

It's always a pleasure to receive one of Patricia S. Bowne's tales of academe in a world where magic works. Others in the series appeared in TOTU #24 (as A.B. Ming), 25, 27, and 29. Each works as a stand-alone story. But taken together, they're building a rich mosaic.

Beginner's Luck

by Patricia S. Bowne

None of his colleagues in Demonology would have voted Anders Regan most likely to become a god, but what did they know?

They wouldn't have thought him a likely mascot for the New Herbalists, either, but it happened. Not because Anders was a New Herbalist—he stood staunchly in the Old Guard of the International Society for the Study of Arcane Botany—but the way he stood was so easy to imitate! His mop of white curls was so available in a cheap wig, his thin figure and pot belly so easy for a slim young botanist with a pillow to counterfeit, and his nose so distinctive, its tip dented in until it was almost branched, that no New Herbalist could resist.

The first time he appeared in a skit at the ISSAB banquet, Anders was taken aback. Manners forbade open reproach; he applauded, smiled, and let people take photographs of him with his imitator, and next year they did it again. By the third year, when the Anders Regan mouse pad appeared as a door prize, it wasn't an insult any more. The year of the Anders Regan peekaboo screen saver, the president of ISSAB took him aside.

"Thank you for being a good sport about this," she said. "It's about the only thing holding the New Herbalists and the traditionalists together, at this point."

Anders flushed and fidgeted with his ring. "Oh well, they don't mean any harm," he mumbled.

"Not everybody would take it that well," said the president, glancing at the tattooed, earringed New Herbalists in their jeans and leather. "You're one of the good ones, Anders."

Anders looked down and twisted his tie-tack, but he was pleased enough to spend some time with the New Herbalists, ignoring what they said and how they said it. Next year he was rewarded with the Anders Regan fan club tee shirt, and instead of trying not to look displeased, he had to work at not looking inappropriately gratified.

He had been ISSAB's treasurer and chairman of the Plant Use Committee for twenty years, after all, with

no recognition but the polite applause that greeted business reports. Now his colleagues were retiring or dying in harness, and every year Anders noticed how little they were missed. Would he, too, disappear without a trace? No, for he would leave at least a screen saver, a tee shirt. Sometimes he sat at his desk, back at the Royal Academy of the Arcane Arts and Sciences in Osyth, and wished he had the peekaboo screen saver on his own computer.

Hardly anyone came into Anders' lab. He supervised field students, Sorcery students based in the teaching hospital, and practical herbology students, who shared an office in the fourth-floor greenhouses; though he disguised his lab's emptiness by subdividing it with bookcases, he wasn't displeased to have someone knock on the door, even someone in the kind of suit worn by textbook salespeople.

"Yes?" he said. The man with the suit took one step in.

"Are you Magister Anders Regan?" he asked, in an accent Anders couldn't place.

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"I am Inspector Liskin," the man said, proffering a badge. "Macoma Central Bureau of Investigations."

"Macoma! Has something happened to Claudia?" The man's gaze was blank. "My graduate student. Claudia Rines. She's at the Macoma Mountains Field Station...."

"No," said Inspector Liskin, "This regards something else. Can you tell me anything of a man named Joachim Sors?"

"Sors?" Anders remembered an earring and leather jacket. "Oh! Yes, he's one of the people I see at herbology conferences. Works in—Selanto, I think. Why?"

"We are investigating a plant pornography ring," said the Inspector. "Sors was our best lead, until he was killed last week."

Anders' jaw didn't drop, but he felt his eyes getting big. "Killed? Plant pornography?" he asked—stupidly,

because of course it was obvious, to anyone who worked with dryads. He blushed. “Why—why are you asking me?”

“There were files featuring you on his computer.”

“What! Me and dryads?”

“No,” Liskin admitted, producing a padded envelope. “I can show you.”

