

# Change Over

By Ron Goulart

HE TRIPPED OVER a bale of hay and fell, skidding on the polished floor of the darkened throne room. Robert Carnivan pushed himself up to a sitting position and called, "King Umberto." He then clutched his flashlight up and walked, rubbing at his knee, to the light switch panel. The throne had been knocked over on one side and a little gold raven was broken off. "Come on. King Umberto," said Carnivan. "I've got the speech for us to go over." He flicked toggles and the six dangling chandeliers burst on.

The big window overlooking the courtyard had been smashed out of its frame and a night wind was fluttering the gold leaf draperies gently. Stretched out Just under the ruined window, sprinkled with the flecks of colored glass that were also on the floor, was the unconscious captain of the palace guards.

"Hey," shouted Carnivan, "are you fooling around again. King Umberto? Or have you been assassinated? Come on now, answer."

"He's out on the bridle path in Zombada Park," said the deep old voice of Dr. Damasco.

"Why?"

"Because he's a horse."

Carnivan didn't see the king's physician anywhere in the great polished room. "Where are you, by the way, Dr. Damasco?"

"The grand piano."

"I don't see you by the piano."

"I am the piano," explained the doctor.

Carnivan took a folded sheaf of white paper out of his inside surcoat pocket and walked cautiously to the heavy, black piano. "Look, doctor, King Umberto promised me, and I in turn promised everybody in the home office on Bamum, that he was cured," said Carnivan. "Our various diplomatic officers aren't, too happy about King Umberto even when he's not an addict. I don't have to tell you what a mess the Barnum Embassy here on Tartaruga was when I arrived three months ago. Even now I've only got one clerk and pretty Corinna Candlebart, my girl friday of a secretary. Barnum really wants to help King Umberto stay on the throne and they'd like to see him halt the mounting revolutionary movement. But he's going to have to stop breaking his promises. How come you're a grand piano?"

"The king is a very persuasive man," said Dr. Damasco. His voice seemed to come from some place in among the piano wires. "He also gets angry with those who don't go along with him and his decisions."

"Whims is more what King Umberto has," said Carnivan. He held the typed speech up to the piano. "King Umberto is scheduled to address the Opera Guild in less than two hours. This is the address right here. You know, I was sent out to this planet because I'm one of the top rated men in the Propaganda Corps, doctor."

"My eyes seem to be down around the soft pedal if you want me to read something."

"No, I don't want you to read anything," said Carnivan. He was whapping his open palm with the speech. "I want King Umberto to read it. Then I want him to practice delivering it. I want him to steel himself against any possible criticism. That incident during his speech on Jockey Day I'm still trying to downplay. He's got to learn he can't shoot hecklers."

"At least not in the open like that," agreed the doctor. "The obligations of kingship, Mr. Robert, they are monumental. They weigh on his poor shoulders like great quantities of impregnable stone."

"Yes, I know, I wrote that impregnable stone speech for him," said Carnivan. He looked at the piano stool, gave it a tentative spin. "Are you the stool, too?"

"No, only the piano."

Carnivan sat on the stool. "Dr. Damasco, I must make it clear to you that on the planet Bamum, from whence all the planets in our system are more or less ruled, on Barnum there is great concern over King Umberto. Now as I explained to you and King Umberto shortly after I arrived, Bamum doesn't insist every government it supports be a democracy. Nor even a benevolent despotism. But they do get upset by a king who goes around publicly shooting people and is, on top of that, a short-tempered loudmouth. And, on top of *that*, is apparently addicted to some strange and illegal drug."

"It's not exactly a drug."

"Whatever it is. He's got you taking it, too, now?"

"Yes," replied the doctor. "As the king puts it, Mr. Robert, he hates to change all by himself."

"Can't you change back to yourself now and help me find him?"

The piano said, "It is not quite so simple. The herb-based drug, Meta, is still little understood. Much of the research done on Meta was carried out on your home planet by a Dr. Davis-Stockbridge, who was, I

believe, also instrumental in the creation of your Chameleon Corps."

"I know, I know," cut in Carnivan. "And the herb grows wild all over the jungles of Zombada Territory here. And good King Umberto has been hooked on the damn stuff for Rve years."

"Four years," corrected the doctor. "The fast year he could take it or leave it."

"Four or five, the point is he's addicted to a drug that causes him to change shape. He's turned into refrigerators, polar bears, apple trees, lawn furniture, baboons, and what have you. On a couple of occasions he did his changing while photographers were around. Now he's changed into a horse. Why a horse anyway?"

