

OCTOBER 1, 1975

QUEZON CITY, PHILIPPINES

11:51 A.M.

Muhammad Ali feels like he's dying.

The heavyweight champion of the world sits on a small stool, looking across the ring at his battered adversary, Smokin' Joe Frazier. Both fighters have been through a brutal fourteen rounds, forty-two minutes of combat. The savagery is so intense that blood has splattered spectators in the front row—among them, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, Imelda. The so-called Thrilla in Manila has become a “death match.”*

The Araneta Coliseum, where the fight is taking place, is on fire—the temperature in the building is well above one hundred degrees. Midday heat, humidity, a broken air-conditioning system, a tin roof, and hot TV lights combine to make it a sauna. Even spectators have a hard time breathing in this inferno. The seats are filled, as are the aisles and rafters. In all, about twenty-seven thousand people

* Marcos will tell promoter Don King that he brought the match to Manila to draw attention to Filipinos who fought and died in World War II. In fact, the president declared martial law three years earlier, and the fight was meant to be a distraction from the corruption, poverty, and threats of revolution brought on by his “New Society.”

surround the ring, but the fighters have little awareness of them. Their pain is too distracting.

This is the third fight between Ali and Frazier. Joe won the first, at Madison Square Garden in 1971, keeping his heavyweight crown away from Ali. Billed as the “Fight of the Century,” it was the most-watched sporting event in history at the time. On January 28, 1974, also in New York City, Ali won the second contest, recapturing the title. Now the most brutal of the three bouts has just one round remaining.

Slouched against the corner post and the ropes, Muhammad Ali sprawls on his stool. He can barely breathe from the cigarette smoke and heat. His body aches. Joe Frazier has hit him approximately 440 times today. Ali has had trouble staying alert between rounds. He has visible lumps on his forehead from Frazier’s punches—and from a secret weapon Joe has never displayed before. At the insistence of trainer Eddie Futch, the southpaw Frazier has learned to throw a strong right-hand punch. Previously, Frazier was most well known for his vicious left.

“You can’t do that! You ain’t got no right hand,” Ali yelled at Frazier when, in the sixth round, he first felt the sting of the other’s right.

“Somebody told you all wrong, pretty boy,” Frazier replied, whereupon the contender immediately blasted Ali with another blow.

“I hit him with punches that would bring down the walls of a city,” Frazier will later state.

In addition to the lumps on his forehead, Ali’s eyes are swollen, his midsection throbs with pain, and the bones in his hands are nearly broken from hitting Frazier so many times with lightweight (eight-ounce) gloves. In fact, for months after the fight, Ali will not be able to shake hands.