

The Life of Clay

I sometimes reflect on the long-past afternoon when one poor salesman sold my father living clay for a bare millionth of its worth. Not only my own life changed, impossibly and permanently. Had the salesman been waylaid, or slaughtered in in a boarder-war...then the world would never have known the blessing and the curse of unity under an emperor so much more, and so much less, than human.

I imagine for myself the Taihang mountains, gazing down at my childhood home of Handan. It is ruined, now. From the top of a mountain, the city must look much the same as when Handan was the prosperous capital of Zhou. It is a sad truth that all the grief and tears of the defeated have a small echo, which vanishes almost as soon as it has begun. Surely, when my emperor and his terracotta army are at last unearthed, the king of that epoch will not know which of our eyes has wept for a slain brother, a missing father, or a conquered home. When I contemplate the city of Handan from the height of a mountain-range, there are no faces which turn upwards to accuse me. But, a shiver runs the length of my spine nonetheless.

Did the age of water end an endless bloodshed between our warring states, punish the depraved, and reward virtue? It may be true, or it may be a lie I repeat to myself, to assuage a guilty conscience. Did we overstep the boundaries of mortals, and spite the laws of heaven? Possibly true. Perhaps.

Putting aside the hypotheticals of morality and state, which I never could answer, I turn and consider the husband I might have had, or the children. After the afternoon I first touched living clay, I was severed from a household life. A life which would have been prosperous, surely, for although I am no beauty, my father's wealth and connections would have left me a sought-after bride. The domestic life would have come naturally to me, I am certain. The life of clay was natural as well, of course. Perhaps, even more so, because, in the end, the clay touched directly upon my spirit rather than mere birth or temperament. My clay arms and legs are so vividly a part of me that, should they over-dry, or shatter under the pressure of the earth, I would weep more dearly at the loss than at the severing of my original skin and bone. The clay is not part of me, the clay *is* my own self. Although I often saw my role as a vessel for its machinations, but I no longer credit that thought. If I have gained any wisdom in my age it is this: once something, or someone, is set in motion, it takes on a life of its own. So too have I taken a life I was never expecting. I have led it up and down mountains, across the sea and under the earth, since that one long-ago afternoon.

## **Chapter 1**

My father was a merchant. Even when he gave up his trade for politics, his rare was the good which slipped beneath his gaze unvalued. Yes, even now that he is twenty-five years

buried, the voice of Lü Buwei rings in my ear whenever I powder a fragment of cinnabar, or send for a new batch of clay.

*How much did you pay for that? —and what, my daughter, will be the return on your investment?*

I used to take it upon myself to clean and arrange his store-room, because it was separated from the room where my late father did business by only the thinnest of curtains. Not only could I hear every whisper, but, in high daylight, I could make out gestures and nods from their backlit silhouettes.

Of the women in the family, that privilege was mine alone. My mother had enough chores on her hands, and my other sisters were either too idle or too clumsy for that important task. So: I was in the corner of his shop, straightening bolts of silk and bundles of long-burning dugong candles, expensive ceramic vessels, still more expensive bronze, and, of course, imported glass. Eager to deserve the trust he placed in me, I never dropped or chipped an item in our stores. I took great care aligning them on the shelves and counters, so that the metal sparkled, the lacquer glowed, and even the cheapest earthenware seemed hemmed at the edges with gold.

Of course, the wares on his shelf were my father's slightest business. No wandering peddler, he sent others to the market with his more commonplace goods, and kept the others in our store-room for those who knew his reputation well enough to seek him out. Yet, even the gentlemen who came to barter in alliances were reassured by the worldly wealth. His goods were ordered and beautiful and bright. He was as meticulous as he was shrewd: it was there for the visitor to see if he so chose. So, Lü Buwei was respected, and even those who despised merchants would excuse him his profession. In his presence, they did not haggle.

In an age when kings scrambled to keep order, and squandered the lives of their men, my father's word was as law.

“And what, sir, would I want with a full load of your clay?” He began, and the face of the salesman plummeted.

“Not—a—the quantity could be less than you are perhaps imagining, sir,” the salesman managed. He was kneading something his hand so vigorously that I could see the motion through the sheer curtain between us. From his voice, he sounded young. “It comes all the way from Zifu, you must understand. Thus, it is a ship-load, not so heavy as one mean when one says ‘load’ in the state of Zhao.”