A moment ago, Anders had wondered what delicious item New Herbalists would come up with next. Now the question was bitter; he stood against an overflowing bookcase as Liskin sat down. Images popped up in spectacular color. Anders’ breath caught, first with fear and then with relief.

“Those aren’t pornographic!” The bodies his head had been affixed to wouldn’t have been called pornographic even in their own era. They were wholesome persons, disporting themselves in appropriate, if scanty, outdoor garb.

“What is it?”

“A pin-up calendar,” said Anders. “It’s a joke at the Society. They make some cheap souvenir with my picture in it, and put it in the door prizes.”

The Inspector frowned. “This would explain the artifacts with your image in Sors’ office?” he asked. “And in the offices of several others suspected in this matter? How many of these door prizes were there?”

“There’s only been one prize each time, but they all had tee shirts last year. I suppose they could be making extras of the other ones, as well.”

“For whom?”

“The younger herbalists in the society. There’s about twenty.”

“I would have a list of these twenty,” said Liskin, all policeman in an instant. And Anders was prey.

“I would—think about it first,” he said, backing into the bookcase. “What are we talking about here? Pin-up photographs?”

“Photographs, but I would not pin them up. Films, videos. And, we think, green slavery.”

Anders looked at his surfer-self, hanging ten on the computer screen. “Those aren’t crimes here, or in Macoma,” he said. “What sense does it make to talk about green slavery, when companies measure the trees they own by board-feet?”

“The new government in Macoma intends to prosecute such activities also,” said Liskin.

“But Macoma depends on the paper industry!” No answer. “I’ll have to consult with the Academy lawyer,” Anders said.

The Inspector gave a little bow. “I will be tonight in the Hotel Eleuthra,” he said. “I will contact you tomorrow. What time will be convenient?”

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“Refer him to my office,” said the Royal Academy’s lawyer, her smooth head bobbing with each word. Anders thought of some sweet-faced flower—a lady’s slipper, or a viola.

“He’ll think I’m involved,” he protested.

“It won’t matter what he thinks,” said the lawyer. “He can get membership records from the Society, through the proper channels. The Academy’s very careful about Macoma politics.” She looked at Anders as if her command would make him rush out and do the opposite. The wariness lightened when Anders nodded. It might have left entirely, had she had seen him call Inspector Liskin even before he left the administration building. She might have praised Anders, and invited him for a drink; but she didn’t see, so Anders went back to his office and worked on a paper about the magical properties of orchids. It wasn’t as soothing as usual.

‘Green nonsense,’ said one botanical listserv. ‘Envirofascists,’ read another. ‘Malpractice for farmers?’ asked a third. Anders found what he expected in the postings: left-wing romanticism, the anti-human crowd, and postmodernists delighted by a new set of mores to challenge—none of whom had ever gone hungry, needed shelter, or used plants in any except processed, prepackaged forms with all the death rinsed out of them.

“It’s worse than I dreamed,” he muttered. One of his pinup images popped up; a paterfamilias grilling steaks in a backyard bordered by red geraniums. In the background, a wife and two children smiled at him adoringly—perhaps because the paterfamilias wore only a ‘Kiss the Cook’ apron, but Anders thought not. The paterfamilias drew smiles because of what he was, in an era when being a white male was enough....

“That’s what they sound like,” he said, staring at the screen. Not the extremists, who sounded like cultural studies majors from Selanto. His side, the defenders, sounded like people who took deference for granted, who hadn’t given their practices a moment’s thought. And neither have I, Anders realized. He went into the hall, brooding, and someone almost ran into him.

“Scuse me,” said the someone, looking up from her mail. It was Teddy Whin, the department’s most irresponsibly radical theorist.

“That’s all right. Um—do you have a minute?”

“I guess so,” said Teddy. “What’s up?”

“I’m trying to follow the debates on green slavery.”

“The what?”

“Plant use,” said Anders. “Is it slavery to own the plant a dryad is living in?”