

Soldier

It was time for a change. After suffering three knockdowns and getting the worst of the slugfest that was the first nine rounds, Terry “Devil” Parvanian entertained no delusions of securing a win on points. Yet a knockout seemed a still greater impossibility considering his age. Indeed, he was surprised his thirty-year-old figure, wizened far beyond that number by gruelling training and countless injuries, had lasted ’til the end of the ninth against the powerful young contender.

Through the haze of battle fatigue, Terry regarded the enemy. Sprawled nonchalantly on a stool in his corner of the ring, the arrogant young buck grinned insolently at him. And why not? Castor Asola was an undefeated twenty-one year old boxing prodigy with the World Title in his sights and the flames of youth burning his eyeballs.... Insensible heartsick maidens threw themselves at his ever-advancing feet, comatose KO’ed opponents lay trailing in his wake.

Castor sensed impending victory, and with it, the winner’s right to challenge Dewan Bradley, the world champ himself, in a fight for the ages with the title on the line.

Pure sensation enveloped both fighters. They *felt* as much as heard the roar of the crowd, a teeming throng of humanity that glittered, diamond-like, with photo flashes, whose presence sanctioned slaughter as sport. Fans laughed and cheered, made bets, screamed, shouted advice and encouragement. Bloodlust electrified the stadium awaiting, in sweaty anticipation, the commencement of the tenth.

Asola drew in the heady air like smoke from a crack pipe. He lived for these fights, these few precious, glorious moments.

Terrence Parvanian felt similarly on the surface. It was always so in a fight, the atmosphere sweeping one up in a flood of emotion. Yet for Terry the match was life or death. He

needed the Bradley fight. Needed money, fame and connections. He saw through the glitz and glamour that distracted from reality. They were two gladiators in the colosseum. Terry had known it ever since he killed Klitschenko.

Had it been three years already? He had the Russian outclassed and on the ropes by the end of the seventh, back when Terry the beast still whirled and raged. Terry Parvanian, “The Tasmanian Devil,” they’d called him. If only they knew. He was no animal—he fought for so much more than mere survival. The reason he tolerated every agonizing second of training, each day of half-life—wasted grinding, studying old fight videos with burning sleepless eyes, every weightlifting session spent tearing and rebuilding muscle—Terry soldiered through for four simple reasons: Laura. Tess, Lyra and Nate. His wife, children. Family. They were worth it.

His opponent rose from each knockdown in futile desperation. At first Terry could not understand, until he noticed Klitschenko staring off at a woman with children, kids too young to be at a fight. They seemed on or past the verge of tears, and Terry knew him and Klitschenko to be the same man.

Some instinctually human part of Terry wanted to throw the fight. Yet he had a family to feed as well, debts of his own—and no margin at all for loss.

Klitschenko’s eighth round was mercifully short. For his watching family’s sake Terry assassinated him with silent efficiency. A final, terrible hit exploded upon Klitschenko’s face, and he fell to the canvas.

The ref raised Terry’s arm, announcing his victory, and the crowd cheered. In a way, that was the worst, when he had to stand alone in the world, as they celebrated him.

When the physician's fruitless efforts to revive Klitchenko drew everyone's attention away, it was almost a relief. Careless of their hypocrisy, of his own, Terry dived into the sudden scummy ocean of concern, numbly grateful for company in the dark.

He looked to Klitchenko's wife, hoping for anger, for blame. Worse, he found sadness: profound, unfathomable. She was a boxer's wife. She understood him better than anyone.

No one ever *did* blame him outright, but after that there was no more Terry Tasmania. They called him Devil. He prohibited his family from attending his fights, following on TV, radio, struck forever after with an unremitting fear of falling before their eyes and never rising.

"*Clang,*" went the bell, and the Devil rose to his work. He knew then that it was him or Asola. He had so much to lose that it could be no other way: victory... or death. For he was no boxer fighting for sport, but a soldier who killed to protect.