

THE FINAL DEATH OF THE COMEBACK KING

by Bruce Bethke

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We melted into the crowd along Penn-sylvania Avenue and watched the black-draped caisson as it rolled slowly past. The horse's black plumes sagged in the light summer rain; their hooves clip-clopped on the wet pavement in soft syncopation to the slow throb of the muffled drums.

"It's the end of an era," said Weaver, of the *Post*, on my left.

"We can only hope," said Vaccaro, of the *Times*, on my right.

The Marines marched past in dark, majestic precision.

Weaver looked down at his wet brown shoes, and softly shook his head. "I still have trouble believing the man's really gone. I mean, he made a *career* out of dramatic comebacks. Washed up as an actor, he turned to politics."

"Declared politically dead after the '68 election," Vaccaro added, "he came back stronger than ever in '76."

Weaver looked up, and brushed back a vagrant strand of wet hair that had fallen in his face. "Elected president, he survived two impossible assassination attempts. I can accept that Helsing missed at point-blank range. It must be hard to aim with Secret Service agents tackling you."

"But to survive the Stinger that took out Air Force One and killed the entire cabinet..." Vaccaro could only shake his head.

We stood quietly awhile longer, watch-ing the funeral cortege plod along the wet, dreary street, making its slow way to the final resting place.

"What do you think?" Weaver asked, turning to me. "Any way he can come back from *this*?"

"There's one way to make sure," I said.

Late that evening, after the crowds and the TV cameras had gone away, we broke into the Capitol. The President's casket stood on a flag-draped catafalque beneath the rotunda. We caught him just as he was releasing the internal latches.

He put up quite a struggle when we drove the wooden stake through his heart.