his stance.

"Aye, but you're thinking too much." Thoros feinted left, and Jon's body wanted to follow the flame more than the blade. "That'll get you killed when you meet someone who doesn't think at all."

They exchanged a flurry of strikes, Jon's plain steel ringing against Thoros's burning blade. The heat was oppressive this close, making Jon's eyes water. But fire was just another distraction, and underneath it, Thoros fought like any other man—favoring his right side, dropping his shoulder before each thrust.

Jon caught Thoros's next swing on his forte, stepped inside his reach, and hammered his pommel into the red priest's temple. Thoros staggered, his flaming sword guttering as he fell to one knee.

"Yield," Thoros gasped, laughing even as blood ran from his scalp. "Seven hells, boy, you hit harder than you look."

Jon helped him stand, earning scattered applause from the crowd. His arms trembled slightly—fatigue already gnawing at his muscles. The field had thinned now, maybe twenty men still standing, and Jon could feel eyes on him. Calculating. Measuring.

That's when he saw Beric Dondarrion approaching through the carnage, his sword blazing even brighter than Thoros's had, and Jon's mouth went dry as old paper. The Lightning Lord moved like he had all the time in the world, stepping over groaning bodies that squires were carrying away.

"Jon Snow," Beric called out, his voice carrying despite the din. "I've been hoping we'd meet."

"Lord Beric," Jon acknowledged, adjusting his grip on his sword. His palms were slick inside his gauntlets, leather chafing against skin rubbed raw.

"Just Beric here." The Lightning Lord's scarred face held something between a smile and grimace. "In the melee, titles matter less than steel. Though I confess, I've been curious about Ned Stark's bastard who fights like he was born to it."

"Curiosity's dangerous in a melee," Jon said, circling left to keep the sun from his eyes. His right shoulder throbbed where an earlier blow had found the gap in his pauldron—not serious, but enough to make each movement sing with small pain.

"Everything worthwhile is dangerous." Beric's blade carved a lazy arc through the air, flames streaming like water. "Tell me, Snow—why do you fight?"

"Because I'm here." Jon's answer came without thought, honest as instinct.

Beric laughed, looking amused. "A practical answer. I fight because I must. Because something drives me forward even when I'd rather rest." His expression darkened. "We're all driven by something, aren't we? Duty, honor, survival..."

He attacked mid-sentence, the burning blade whistling through space where Jon's head had been. Jon's body reacted—duck, pivot, parry—but the heat washed over him like opening a forge door. His counter-strike met air as Beric flowed away, already reversing his swing.

Their blades met with a shriek of steel and shower of sparks. The impact traveled up Jon's arms like lightning, and he understood why they called Beric the Lightning Lord. The man didn't just carry a flaming sword—he fought like a storm given form, strikes coming from unexpected angles, no pattern to follow.

Jon gave ground, boots sliding through churned mud and worse things. A corpse's outstretched arm nearly tripped him, and Beric pressed the advantage, his blade leaving trails of fire in the air. Jon's world narrowed to the burning steel—block, deflect, dodge. The flames were hypnotic, drawing the eye when he needed to watch Beric's body, read the telegraph of his shoulders and hips.

*Stop watching the fire*, he told himself, but telling and doing were different beasts when that blade passed close enough to singe his small beard.

Beric's style was all flourish and misdirection, spinning his blade in patterns that belonged in a mummer's show. But beneath the spectacle lay real skill—each theatrical move flowed into genuine attacks, using the flame's distraction to hide killing strokes.

Jon's legs burned now. His breath came in gasps that the helm turned stifling. Beric seemed tireless, pressing forward with relentless pressure. Another exchange of blows, and Jon's guard dropped a fraction too low. Beric's burning blade scored across his ribs, not penetrating armor but leaving a line of heated metal that made Jon hiss through clenched teeth.

"You're fighting his fight," Jon heard in his memory—Ser Rodrik's voice from years past, teaching him and Robb in Winterfell's yard. "When your opponent controls the dance, change the music."

Jon stopped retreating. When Beric's next flourish began—a spinning overhead strike more suited to execution than combat—Jon stepped inside the arc. The proximity to the flames made

his eyes stream, but he was too close for Beric's longer blade to find purchase. Jon's pommel struck Beric's wrist, his knee found the lord's thigh, and suddenly the Lightning Lord was stumbling backward.

