

Olivia Duby

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Saginaw Arts & Sciences Academy, Saginaw, MI

Educator: Karen Horwath

Category: Short Story

A Siren's Call

A Siren's Call

After hours at The Black Azalea ran long and somehow moved more slowly and painfully than the hours of the night when the bar was open to patrons; people from all walks of life would spill in through the stained glass doors to drink, slow dance, and gamble from dusk to dawn every night of every week. The bar itself was an antique, the dark, polished wood shining in the candlelight. The smell of sandalwood permeated the whole building, an expensive incense burned in the interest of attracting those who spent their lives drifting in the direction of the luxurious. There was a gorgeous saltwater fish tank near the stage where the pianist performed; the tropical fish swam leisurely around their tiny reef.

When the bar closed around three o'clock in the morning, the gothic chandelier would dim and the Christmas lights unplugged to leave the space soft and sentimental for the tired employees. The head bartender, a short young man with choppy black hair and a snug red vest overtop of his white button-down, was perhaps the only worker who had never indulged in any of these pastimes. His name was Gavin, and unlike many of his coworkers, his hours spent at The Black Azalea were only out of necessity; it was no one's dream to be a bartender. However, there were many who dreamed of a life as a pianist or an expert gambler, their statuses coveted by patrons and employees alike.

Unfortunately, Gavin's dream had no place in an exclusive bar like this. So, he worked to earn money to pay for his passions: the rent for his seaside flat, his oil paints and canvases, his waterproof camera to photograph the women who wandered down the beach. The pay was decent and the hours odd; he loathed the pretentious atmosphere but was thankful he'd landed a job that allowed him to be free during the daylight hours. Tonight as he scrubbed down the wooden bar with one of the many off-white, embroidered towels of The Black Azalea, he would imagine that his hands were instead smudging a charcoal drawing in his sketchbook, cracked and dry and calloused where he held his tools. Gavin tried to will away the bitter sting of alcohol in his nostrils and replace it with ocean air, salty and biting. His daydreams were abruptly interrupted when one of his coworkers called out to him in a voice worn by years of cigarettes.

"Shot Glass, why don't you join us at the game table for a little while?" one of the waiters called. "Viv is reading cards tonight!" another added. The bartender grimaced at the nickname, a poor jab at his height that had stuck shortly after he was hired; his coworkers were gathered around the silk-covered table of Viviane, a medium who The Black Azalea paid to read tarot cards and tell fortunes. "Mystic Mondays" had proven to be a great way to draw in superstitious patrons on what should have been one of the slowest nights of the week. Once in a while, she would read for the whole staff without pay and it seemed to have been one of those nights.

"I don't quite feel up to it. You guys go on without me," Gavin replied, turning to the pile of dirty glasses he had yet to clean. Due to his aloof nature, his coworkers had taken to teasing him soon after he'd been employed. Their jokes were made in an affectionate manner; it was, after all, very easy to make fun of a reclusive starving artist. Gavin didn't like to be made fun of; this was the ever-present problem with companionship. When you let people close, you permit them to humiliate you.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the flash of Viviane's silver earring as she leaned back in her chair to leer at him. Gavin had drawn that glinting silver earring more times than he'd like to admit; the moment he'd laid eyes on Viviane, he'd been enraptured by her gaze. It followed him home and forced his hand. She hummed softly while she

shuffled her cards; she always seemed to be humming. Her voice had a glow to it; it was thick and sweet like honey as it filled the air around them. She'd hypnotized him into painting her, a siren calling out to him always.

"Aw, you're no fun. Just this once, sweetheart?" the pianist said, waving a hand in the air.

"There might be a pretty lady in your future, Shot Glass," the card dealer mused, joining the fray. He oversaw all the gambling that took place at The Black Azalea.

Gavin paused; he didn't need a fortune teller to inform him there were beautiful women in his future; he had beautiful women in his present and past. However, he never spoke to them; he only painted them and admired them from afar. Sizing them up from a distance like a wolf, only to drive to the lighthouse off the coast near his apartment to capture them in his work. He often drew his subjects laying in the sun on the beach or in the water, sometimes drowning sometimes not; when his subjects did tragically drown, he attributed it to the call of a certain siren who was sprawled across a black rock and surrounded by the frothing white waves of the ocean—her silver earring shining in the light.

Viviane shuffled her tarot cards and offered him a smile, the tight curls of her up-do bouncing in time with her movement. "It's just some fun, Gavin. You've been hunched over that bar all night. You deserve a break," she added.

The bartender sighed; Viviane's clients were rarely dissatisfied, some even returned to thank her for what she'd done for them. The mermaids who floated in and out of his life, passing by his window and filling the pages of his sketchbooks, were ethereal but temporary. What Gavin had longed for over the years was a muse to call his very own.