"I asked the same question when I noticed the bale of hay."

"This grows tougher and tougher to keep quiet," said Carnivan. "Maybe out here King Umberto can shoot his bitterest critics, but Barnum is a democracy. We have to listen to critics. A lot of the criticism lately has been directed at our continued support of King Umberto and his regime. Why is it you can't turn back into yourself?"

"I've been endeavoring to explain," answered the piano. "You see, Mr. Robert, a period of time is required for one to become a complete Meta addict, to become what the lower depths call a shiftie. Then one can change back and forth in a matter of moments. I am not such a one, not an expert shiftie, having only used Meta on the half-dozen occasions when the king threatened to shoot me did I not join him. For me, therefore, there is a waiting period, several hours unfortunately, before I will be myself again."

"King Umberto, if I find him, I can get him to shift back to his own shape right away?"

"Theoretically that is so," said the doctor. "He is, however, in a particularly nasty mood, Mr. Robert. He knocked out six of the palace guards before he came roaring into my suite."

"He's not helping the security situation around here any either," said Carnivan. "Knocking out all his guards. He's likely to get assassinated and that's going to be even harder to keep quiet."

"I do believe you can perhaps reason with the king, Mr. Robert. He seems to be fonder of you than of any of the former Bamum Embassy staff members."

"I'm the only one he hasn't taken a shot at," admitted Carnivan. He put the speech back away in his gray surcoat. "What kind of horse is he?"

"A roan stallion."

"What color is that?"

"Chestnut interspersed with gray," said the old doctor. "He's wearing horseshoes, so you may be able to trail him."

"Okay," said Carnivan. "If he comes back here send him to the Opera Guild. This propaganda opera we're going to put on next week is vitally important. He must be very nice to these opera patrons. Tell him."

"Of course, Mr. Robert."

Carnivan ran from the palace and headed for his embassy building. The night was calm and clear.

Lovely Corinna Candlebart turned off her desk phone and inclined her head so that Carnivan's kiss hit her on the cheekbone. "I know," she said.

"Know how fond I am of you?" Carnivan backed away from her cream-colored metal desk and began loping nervously around the room.

"I meant I know King Umberto is making changes again," said the pretty blonde girl. "We just got a report from a Political Espionage field agent."

Carnivan continued doing a little trot around the big office, hopping from one oval native mat to another. "You shouldn't be working so late, Corinna. I really appreciate you and enjoy your presence but I don't want you coming down with mono or Goldstone's twitch or something." He stopped still. "A PEO man has spotted the king? Where?"

"He's on a rampage down in the ghetto."

"Which ghetto?"

Corinna touched a memo pad with one slender hand. "Ghetto #13. He's been galloping around in front of the Chez Null club."

"Damn, that anti-establishment hangout," said Carnivan. "Wait. How come they know it's the king if he's a horse at the moment?"

"Apparently he's still wearing his crown."

"Let's see," said Carnivan, checking the bank of wall clocks. "I've still got over an hour before he's due to speak at the Opera Guild meet. Wish me luck."

The striking blonde touched warm fingers to his wrist. "You, too, should take care. Bob. All this running around you do." She kissed her fingertips and pressed them to his ear. "I'd hate to see you fall ill."

"I know, Corrie," he said. "But it's my job. I have a hope we can get the government here in Zombada Territory propped up and resembling some kind of democracy."

"I admire your idealism. Bob."

He kissed her on the jaw and left the hollow, under-heated embassy building. In the robot cab, heading for Ghetto #13, he passed the Civic Opera House. *Coming Next Week!* announced the marquee. *The Ballad Of Generalissimo Noz!* Carnivan nodded to himself. That opera just might do it.

The king was giving derelicts free rides around the memorial fountain in the only square in Ghetto # 13. A grizzled tobacco freak was doing a handstand on the bare back of the brownish stallion. The man's dotted tunic tails flapped like pennants. A dozen others were watching, clapping hands or shaking fists. In the doorway of the Chez Nul stood the leader of the Counter-culture Commandos and the chief correspondent for the Bamum News Syndicate. They were both taking pictures.

Carnivan skirted the edge of the cobblestone square, hopping to avoid puddles and scum and offal. He caught hold of Marlow Demby, the big bearded newsman, and said, "Give us a break, Marlow."

"Hey, Bob, you jiggled that last shot," complained Demby. He was using a slim robot camera, which now gave out an angry bleep. "See?"