Jon pressed, abandoning finesse for brutality. Short, hammering blows that gave Beric no space for his theatrical style. Their blades locked at the hilts, and Jon could see his own reflection in Beric's eyes—dirt-streaked, blood on his chin from a split lip he didn't remember getting.

"Interesting," Beric gasped, straining against Jon's pressure. "You fight like two different men."

"Maybe I am," Jon grunted, then headbutted him.

The impact rang through Jon's skull like a bell, but Beric got the worst of it. He staggered, guard dropping, and Jon's blade found his shoulder where pauldron met breastplate. Not deep—tournament rules—but enough to draw blood and a sharp cry.

Beric's sword tumbled from nerveless fingers, flames dying as it hit the mud. He dropped to one knee, hand pressed to his shoulder, but his eyes held no anger—only assessment.

"I yield," he said clearly, then quieter, meant for Jon alone: "The night is dark, but some monsters walk in daylight. Be careful which shadows you trust, Jon Snow."

Jon offered his hand, pulling Beric to his feet. The crowd's approval washed over them, but Jon barely heard it. His entire body was one vast ache, sweat stinging his eyes, blood copper on his tongue. He'd bitten his cheek during the headbutt, and now it throbbed in time with his pulse.

"What monsters?" Jon asked, but Beric was already walking away, cradling his wounded shoulder.

Jon turned back to the melee, trying to count standing fighters through vision that swam slightly. Maybe a dozen left. His legs trembled, and he locked his knees to keep from showing weakness. Breathe. Just breathe. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

That's when he saw the path of destruction cutting through the field's center. Bodies lay twisted at wrong angles, some moving weakly, others still as stone. At the path's end stood Ser Gregor Clegane, casually backhanding a knight who'd had the misfortune of coming too close. The man flew several feet before landing in a heap that didn't rise.

The Mountain's head turned, scanning the field like a predator seeking prey. When his gaze found Jon, he went still. Even through the narrow slit of his helm, Jon could see those eyes—flat and empty as a corpse's, holding nothing that could be called human.

Jon's hand tightened on his sword until his knuckles ached. The Mountain began walking toward him, each step deliberate as an executioner's, and Jon knew with cold certainty that this wasn't about winning anymore.

This was about surviving.

The space between them might have been fifty yards, but it felt like nothing at all. Jon watched the Mountain begin his approach, and the other fighters seemed to sense what was coming. They peeled away like flesh from bone, creating a clear path between predator and prey. Nobody wanted to be collateral damage when titans clashed. Not even Loras.

Jon's breath came shallow and quick, his body already screaming from the earlier fights. His sword arm trembled—just slightly, but enough that he had to adjust his grip to hide it. The smart thing would be to yield now, before those dead eyes got any closer. Take the loss, keep his limbs, live to fight another day.

But Arya was watching. Sansa. Father. The whole damned court. He had shown himself to be a talented knight. He was able to go toe to toe with Ser Jaime in Winterfell, even if Ser Jaime was not giving it all, and he was able to hold his own against him in King's Landing. He. The bastard was able to do that. If he turned away now, if he surrendered, then what was he anymore? Less than a bastard...

And somewhere in the royal box, Cersei Lannister would be smiling.

The Mountain's stride never changed pace—not hurried, not slow. Inevitable. Other men might have shouted challenges or threats. Gregor Clegane didn't need words. His presence was threat enough, three hundred pounds of armored death crossing the field like a siege engine given legs.

Twenty yards now. Jon could see details—the scratches on Gregor's armor from men who'd died trying, the way his massive sword rested on his shoulder like it weighed nothing. Could see those eyes more clearly too, and wished he couldn't. There was nothing there to reason with, nothing to appeal to. Just a vast, hollow emptiness where a soul should be.

Jon rolled his shoulders, trying to loosen muscles gone tight as bow strings. His earlier opponents had been men playing at war. This was different. This was facing down an avalanche and knowing you couldn't run.

Ten yards. Close enough that Jon could hear the Mountain's breathing—steady, unbothered, like a man out for a morning walk. Close enough to smell death clinging to him like perfume.

