

Lu Qi lived in a city of the dead. In little matchbox rows they lay, their bones crumbling into dust and mixing with the marble sarcophagi that lurked like stray teeth. There was the one he called Jo, slumped by the ash tree, with his jaunty grin and ribs that rattled in the wind. Regina, splayed like a queen bejewelled with desperate gold. And the unnamed little skeleton that sat in the crypt and watched.

When his crew had first marooned him he had been afraid of the dead. *Something horrible must have happened*, he had thought, shivering in a cold half-light after the larger sun set. *Something that burned away the living, leaving an empty necropolis*— and, a century down the line, its lone explorer. But as time pressed on it didn't matter. Dead or not, they were his friends, and without them he would not have lived.

If he had been a bit better of an explorer and realised some alien life looked like human death, he would have been honoured that they thought he was their friend as well.