"Why don't you bribe him, you oligarch's retainer you?" asked Mick Ezra, the thin pale Counter-Culture Commando.

"Ezra," said Carnivan, "you have the functions of democracy all confused in your head. That's because you're not well-read in the area of politics. You probably don't even read the press releases I put out."

"Those despot's boot lickings I always devour," said Ezra.

Carnivan turned again to the newsman. "Marlow, I'm putting a lot of effort into getting King Umberto to modify some of his habits. I know you can't suppress the news, but could you maybe soften it a little? How'd you find out about this anyway?"

"People confide in me," replied Demby. "Though I'm offplanet, same as yourself, I'm in tune with these people of Zombada Territory. The everyday guys, the street-corner folks and the honest job bunch as well. Maybe there's something almost mystical the way these people confide in me. Tell it to Demby, they seem to feel, and he'll pass it on to the universe. Funny, Bob, how a dictator can squash the truth and yet the truth will come blossoming forth."

"Come on," said Carnivan. "You're doing one kind of publicity and I'm doing another." Something nuzzled him in the back and then warm breath was snorted in his ear.

"Hello, Bobby, want a ride?"

Carnivan turned round to face the horse. "Let's go over into that alley, king," he whispered. "I want to talk to you."

"Beautiful, terrific," said Ezra, clicking off another photo with his manual camera. "Beastly despot consorts with elitist menial."

"King Umberto," said Carnivan, "this is not good public relations."

The horse's head bent low and he began to cry. "Oh, I know, Bobby. I'm letting you down. I'm letting the wonderful, kind, Barnum government, which has poured much needed funds into our public coffers, down. I'm letting down my poor old poppa and my dear old momma, too."

"Well, trot with me over to the alley and we'll talk," Carnivan softly suggested again. He had brought a spare suit of clothes in a small attache case.

"Oh, all right, Bobby," said the horse. "I feel so ashamed. I've compromised my liberal notions once again I fear."

Carnivan took hold of the king's mane and started for the shadowy alley that twisted between the Chez Null and a cyborg bordello. But the small crowd began to follow and the Counter-Culture Commando chief and newsman as well.

"We're not going to get much privacy, Bobby," said King Umberto. "Climb on my back and we'll shake this bunch."

"I don't think that would be a very politic thing to do."

"We've got to get to the Opera Guild, don't we? And that's way across town," the horse pointed out. "It's always tough to get a cab around here. Get on board."

"Well. okay." Carnivan swung up onto the horse's slightly swayed back.

"Beautiful, terrific," said Ezra as Carnivan galloped away on the king.

Carnivan seated himself at the small electronic organ in the recreation room of the Barnum Embassy and inserted a music cartridge. "I guess it's safe to assume this isn't anyone we know," he said over his shoulder.

At the window, facing the bright morning gardens outside, Corinna said, "I don't quite catch your allusion, Bob." She was sitting on the arm of one of the several candy-striped sofas in the room.

"Last night," said Carnivan. "King Umberto got Dr. Damasco to take some of those damn orange-and-black capsules of his. The doctor changed into a grand piano."

"A very intellectual choice," said the lovely girl.

"Okay, a sense of humor is necessary in the government service, Corrie. Still I wish you'd try to understand how serious everything is getting," said Carnivan. "Basically, what it amounts to is King Umberto is not getting any better. He's turning worse. He's now almost a full-time shiftie and he's getting more press coverage than ever."

"Didn't he execute the editors of the two leading Zombada Territory papers?"

"It's not local coverage I'm worried about," said Carnivan. "Our problem is guys that work for outside news agencies. Like that friend of yours, Marlow Demby."

Corinna turned to watch black butterflies circle in the green garden. "He's not exactly a friend. I only know him through our Embassy encounters."

Carnivan clicked on the music machine and an overture came out. He hummed, his head ticking in time with the music. "If our Propaganda Corps computers are at all right, this opera will be a big help. The whole work is designed to invoke a lot of patriotic feeling, to glorify the traditions of Zombada Territory and to subtly point out the parallels in the careers of King Umberto and that great patriot of a century ago. Generalissimo Noz."

"You think people will really notice any parallels?" asked Corinna. "The generalissimo was a young, deeply religious man who used to fast in the wilderness. The only furnishings in his office when he ruled around here were a rug of jungle grass and a prayer wheel."

"We've shuffled history a little to punch up the comparisons."

"I still worry about Mick Ezra and his Counter-Cul-ture Commandos trying to stage an incident during opening night next week. Don't you?"