My father did not answer. He left the salesman to consider his own error, in insulting his buyer's understanding of regional measurements.

I paused, then, leaving a lovely jade rosette at an unflattering angle, and waiting to hear what came next. The salesman had been given his opportunity to excuse himself from the store—but there he remained. Kneading something between his fingers. With expectation laid heavily in the silence of the room.

“And what, sir, would I want with *any* of your clay?” My father continued. “Do you think I own a potter's studio? Or should I carry it to the market on my back, and see if anyone there has a use for it?”

The poor salesman's voice set to trembling, but he must have been a brave man to persevere.

“I thought that might be the case,” he said. “But I have travelled a month out of my way to show it to you, on an alchemist's advice.”

My father whistled through his teeth; I could imagine the twinkle in his eye right now. I knew that the salesman had just done himself a favor. A load of clay might be worthless, but a magician's opinion was not.

“Which alchemist, then, would have me be a buyer of raw clay?”

“He did not give me a name, but he made a stone wall shiver with his art.”

Not an alchemist then, but still interesting.

“I do not wish,” my father said, “To cause you trouble, or him embarrassment. Send your load of clay—no more than five can carry—to *this* address,” he said, adding the name of an acquaintance's warehouse a mile out from the city. He named a price much lower than the salesman had suggested who, cheeks still flushed with feeling, passed that sample of clay he had been kneading into my fathers' hands, and then made his escape from the shop.

My father waited a moment, to make sure the salesman was not about to turn around. I straightened the jade rosette on the shelf, and I fought the urge to smile. My father opened the curtain to the store room.

“Well, child” he said, his moustache twitching with mirth, “I have something for you to add to the rubbish heap.”

He placed the clay in my hand, and it slid from my fingers.

No, not as a jug drops from a clumsy child's hands, or a full pot slips from a weak woman's arms...this struggled between my fingers like a frog. Grey and sinewy like a bird's neck. Fluid as water itself. The living clay left me death-cold well up to my wrist, a cold so deep and terrible that I could not have come near it if I had plunged my arms so deep into a well in the dead of winter.

Chilled blood coursed through my veins, all the way to my heart—I gasped from the pain, but for an hour at least, I was too cold to speak, and insensible to my environment. The last scene from that encounter, which has fixed itself within my mind forever, is the broken creature of clay drying in shambles on the ground. Later, I would learn that surviving that encounter was little short of a miracle. The clay must have appraised me well, for, if it had wanted to, the clay could have frozen the blood in my veins.

When I came to, I was in the store room. All of my father’s valuables, which I used to upkeep so carefully, had been mounded in the corner of the room along with the ill-swept ashes of a heating fire. I lay covered in a quilt, on a floor still piping-hot, and wept with the distress when my right hand refused to move. I could not bid my fingers to curl, I could not articulate my wrist, and even my elbow was quite difficult to bend.

My father hovered at the edge of the curtain, and spoke to me without entering the store room--though, remarkably, it must have been he himself who had re-arranged the room, as no other would have dared treat his wares with such disregard, and, furthermore the hands which had swept the floor were clearly unused to the task.

“My daughter, you will tell no one,” he said. “Not your cousins, or your sisters, you grandmother, your aunts, or the servants in the scullery. Not your old brothers or uncles, if they return alive from the wars, may that be the case, and certainly not your mother.”

I promised, of course, but although I did not utter a single word to the household, my encounter with the clay showed itself in my countenance and demeanor.

For a while, I lay in the store room, trying to warm my arm to life, but eventually I realized I would be missed long before any feeling stirred my fingers besides a heavy, aching

cold. I walked into the courtyard of our home, blinking at the ordinariness of the household bustle, the glow of flowers and imported glass décor, and the brightness of the sun.

By that same evening's close, I had caused a stir amongst my sisters by neglecting those of my duties which I could not discreetly perform one-handed. One of my younger cousins pulled me aside, and with the best of intentions, asked what I was troubling me—I could not answer with the truth, and I did not wish to lie, so I merely stood dumb as a mound of earth, and she left shaking her head. My mother's feet were aching that day, still swollen from the weight of carrying my youngest brother, but I pretended not to see the pain she suffered, because to tend her, I would necessarily reveal the disability I suffered, and she would ask the reason.