Jon shifted his stance, weight on his back foot, ready to move in any direction. His mouth had gone dry as sand, but he forced himself to speak, if only to prove he still could.

"Ser Gregor."

The Mountain didn't respond. Didn't slow. Didn't acknowledge Jon had spoken at all.

Five yards.

Jon's every instinct screamed at him to run, to yield, to do anything but stand there waiting for death to arrive. But his feet remained planted, sword raised, playing out a scene that could only end one way.

The Mountain stopped just outside sword range, and for one heartbeat that stretched like eternity, they simply looked at each other.

Then, without any warning, without shifting his weight or dropping his shoulder or giving any tell at all, the Mountain struck.

The Mountain's first swing came without warning—no stance, no tell, just eight feet of steel carving through air where Jon's chest had been. The blade hit earth with a sound like thunder, sending clods of mud and grass flying. Jon's dodge had been pure instinct, his body jerking backward before his mind registered danger. A heartbeat slower and he'd be in two pieces, steaming in the morning sun.

Gregor Clegane straightened with the casual ease of a man who'd missed swatting a fly, not attempting murder.

Jon circled left, his legs already trembling from earlier fights. Each step squelched in mud churned to paste by dozens of boots. His sword felt inadequate as a child's toy against the Mountain's massive blade—castle-forged steel that could shear through mail like parchment.

Test him. Find the rhythm. Jon darted in, a quick thrust toward Gregor's knee. His blade struck true, a perfect hit that should have hamstrung any man. The point skittered off plate armor thick as Jon's fist, leaving barely a scratch. The Mountain's counter came faster than something that size should move—a horizontal cut that Jon ducked under, feeling wind ruffle his hair through his helm.

"You're quicker than the others," Gregor rumbled, his voice like grinding millstones. "Makes it more interesting."

Jon didn't waste breath replying. His chest already burned, each intake like swallowing coals. Strike and move. He landed three more hits—hip, elbow, the gap behind the knee—perfect strikes that would have crippled normal men. The Mountain didn't even grunt. Just kept coming, inexorable as winter.

Another massive overhand chop. Jon sidestepped, but his boot found a corpse's outstretched arm. His ankle turned, balance failing for one critical instant. The Mountain's blade adjusted mid-swing. Jon threw himself sideways, hit the ground hard, shoulder screaming as he rolled through mud and blood and worse things.

Get up. Get up. GET UP.

He found his feet as the Mountain's blade split the earth where he'd been. Jon's counter-strike caught Gregor across the back, the best hit yet, right where the armor plates separated. Any

other man would be on his knees, spine severed. The Mountain just turned, backhand already swinging.

Jon got his blade up, caught the blow on his forte. The impact was like being hit by a battering ram. His arms went numb to the shoulders, sword torn from nerveless fingers. He stumbled backward, tripped over something—someone's helmet, rolling free from its owner—and went down again.

The Mountain loomed above him, massive blade rising for the killing stroke. Time stretched like molten glass. Jon could see everything with terrible clarity—the notches in Gregor's blade from other men's bones, the dent in his breastplate where someone had died trying, a fly crawling across the eye-slit of a corpse three feet away.

*Move, you fool.*

Jon rolled as the blade came down, felt the wind of its passage, the tremor through the ground as it bit deep into earth. He kept rolling, grabbed a discarded shield—too heavy, wrong balance—and brought it up just as the Mountain's next strike fell. The shield exploded into splinters, but it bought Jon a heartbeat to find his feet, snatch a dead man's sword.

This blade was different—heavier, poorly balanced, grip sticky with its previous owner's blood. Didn't matter. Steel was steel.

"Running won't save you," Gregor said, advancing like a giant. Not rushed, not angry. Just certain.

Jon backed away, trying to catch his breath. His ribs felt like they'd been used for kindling, each intake a fresh agony. Think. THINK. Can't match his strength. Can't outlast him—the Mountain seemed no more tired than when they'd started. Had to be smarter. Had to—

A corpse at his feet groaned, still alive. Jon stepped over him without looking, but his heel caught on the man's gorget. His weight shifted wrong just as the Mountain struck again—not a killing blow but a testing one, probing Jon's defenses.

