

Honorable Mention #3

Diamonds of the Underworld

Barbara Parker, Radford, VA

The Caged Bird Cafe's decor was entirely bird themed. This month, the art on the walls was all mythical birds.

"Is this art all about harpies?" Kasper asked.

"Nope. Mythical birds." Desdemona pointed to a sign. "There is a harpy corner."

Kasper moved forward and sat at the booth in the harpy corner. "Look at how much wall space the phoenix gets, and we get a corner," he said.

"Well, they captured our likeness." Desdemona took a selfie with a particularly ugly painting of a harpy. "Don't you think?"

They laughed.

"You have to admit. We got great hair, but why are we always topless?" Desdemona said.

They laughed again.

"Why are there never any men in these paintings?" Kasper said.

"Calm down there, ladybug." Desdemona teased, pointing to a painting. "This one kind of looks like a man. In fact, this one kind of looks like you: long, blond hair, high cheekbones. I mean, you even have the bird legs."

Kasper was not amused because he never skipped leg day at the gym. "Mara, why are we here?"

"I wanted you to see these paintings," she said.

"Shouldn't we be out ..."

Mara cut him off. "Trust the process."

"I see harpies still travel in threes," a male voice said, sliding into the booth next to Mara.

"Maddox," Mara said.

"You do know you're a bird of Rihanna, and there are three of you," Desdemona said.

"Touché," Maddox said. "Why are you here?"

"Why are YOU here?"

"Darling, it's karaoke night." Hamish, another bird of Rihanna, approached the table.

"So do you plan to lure us to sleep?" Desdemona said.

"Oh, Christ," Kasper said. "Maeve will be singing 'Rihanna' for sure." He stood up and imitated Maeve's Welsh accent singing Fleetwood Mac. He even spun around like Stevie Nicks.

They chuckled. The birds of Rihanna did not.

"You have a problem with Stevie Nicks?" Hamish asked.

"No one except Lindsey Buckingham has a problem with Stevie Nicks," Mara said.

Kasper spoke. "I'm just saying, you could shake it up. Maybe sing ABBA or, you know, a Rihanna song. I'm sure Maeve could do a brilliant rendition of 'Diamonds.'"

"That's just blasphemy," Desdemona said.

"You think you can do better? Go ahead," Maddox said.

It was common knowledge that harpies cannot sing. Sure, if they get drunk enough, they'll try. But Mara had never met a harpy that could truly sing. Harpies are guardians of the underworld. They communicate with the dead. If needed, they'll snatch up a bad guy and deliver them to Hades.

It was a tradeoff, Mara thought. Be scary or belt out a Celine Dion song. She'd rather be scary.

"A few shots and I'll sing," Desdemona offered.

The birds of Rhianna cringed.

Maeve walked in. She looked beautiful, with her dark hair and dark eyes. She wore a bright orange dress that fit like a glove. She approached the stage and spoke to the person who was hosting the karaoke event.

Mara watched him respond. There was no doubt that the birds of Rhianna had a light about them; people were naturally drawn to them. Harpies had the opposite effect on people. Only those who had a little darkness in them were drawn to harpies.

There were only a few people in the café when they arrived, but it slowly filled up until the place was packed. Maeve stood onstage.

“Lord, here we go, Stevie,” Kasper muttered.

But when she opened her mouth, she sang, “Wind Beneath My Wings.” Everyone was transfixed. Here we go, Mara thought. Time was about to slow down, and the humans would fall asleep.

Maeve’s beautiful voice and the fact that she wore orange, the only color the dead can see, meant the dead would appear and the harpies would need to stop them.

There were a few precious seconds between when the humans slept and the dead appeared. This was when they’d spot their target, a hound from the underworld. Yep, Hades was not a responsible pet owner and his dog, not the three-headed one but the cute little one, was loose in the world.

The bigger problem was that the gate to the underworld had been opened. A hound of the underworld, no matter how cute, was dangerous. And Mara knew the birds of Rhianna could not help themselves. Their beautiful voices were a beacon of light, and a hound must hunt.

The hound would appear here for sure. Only once he was caught could the gate be locked again.

Time stopped and the humans slept. Mara heard the tick of the second hand of the watch she carried in her pocket. Then the dog, appropriately called Trouble, appeared and ran straight for Maeve. He was followed by a group of the dead.

Mara was on her feet, headed straight for the dog. Desdemona and Kasper jumped up to stop the dead. Mara wrestled the snarling dog to the ground. Then she opened her wings and flew to Hades with him.

By the time she returned to the café, the dead were gone and the gate was locked. The humans were awake, and Maeve was off the stage.

Kasper sat in the harpy booth. “You could have told us the plan.”

“We’d have all tried to catch the dog. That wouldn’t have worked,” Desdemona said. “I don’t like surprises, but in this case, it was well-played.”

This was high praise from her, and Mara smiled.

Maeve appeared at their table. “Thank you for your help.”

Mara wanted to launch into a lecture about using their gift safely. But the birds of Rhianna were who they were. They couldn’t help their light any more than the harpies could control their darkness.

On stage, Hamish and Maddox were singing “Diamonds” by Rhianna.

Barbara Parker is an educator and writer currently living in Virginia. Her books, *Crossties* by Barbara Purbaugh and *Ms. P’s Guide to Going to Hell* by Babs Parker, are available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.