"What the hell," he said, throwing down the towel he usually kept slung over his shoulder; his companions gave a few cheers in response. Gavin climbed down the staircase that led up to the bar, ducking past the beaded ceiling decorations all the while. His footsteps were muffled against the worn Persian carpet as he made his way across the bar; his gaze was drawn to this fish tank and small lighthouse decoration inside. It was a replica of the one he liked to sit by while he painted the coastline, a refuge of sorts.

Tearing his gaze away from the lighthouse, Gavin pulled a wicker stool out from beneath the table directly across from Viviane's plush armchair, where she performed all her readings. The backside of each had a velvety illustration on it depicting an intricate repeating pattern of crescent moons and constellations; Gavin noticed one card had what looked to be a single drop of wine staining the upper left corner. It bled out beneath the ink and was easy to miss against the already dark illustration. Before he could examine this further, Viviane gathered up her deck with a practiced hand, acrylic nails sliding against the varnish of the cards.

Gavin looked up and the two briefly made eye contact. Her eyes were a dark brown that reflected warmly in the candlelight. Viviane was quite beautiful herself, made more attractive by the air of mystery that trailed behind her. One of his many drawings of her had her suspended in the midnight blue of the deep sea, held up and constricted by dozens of glowing jellyfish. His trance was broken when she blinked slowly before smiling wide.

"Have you ever had your cards read before?" she asked. The other bar staff leaned in close to study the pair; Gavin absently realized they indeed had an audience.

"Oh, no, never. I've never really...had an opportunity," he replied, a bit sheepish.

"Well, it will be my honor to be the first to read them," she began to shuffle her deck wildly; the cards flew in various directions, but Viviane seemed to be in complete control. Her humming grew louder as she worked until it evolved into a delicate song. Gavin saw the wine-stained card flash out of the corner of his eye; as she flipped it over to tuck back into the larger deck with its companions, he was able to identify it. The card with the drop of wine staining its back was of a wedding ceremony where the couple was being married beneath four wands that held up a wreath of flowers, grapes, and ribbons.

"Since it's your first time, let's keep things simple," Viviane continued. "Unless you have a question you'd like the cards to offer you insight on,"

Do I have any real talent?

Where is my perfect match hiding in this wide world?

What is it about her that I keep coming back to

Questions flickered through Gavin's mind, but he kept them to himself.

"...we can do the classic past, present, future spread. We'll just skip the Catholic Cross tonight, ok?" Her cards were now placed in a neat pile between the two.

"Yeah, sure," Gavin said, trying to block out the prying eyes of his coworkers that he could feel from every direction. Viviane hummed in acknowledgment before spreading the cards into that perfect fan once more.

"All you have to do is pick three cards to represent your past, present, and future," Viviane explained. "When you draw the cards, place them in the row; when we flip them over, if they are right-side-up, then they will be read normally. If the card is wrong-side up, that means it is reversed, and this alters the meaning of the card,"

Everyone began to look at Gavin expectantly; he drew the first and second without much of a thought, placing them down in quick succession just as Viviane had instructed. Before drawing the third card, he stopped for a moment. This was the card that would represent his future. Gavin was unfamiliar with the intricacies of tarot, but he wondered if cards read by a talented diviner were set in stone and if those cards could be manipulated. The wine-stained card peeked out at him from the fan of cards, teasing him and sending winks his way, practically begging to be drawn. He placed a finger on the card and began to pull it from the deck, slowly at first and then more confidently. If magic was arbitrary and relied on intention, then this card foretelling love and permanence, control, might trick the universe into sending goodwill his way. Gavin found himself picturing himself and Viviane, pretty in black and white, taking vows on the beach; he smothered the thought.

Viviane's expression brightened and she nodded encouragingly at the first card, prompting him to flip it after all three had been drawn.

"The moment of truth!" the pianist whispered excitedly.

Gavin flipped the first card in the row over almost aggressively; it was entitled The Hermit and depicted a man alone on a mountaintop holding a gas lamp and looking out into the distance. It was upside down, reversed.

"There's our Gavin!" one of the waiters laughed, others joining in around him. Viviane ignored the spectators.

"The Hermit is a card in the Major Arcana, the most powerful twenty-two cards of the seventy-eight in tarot, and this one is to represent your past. The Hermit isolates himself from society willingly to engage in introspection. This is not the case for you as your card is reversed; when reversed, The Hermit spells loneliness and isolation. In your past and perhaps still now, you've longed for companionship but faced rejection more times than most would like to admit," She read aloud.