Jon parried, but the force drove him to one knee. Their blades locked, and Jon found himself staring up into those empty eyes.

"All that honor. Makes you predictable."

Jon's knee was sinking into the mud. His back bent under the pressure. In another heartbeat, his guard would break and that massive blade would split him crown to groin.

*When strength fails, use their strength against them.* Ser Rodrik's voice, teaching him and Robb how smaller fighters could survive larger ones.

Jon stopped resisting. Let his guard collapse, fell backward. The Mountain's blade, meeting no resistance, drove into the ground with all Gregor's strength behind it. For one precious instant, the Mountain was overextended, weight forward, blade trapped.

Jon's boot found Gregor's knee—not to injure through that armor, but to push himself clear. He scrambled up, grabbed a handful of mud and flung it at the Mountain's face. Futile—the helm blocked it—but it bought another heartbeat to move.

"Clever," Gregor acknowledged, wrenching his blade free with terrifying ease. "But clever won't save you either."

Jon's makeshift sword felt heavier with each passing second. His shoulders burned, his grip weakening. Sweat ran into his eyes, salt and sting blurring his vision. The Mountain kept coming, each strike precise and devastating.

Jon gave ground, using the field's detritus as obstacles—corpses to slow pursuit, discarded weapons to force Gregor to adjust his footwork. But he was running out of space, out of strength, out of options.

A sideways cut nearly took Jon's head. He ducked, but not quite fast enough. The blade caught his helm, sent it spinning away in a spray of leather straps and bent metal. Blood ran from a gash above his eyebrow—when had that happened?—turning half the world red.

The Mountain paused, tilting his head like a curious dog. "There you are. I can see your fear now."

Jon spat blood. "All you're seeing is your death approaching."

His words made Gregor laugh. "Good. Die defiant. It's better that way."

The Mountain struck again, and this time Jon wasn't fast enough. The flat of the blade—not the edge, or he'd be dead—caught his shoulder. Jon heard more than felt something break. The impact lifted him off his feet, sent him spinning through air that turned to stars and darkness.

He hit the ground hard, couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Get up, his body screamed, but his limbs wouldn't cooperate. Through the red haze, he saw the Mountain approaching for the killing blow.

Jon's hand found his belt. Found the thing he'd hidden there. Just a dagger—thin as a letter opener, meant for desperate moments.

This seemed to qualify.

The world swam in and out of focus as Jon forced himself to his knees. Blood ran into his left eye from the gash in his brow, turning half the world crimson. His right shoulder was on fire—something definitely broken there, maybe the collarbone, maybe worse. Each breath felt

like drowning in reverse, his ribs grinding against each other in ways that made his stomach revolt.

The Mountain stood over him, taking his time. Why rush when your prey couldn't run?

"Stay down, boy," someone shouted from the crowd. Jon couldn't tell who. The voices all blurred together—some calling for blood, others for mercy. He caught a glimpse of the royal box through his good eye. Cersei leaned forward, her beautiful face alight with satisfaction. Beside her, King Robert looked troubled, wine cup forgotten.

Jon's searching fingers found a broken spear haft. He grabbed it, used it to push himself upright. His legs shook like a newborn colt's, but they held. Barely.

"Still fighting?" The Mountain sounded almost approving. "Most men would be begging by now."

"I'm not most men," Jon gasped, though the words came out more wheeze than defiance.

"No," Gregor agreed. "You'll die better than most."

The Mountain swung again—lazy, almost casual. Jon couldn't dodge, could barely stand, but he could redirect. Let the massive blade slide along the spear haft, using Gregor's own force to spin himself aside. The movement sent lightning through his shoulder, and he bit through his lip to keep from screaming.

Think. THINK. Can't win straight up. Can't run. Can't outlast him. But the Mountain was armored like a fortress—all that weight, all that metal. Had to be gaps. Had to be weaknesses.

Jon circled, stumbling more than stepping, keeping the broken spear between them like a talisman. His left hand fumbled at his belt, finding the thin dagger hidden there. No good against armor, but maybe...