Carnivan listened to a few more bars of the propaganda opera overture, then flicked the organ off. "You're lovely when you get that quizzical look. I'll tell you something, though this is a secret and officially the Barnum Embassy isn't supposed to know a thing about it. Unofficially I know the Royal Police are very quietly going to round up Ezra and most of his key followers, as many as they can find, a day or so prior to the opera's opening."

"That's not too democratic either."

"It looks to be, though, the only way we can get this opera on with not too much trouble," Carnivan said.

Corinna finally smiled, her back to the sunlight, and left the room.

"What do you think of that?" asked King Umberto. He had just snapped his fingers and changed into a large bookcase. "Complete with books, Bobby."

Carnivan yanked his ear watch out of the pocket of his formal tunic and held it to his ear. The time was 7:45. "King, this is opening night. We've got to be at the opera house in less than an hour. Traveling there will be slow because your bulletproof coach only does twenty miles an hour."

"Don't I know it, Bobby. I can't help getting the wim warns when I think about all the people who'll be at the opera house."

"Wim warns? What kind of thing is that for a king to have?" Carnivan gave the bookcase a shake. "Didn't you tell Dr. Darnasco and me you were off Meta for good?"

"Another broken promise."

"Look, change back to yourself. King Umberto. There's really not much to worry about. Mick Ezra and his followers have all been rounded up and put away, haven't they?"

"No," replied the bookcase. "Which is one reason I've got this tummy ache."

"Didn't your damn Royal Army arrest Ezra?"



"We couldn't find him," said the king. "Not Mick Ezra or one single member of his Counter-Culture Commandos. The army swept through all their known haunts. I suspect they had advance warning."

Carnivan sighed. "You have such sloppy security around here, anything is possible."

"Another thing, Bobby," said the king. "I read a think piece in the teleport edition of the *Barnum Tattler* and in it Marlow Demby made a nasty remark about me turning my physician into a piano while my empire burned."

"He did?" said Carnivan. "I haven't monitored the new issue yet."

"You knew about dear old Dr. Damasco's unfortunate experience, Bobby. You even sat on his stool I hear."

"All your guards knew it, too," said Carnivan. "Trust me, king, I'm not a spy for Bamum News. So now come on and change back to normal."

"Don't want to."

"Damn it. King Umberto, this opera is important. This could help you turn the corner."

"Turn the corner and walk into the lion's den." The bookcase flickered and changed slowly, contracting and writhing, back into the king. He was a small, chubby man, naked, with graying whiskers.

"Good. Stay that way and get dressed."

The king walked to a real marble dressing table at the far side of his bed chamber. He opened a gold filigreed pillbox, grabbed out a handful of black-and-orange capsules. He slapped them into his mouth. "I don't really need any more, but so what. Watch this, Bobby." He grunted, flickered, stretched, and blurred, and slowly metamorphasized into a lion. He came bounding toward Carnivan, skidded into a slide, whapped Carnivan across the knees with a paw. "Scary huh?" He skated over to the window. Giving another roar he leaped through.

Carnivan dived to the vidphone, punched a number. When Corinna's lovely face appeared on the tiny screen he said, "Get over to the opera house and tell them to delay the overture."

"Bob, is there going to be more trouble?"

"King Umberto has turned himself into a big, dirty, brown lion. I've got to track him down and get him to the opera house."

"Well, good luck, Bob. I'll see you there I guess."

Carnivan reluctantly broke the connection. He started toward the smashed window, then stopped at the marble table. The lid of the pillbox was still open and a half-dozen black-and-orange Meta capsules were still inside. Carnivan glanced at the shattered window and the night beyond. "Let him frolic," he said. "I can be a better King Umberto than him." He took four capsules, one at a time, and walked to the wardrobe closet to select a crown.

Carnivan didn't realize anything was wrong until after the overture. When the chorus of jungle peasants began singing, though, he rubbed at his gray whiskers and turned to look at the door to his royal box.

The peasants weren't singing the carefully written, and thoroughly researched. Propaganda Corps lyrics at all. "Mick Ezra is the man of the hour," they sang. "He's seized control of the king's power. Now freedom and justice will take flower. The rule of despots has had its final hour."

