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## Gaslighting Wizard

Divya Bulchandani

Arjun sat on the worn wooden floor of his room in Rishikesh, surrounded by the quiet murmur of his family downstairs. His father's angry words still echoed in his ears.

"Why can't you be more like Vikram?" his father had shouted. "He's a doctor, and what are you? A dreamer with no future."

Arjun's chest tightened. He was tired of being compared, tired of being the "lesser" son. But what else could he do? He wasn't like Vikram. He didn't want to be bound by rigid rules and expectations. He wanted something more. Something real.

A sudden, unsettling chill swept through the room, and Arjun looked around. The windows were closed. His family was downstairs, oblivious to his turmoil. He stood up, brushing the dust off his jeans, trying to shake off the feeling that something—*someone*—was watching him.

The air in the room shimmered for a moment, as though reality itself was bending. And then, out of nowhere, a voice whispered in his ear.

"Arjun."

He froze, his heart pounding in his chest. It wasn't his imagination. The voice was clear, too real to ignore.

"Who's there?" Arjun asked, his voice shaky.

From the shadows, a figure stepped forward. A woman, tall and elegant, with dark, flowing hair and eyes that glowed with an unnatural light. She didn't look like anyone Arjun had ever seen before. She had an otherworldly aura, as though she didn't quite belong to this world.

"I've been watching you, Arjun," she said, her voice soft but carrying an eerie weight. "You're not happy here, are you?"

He took a step back, his pulse quickening. "What do you want from me?"

The woman smiled, a knowing smile, and stepped closer. "I'm a wizard. I can show you a world beyond this one, a world where you can be free—where you can truly be yourself."

Arjun's mind reeled. A wizard? Was this some kind of trick? A hallucination? Or had he finally snapped under the weight of his family's expectations?

"I don't know what you're talking about," he stammered, trying to stay calm, though his heart raced in his chest.

The woman's smile grew wider, and suddenly, the room around them began to shift. The walls seemed to melt away, leaving only swirling shadows and mist. The floor beneath Arjun's feet felt like it was no longer solid, as though he were floating in some vast, endless void.

"Everything you know, everything you think you understand, is a lie," she said, her voice now an eerie echo in the void. "This world you live in, with its rules and expectations—it's nothing more than an illusion, a prison. You've been gaslit, Arjun. Your parents, your society, they've told you who you are, but that's not the truth. I can show you the truth. I can take you to a place where you can rewrite your destiny."

Arjun's breath hitched. He had always felt like something was wrong with the world around him. The suffocating weight of his father's expectations, the constant pressure to be like Vikram—it all felt like a dream he couldn't wake up from.

But now, as the woman's words lingered in the air, the desire to escape, to find freedom, pulsed within him. He could leave this place, leave behind the weight of his family's expectations. He could go somewhere where no one would tell him who to be.

The woman reached out, her fingers brushing his shoulder. "Come with me, Arjun. I'll show you a world where magic is real, where you can live without fear. There are no boundaries, no limitations. You can be whoever you want to be. You can change the world."

Arjun's mind was swirling. The idea of escape, of freedom, was so intoxicating. He looked at the woman, at the shadows swirling around them, and felt a pull—an urge to follow her into this unknown world. But as the weight of the decision settled on him, a question burned in his chest.

"Why me?" Arjun asked, his voice trembling. "Why offer this to me?"

The wizard's eyes gleamed. "Because you're different, Arjun. You've always known that the world you live in isn't real. You've always been searching for something more. But most people never see it. You have the potential to change everything. To reshape reality itself. But you must

choose. If you stay, you will always be trapped. If you come with me, you will be free. You can change your fate."

For a moment, Arjun felt his resolve waver. The world seemed to collapse around him, the weight of his father's demands, the pressure to be someone he wasn't. He wanted to run, to escape to this magical world where he could finally be himself.

But then, as if by instinct, something deep within him stirred. The thought of abandoning everything—his family, his roots, his reality—felt wrong. He didn't want to run away from his problems. He wanted to *face* them.

"No," Arjun said, shaking his head. "I won't run away. I won't leave this world behind."

The wizard's smile faltered for just a moment, her eyes narrowing with an unreadable expression. "Are you sure? You have no idea how much power you have within you, Arjun. You could change everything. But you must act quickly, before your world consumes you."

Arjun's heart pounded, his chest tight with the weight of the choice before him. The promise of a new life, a life without limits, was so tempting. But could he really turn his back on everything he knew? Could he leave his family behind? Could he let go of the world that had shaped him?

"I can't leave," Arjun said, his voice steady. "Not like this. I can't let this world win. If I leave, then nothing changes. I want to change the world. I want to make it better. I can't do that by running away."

The wizard's eyes flashed with something darker—something almost predatory. She stepped closer to him, her presence overwhelming. "You think you can change this world? You think it's that simple? The world you live in is broken, Arjun. It's suffocating you. You cannot change what you do not understand."

Arjun stood firm, his feet rooted to the ground. "I *will* change it. Not by running away, but by staying. I'll show them a different way. A way to be free, without magic, without tricks. I'll change the world from the inside."

For a moment, the wizard said nothing. She simply watched him, her eyes filled with a mixture of admiration and something darker—something that sent a shiver down his spine. Then, slowly, she raised her hand, and the shadows around them began to twist.

"If you are certain," she said softly, her voice tinged with something almost sorrowful, "then the choice is yours. But remember, Arjun—*nothing* is as it seems. The world you live in is a web, and you are its fly. You may think you can change it, but can you truly fight something that isn't even real?"

Suddenly, the mist around them grew thick, and the room seemed to distort, like an image through a cracked mirror. Arjun's vision blurred, and for a moment, he felt like he was falling. But then, just as quickly as it had started, the world snapped back into focus.

He was standing in his room again, the shadows gone, the woman nowhere to be seen. His heart was pounding in his chest, his body trembling. The air was thick with the aftertaste of magic, as if the very fabric of reality had been stretched, and then snapped back into place.

Arjun took a deep breath. He was still here. He had chosen to stay.

But the question lingered in his mind. Was it truly over? Had the wizard simply left him to his fate, or was she watching, waiting for him to change his mind?

He didn't know. But he was certain of one thing: He wasn't going to run. He wasn't going to let anyone—or anything—tell him who he should be.

He would face the world, with or without magic. And he would change it, piece by piece, until the chains of expectations that held him prisoner no longer existed.

The wizard had been right about one thing: *Nothing* was as it seemed. But maybe, just maybe, Arjun could be the one to see the truth—and make it his own.

**About the Author:** Divya Bulchandani is a writer, poet, researcher and a Bharatnatyam dancer. She has been working as an Assistant Professor at Shri TMSD Mahila College, Adipur, Kachchh (Gujarat). Her area of interest includes Feminist theories, Partition literature, psychoanalyses and children's literature. She has published several research papers, poems and a short story.