

Episode 1: Coming Back To Reality

"You know, I don't talk about it much because you'd never believe it, but *I* once was a wizard," the disheveled man at the bar said, a bit of ale sloshing out of his tankard as he raised his arm to steady himself, narrowly avoiding a short fall off a tall stool.

An amused murmur slipped through the crowd at The Serpent's Stein Inn as each man in attendance told his neighbor Gregory's newest wild claim, and Old Man Joe waved a dismissive hand from across the room. "Oh, come off it, you old codger!" he yelled. "You know you ain't never!"

But Gregory nodded solemnly, then leaned forward, his stool tilting dangerously as his eyes bulged in indignation. "I have!" he exclaimed. Then he sat back, relaxing slightly and unconsciously re-stabilizing his chair as he did. "Er, well, I *was*, at least. And I'm of a mind to talk about it tonight, whether you believe me or no!"

"Ah, tell us all about it then, Gramps," laughed a red-faced young man near the front door, slapping his hand down on the table in mirth. "And show us too, while you're at it! If you was really a wizard, well, turn me into a hen or something!"

"I never did say I am," Gregory insisted, "I said I *was*!" He shook his head in disgust, splashing his nearest neighbor with amber liquid from his somehow-still-full mug as he did. "The words," he muttered, shaking his head and apparently speaking to the sodden floor beneath his feet, ignoring the annoyed protests of the only-recently-dry man beside him. "The words *matter*. And nobody *ever* listens to the *words*!" He looked up at his somewhat rapt audience and, taking a deep breath, continued, "and that's *exactly* why it happened!"

"But listen now!" he said, throwing his arms wide. "Listen, and I'll tell you *how* it happened. You already know why. I already told you that. But *how*! Ah, that's the part you'll never believe." He lowered his face toward the floor in dismay.

Young John raised one finger and said, "Now see here, if you were a wizard, why ain't ye anymore?" Murmurs of agreement drifted through the considerably larger crowd, and the bartender hummed softly, a small smile appearing on his lips as he prepared a row of wooden steins for the customers he knew he would soon have.

Gregory looked up, his beady brown eyes instantly upon the young man, piercing him like daggers, while his brows beat him down. A few sniggers ran through the crowd as the old man roared, more ale sloshing toward the floor, splashing those nearest to him with a fine alcoholic spray, "Well, you fool, that's what I'm trying to tell you, isn't it?"

John held his hands up, palms out in supplication. "Alright, then," he said, "I oughtn't to have interrupted, but it seems to me that this all doesn't make much sense to a right-thinkin' fella like me. But go on and tell us your story, and we'll see what it sounds like soon enough."

Gregory huffed in disgust. A few random men toward the back of the room broke out in raucous laughter, and he cast them a glare until he realized that they weren't even listening to him, much less responding to what had been said. "Well," he repeated, relaxing a bit, "it's just like I said. No one ever listens. But here it is anyway, because someone . . . maybe even someone among you lot . . . *needs* to know, and I'm the only one who knows now. The only one left who knows the *whole* story."

And with that, the old man began to speak, to tell a tale never told before, his voice gathering strength and vigor with the telling, and the patrons of The Serpent's Stein Inn quieted their conversations, looked up from their half-filled ales, and slowly, like snails moving through the stagnant remains of a river of molasses, gathered round. The dimly lit room made their shadows flicker on the wooden walls, and yet somehow, it was as though a glow surrounded Gregory himself, perhaps emanating from somewhere within the fabric of his very being.

And so it began.