"Clumsy," said Carnivan. "Not at all as good as our words. Oops." He was a very close physical replica, thanks to the Meta capsules, of King Umberto. After a few minutes of practice he'd been able to control the effects of the drug. He figured he was fooling the three hundred people in the audience. They'd given him a nice ovation when he tipped his crown to them just before the rise of the curtain. With the government falling he didn't want to be sitting around in public being a replica of King Umberto. Carnivan left his seat, knocked aside the Royal Guard standing near him. He hit the exit door of the box and ran out into the corridor.

As he sprinted along the still empty hall he strained to change back to himself. He couldn't. That was right. Dr. Damasco had told him shifting back to yourself sometimes took hours when you first started using the stuff. You could change into somebody, or some thing, fairly fast. After that you might be stuck.

During the rehearsals he'd learned where all the emergency doors in the opera house were. He found one now and fled quietly down a fire ramp. He shoved his crown behind some packing crates in the alley he landed in and eased to the alley mouth. Fires were starting all around, shouting was growing up in the night. Blasters crackled, windows were smashed and crowds were rolling into the streets. Carnivan kept to alleys, finally hid in Generalissimo Noz Park. He hid for long hours in the shadows of a merry-go-round while the commandos worked at the overthrow of King Umberto's regime.

At dawn Carnivan was finally able to change to his own shape. He smiled, feeling himself, stretching the stiffness out. He smiled and went walking toward the embassy. He wanted to get a report off to Bamum.

It was quiet all around the embassy. The building was unharmed, the whole block was still peaceful, tranquil with leafy trees lightening as dawn progressed. Carnivan decided he would walk right in.

Obviously even Mick Ezra wasn't going to attack a Bamum Embassy and risk intervention.

He was on the steps of the entrance stairway when a voice in the nearby brush cried, "Death to the sheep-hearted plaything of a heavy-handed and philosophically threadbare regime."

That was a commando-style threat. Carnivan got his fingers into the whorl lock in the heavy metal door. It was made to admit only him and Corinna. He got the thick door open and himself inside, but before he could slam it shut three commandos came tumbling in on him.

Carnivan kicked someone, untangled, ran into a dark embassy hallway. A hand blaster crackled.

"Stop, you insidious glib-tongued symbol of an overwrought and basically unjust feudal system," called one of the pursuing commandos.

Carnivan jumped around another turn of the corridor, into the recreation room. He cracked his ankle on a sofa. He stopped, nodding to himself. He got hurriedly out of his clothes, bundled them into a wicker basket full of badminton equipment. Then he concentrated, hoping he had enough Meta left in his system to be capable of a quick shift. He had and in a very short time he became a fair facsimile of one of the candy-striped sofas. He got himself placed in a clear corner as two commandos crashed into the room.

Song birds joined the butterflies in the embassy gardens as the mid-morning sun burned away the last of the morning mist. Carnivan was still a red-and-white sofa. He listened to the birds singing and he began to feel safe. The commandos had spent less than an hour searching through the embassy for him. They had gone, without trying to demolish the building. He guessed they were still afraid of the Barnum government if not exactly of Carnivan himself.

Now he had to shift back to his own shape and sneak away. Or possibly he should work out some safe alternate appearance for himself. The best thing to do was get across the border into a neutral territory. He concentrated, but remained a sofa. That was okay. It might take another hour at least.

After he was away from the embassy he'd get in touch with Corinna. The two of them would make the dash for the border. This might well be the time to retire, or anyway take a leave, from the Propaganda Corps. Now might be the time to marry Corinna, too. He had kept the relationship casual. He knew if he pushed, the romance would become more intense.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. Two people were approaching the rec room. The door swung open and Corinna said, "Are we going to cover the whole thing, Marlow?"

"Barnum News says no, Corrie," answered the reporter. "They want us back on Barnum for interviews and to supervise the documentaries on the coup. BNS figures we can get a book out of this, too. Daring

news team takes you up close to a revolution."

"Okay," said the lovely girl. "I'll get those extra suitcases I stored in here."

"What's this? A whole bar set up in here, too."

"First cabin for all the embassy staff."

Demby poured himself a glass of local rye whiskey. "We're not due at the spaceport for several hours. It's pleasant here."

"Yes, the gardens are wonderful," said Corinna. She carried two small, buff, real leather suitcases from a closet. "I hope Bob got away."

"Nobody reports shooting him," said Demby.

"Poor Bob." She put the suitcases down next to the sofa that was Carnivan. "We haven't been much together for nearly two days, Marlow. What with covering the revolution keeping you so busy. Did you miss me?"

"Nights especially," laughed the newsman.

"And I you," said the lovely girl.

They both sat down on Carnivan and began taking off each other's clothes.