Gavin raised a brow; he'd never particularly thought of himself as lonely, perse, but it would be a lie for him to say he hadn't been "longing for companionship" for quite some time now. It made him think back to the nights he'd sat in front of his easel, hand cramped and unable to produce sketches of anything but Viviane, her sing-song voice singing in his ears.

"Poor Shot Glass, alone at the bar every night," the card dealer snickered. Viviane nodded at Gavin to continue flipping the cards. He tried to block out his coworkers' chatter and proceeded to flip over the second card; this one was entitled The Fool and depicted a young, carefree man skipping near the edge of a cliff and carrying a small sack of belongings. This card was also upside down, though, reversed.

"Damn, that's a tad harsh," a waiter commented. "...you're not the brightest bulb in the box, but I don't know if I'd call you a *fool*,"

Viviane ignored this quip as well. "The Fool is also a card within the Major Arcana. If your last card is as well, this

reading may be of great importance to you; this card represents your present. Though The Fool may sound somewhat harsh, its meaning is not always negative. The Fool can mean innocence and new beginnings as he is a free spirit; caring not for what the world thinks of him, he chooses not to dwell on an idea or in a place for long. Your card, however, is reversed," she said.

Gavin narrowed his eyes and stared down at his two revealed cards, trying to understand what this "spontaneous act" may be referring to. His cheeks were suddenly hot with embarrassment as he remembered last week when he'd offered Viviane a free drink when she came into work looking rather tense. He was sure what he'd been expecting, maybe a short conversation or just a gentle "Thank you, Gavin." She had politely declined the offer, saying she couldn't afford to be tipsy on the job. He was mortified for even suggesting it. Had he stepped too far? Gavin looked up and met Viviane's gaze, suspicious but unsure of what.

"...When The Fool is reversed, he speaks to recklessness and risk-taking. In tandem with your previous card, I'd assume that to escape your loneliness, you acted spontaneously and this may not have been in your best interest," Viviane finished. The spontaneous act would've had to have been something bigger than a simple invitation to drink; how do tarot cards define the present? A thought bubbled to the top of his brain, whispering that it may have been unwise to sit for this reading. Gavin chose to ignore it, almost aggressively.

"Well, the most important thing is that you have a bright future ahead of you. Let's see the last card!" the pianist exclaimed.

"Yeah, Shot Glass, let's see what you got," another waiter said. Gavin rolled his eyes before flipping over his last card, subsequently surprised to find himself face-to-face with a card called The Tower. The art on the card showed a tall stone tower crumbling due to a lightning strike and people falling to their doom as a result. Only after a moment was he struck with the realization that this was not the card with the wedding illustration; where had it gone?

"Your last card and the one to represent your future is The Tower, the only card you drew right-side up. All Major Arcana cards tonight, you should think carefully about the decisions you make moving forward. The Tower is a card of great misfortune. It represents chaos and unavoidable disaster," she said.

Gavin was taken aback and ground his teeth together in an attempt to create something he could focus on. Anxiety was hot as it clouded his senses, filling his mind with the buzzing of hummingbird wings.

"A moment of great pain is approaching quickly, perhaps due to the spontaneous decision made by The Fool; this will pass in time, but you will be unable to prevent it," Viviane finished; when Gavin looked up at her, the beginnings of anger flaring in his chest, she looked faintly amused.

"Oh, honey, what a bummer," the pianist lamented.

"That's tough," a waiter said.

His life and dreams could not crumble; there could be no disaster, it could not be real. There was no reason he should've drawn this card; when Viviane shuffled her tarot deck, he'd seen that the wine-stained card depicted a wedding ceremony and not a tall tower crumbling beneath the wrath of nature.

His mind drifted to all the moments he'd shared with Viviane, or the ones he'd thought they'd shared. Passing glances, tiny waves, slamming his sketchbook closed on the bar when she walked too close. Never in his life had he been so taken with someone. Foolishly, Gavin thought this invitation to have his cards read might have been a proposal of sorts. The overpowering current of shame pulled him beneath the frothing waves and filled his lungs and stomach with salt.

Gavin had heard the tales of sirens all his life, they colored his childhood with deception. Stories whispered around candlelit tables of innocents being lured to their doom by the sweet song of a beautiful woman. Just like a naive sailor, he found himself enraptured by Viviane's song, moving closer to taste whatever euphoria she might have to offer him. When the sailor was close enough, the siren would dash him against the jagged rocks of the ocean; Gavin could almost feel his bones splintering against stone when Viviane overturned his last card.

He and Viviane were engaged in the most intense bout of eye contact he'd ever experienced; between the magically changing cards and the look on her face, he was sure she'd tricked him. She had a light grin on her face, soft enough to be mistaken for amusement. He knew better than to fall for it. Gavin didn't know how she did it, but he was sure Viviane had tricked him.

He was right to have drawn her as a siren.