"JON!" Arya's voice cut through everything else, high and terrified. He caught a glimpse of her in the stands, Sansa holding her back from climbing over the barrier. Their father stood rigid beside them, his face carved from stone, knuckles white where he gripped the railing.

The distraction cost him. The Mountain's blade came from nowhere, caught the spear haft, shattered it like kindling. The follow-through—just the flat again, toying with him—hammered into Jon's ribs. He felt pain in his chest.

Jon hit the ground again, rolled through instinct more than intention. The Mountain's blade struck where he'd been, so close Jon felt chips of stone pepper his face. He kept rolling, came up on one knee, fell immediately when his body refused to cooperate.

"STAY DOWN!" That was Lord Stark, command and plea wrapped in two words.

Jon spat blood, forced himself to stand. The Mountain was right there, close enough Jon could see his own reflection in the polished breastplate—a broken thing, covered in mud and gore.

"You have heart," Gregor said, raising his blade for what would surely be the final strike. "I'll make it quick."

The blade came down like judgment. Jon didn't try to dodge—couldn't anymore. Instead, he stepped forward, inside the arc. His body screamed in protest, ribs grinding, shoulder blazing, but he moved. The Mountain's blade passed behind him, Gregor's arms extended, body open for one crucial instant.

Jon's left hand came up, the thin dagger driving toward the only gap he could reach—the eye slit of Gregor's helm. The Mountain saw it coming, started to turn his head, but momentum worked against him for once. Three hundred pounds of armor couldn't change direction instantly.

The dagger went in with surprisingly little resistance. Through the slit, into the eye, deep into whatever lurked behind. Jon felt it catch on bone, twisted hard, drove it deeper.

The Mountain's scream was inhuman. Pure, distilled fury that something so small had dared to wound him.

Gregor's left hand swung wildly, caught Jon across the chest. The world exploded into stars and darkness. Jon flew backward, finally losing his grip on the dagger, hit the ground in a sprawl of broken limbs. He couldn't see—blood in both eyes now. Could hardly breathe.

Through the roar in his ears, he heard the Mountain still screaming. Heard steel hitting earth with wild abandon. Heard other voices—officials, knights, someone shouting for the Kingsguard.

"ENOUGH!" Robert's voice, thunderous with royal authority. "SEPARATE THEM! NOW!"

Jon tried to rise, managed to get to his elbows before his body simply refused. Through the blood and blurred vision, he saw shapes converging on the Mountain—five, six men trying to restrain him. Gregor's helm had been torn off, and Jon could see his work—blood streaming from the ruined socket where his right eye had been, the dagger's hilt still protruding like an accusation.

"Hold him! HOLD HIM!" Someone in white—Ser Barristan maybe.

Jon felt hands on him—gentler, helping rather than restraining. Loras's voice in his ear: "Stop trying to stand, you fool. You're done. You survived."

Survived. Not won. Just survived.

The crowd's noise had become something animal—part horror, part bloodlust, all chaos. Jon caught fragments through the haze: "—never seen anything—" "—Mountain's eye—" "—should be dead—" "—mad, completely mad—"

"Jon." His father's voice, close and desperate. Lord Stark's face swam into focus, gray eyes wide with something between pride and terror. "Don't move. The maesters are coming."

Jon tried to speak, coughed blood instead. His body felt distant, like it belonged to someone else. The pain was still there but muffled, as if wrapped in wool. Shock, some distant part of his mind supplied. The body's mercy when it had taken too much.

Through fading vision, he saw the Mountain being dragged away, still thrashing, blood painting his face into a demon's mask. Saw Arya break free from Sansa, running toward him with tears streaming down her face.

The last thing Jon heard before darkness took him was the Mountain's voice, raw and horrible:

"I'LL KILL HIM! I'LL KILL THE BASTARD! HIS EYES! I'LL TAKE BOTH HIS EYES!"

Then nothing. Just the weight of his body against the earth, the copper taste of blood, and the strange peace that comes when fighting ends and all that's left is aftermath. He'd survived. Somehow, impossibly, he'd survived.

But as consciousness faded, Jon wondered if survival and victory were really so different from defeat when you were lying broken in the mud, tasting your own blood, listening to a monster promise your death.

The darkness, when it finally came, was almost a mercy.