

# *Draco Campestris*

By Sarah Monette, illustration by Mack Sztaba

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## I.

The Museum owns eighty-nine specimens of the genus *Draco*. It is unlikely that there will be any additions to the collection, for the adit to the array of arcs in which dragons are found has become increasingly unstable in the last two centuries. For that same reason, very little work has been done with the specimens since the last of the great dragon hunters willed his collection to the Museum one hundred thirty-two years ago. They were once a prized exhibit, with their own salle, the Salle des Dragons, but after the great taxonomic scandal under the previous Director, they became an embarrassment rather than a glory, banished to a cavernous hall in the sublevels of the Museum where they stood, shrouded in layers of yellowing plastic, their great eye sockets full of darkness deeper than shadows, unvisited, unwept, unheeded.

But not unremembered.

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## II.

The Lady Archangel was no longer in favor with the Empress.

That much was certain, and the Museum buzzed and rustled with the rumors that strove to create the story around that fact. The visitors chattered of it while the tour guides looked remote and superior and squirreled away every tidbit to be shared later over tea. The curators speculated, in slow, disjointed conversations; the visiting academics asked nervously if there was any danger of an uprising, for the Lady Archangel was popular, and the papers reported unrest in those parts of the Centre where her charity had been most needed and most freely given.

No, said the curators, the tour guides, even the custodians. There had been no uprising in the Centre since the short and bloody reign of the long-ago Emperor Carolus, and there would not be one now. But when the academics inquired as to the probable fate of the lady herself, they were met with grim headshakes and the sad, gentle advice to concentrate on their research. Whether it was sin or treason the Lady Archangel stood accused of, if she could not prove her innocence, she would be beheaded at the culmination of Aquarius. Such was the penalty for falling when one climbed as high as the Lady Archangel had climbed, and though the Empress was just, she was not merciful. She could not be, and still hope to maintain her rule.

It was not for mere poetry that her throne was called the Seat of Dragons.

## III.

The Director has a dream. So she says, and no one in the Museum would dare to say otherwise, no matter how much they may doubt her ability to dream. Everyone knows she does not sleep.

Perhaps it is only a metaphorical dream, but even so, her shining coils are restless with it, her great yellow eyes (which only blink when she remembers that they ought to) hypnotizing. There are rumors that they were the eyes of a basilisk, and somehow that seems more likely than the idea that the Director can dream. Her metal claws score gouges in the vat-grown teak of her desk, and when she leaves her office, the tithe-children come creeping to sand and polish, as they have been doing for years, so that no unwary visitor may catch a splinter in the soft pads of his or her fingers.