The weight of my promise, the biting chill still welling up through the blood of my arm, and the pressure of conflicting expectations overcame me. I rose early from a dinner barely tasted, pleading illness. Unable to meet the eyes of a single person in the room, I hurried to my bedroom, and then stole back to the store-room. From that day, until I left Handan for good, I confined myself to that room. The story spread through the house that I was dying; sometimes, I heard servants' whispers through the sheer curtain. *Has Lu Jin died yet? Her food has returned un-eaten, even the melons she used to love. What could she have done, that they held no funeral? And No, she is not dead yet. I cleaned her chamber-pot only yesterday, and those are not a dead woman's leavings.* I have no doubt at all that my family grieved my loss in private, but they never spoke of it loudly in the courtyard, and so for many years, life in the household of Lü Buwei continued much as it had before.

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When, after my close brush with death, my father spoke to me through the curtain, I assumed that I had done the house a great wrong. When Xu Fu, the alchemist, came to live with

us, I quickly learned that I had mistaken solemnity for displeasure, and the seeds of plotting for embarrassment.

Xu Fu was a cheerful man, remarkably, unshakably so. His laugh was embarrassingly loud, he belched grandly whenever he ate, and had a great respect for the “scents of nature.” Although his conversation could be indelicate, I will freely admit that I could not have learned so much about living clay under the supervision of any other teacher.

The stores of living clay arrived a week after Xu Fu. He wandered around the house, stopping in the store-room occasionally to mention an odd fact—such as that clay will float or sink in water, depending on its shape—and then disappearing to the other side of the curtain.

When the living clay arrived, it was stowed in one of my brothers’ empty bedrooms, with access barred to all but the alchemist, or so he told me. The same evening the clay came, Xu Fu brought a ball no larger than his thumbnail into the room, along with several heated bricks. My teacher laid the bricks on the floor around him, and then showed me the extent of his ability to animate earth. First, Xu Fu held one of the bricks, the grin on his face fixing with pain. Then, sweat pouring from his ample forehead—and the odor of exertion so strong that I moved to the opposite corner of the room—Xu Fu rolled the bead between his palms. He lowered the clay to the edge, as delicately as if it were a baby, and the bead rolled in a small, deliberate circle.

Round and around it went, like a spinning top, but occasionally reversing its direction.

Xu Fu warmed his palms on a heated block, for a full ten minutes before he spoke.

“I never would have sold the clay if I had blood like yours,” he said, out of breath, but no longer looking so pained as when he had been charming the clay. “I would have had the world in my palm like so—but there’s life for you!”



“What could it possibly be good for?” I asked him, for the pain in my arm was still raw, and seemingly worse by the day. “What would you, or anyone else, want with earth that sucks the heat from your blood, and the very life from your veins?” Two months of self-imposed confinement, in clutter, half-light and isolation, had compromised my temperament. It was fortunate, miraculous, for me that I had found a teacher who hardly seemed to notice, much less care, when I was rude—as I often was when I fretted at my new life in the store room during the first, most difficult months.

“If you asked that question to your father, he would answer, ‘for making money,’” Xu Fu answered. “I would imagine, that is why he has dropped his ordinary businesses and begun skulking around the court, surveying the Zhao kingdom as if it were a ware already in his storehouse—I say this with the greatest respect for the man, of course, but watch that you don’t overhear too much or you’ll also be guilty of treason.”

The answer stunned me. If I had not been wallowing, I might have wondered more about my father’s absence from the room adjoining the store-room. I had assumed that my presence was distasteful, since my first disaster with the clay. I had taken his occasional visits to the other side of the curtain as a sign of pity, but not genuine interest. I looked at Xu Fu with disbelief, hardly willing to believe digest the knowledge that he was dealing in riskier commodities, at risk to himself and our household, for the cursed clay.

I looked at the spinning bead on the warm block; by now, it was weaving and wobbling. Like a dying insect. Right then, I wanted to put out my hand and squash it, but I was afraid the touch would damage me.

Xu Fu continued, insensitive to my shock. “Now, Lu Jin, if you asked me that question before he wrote to me about you, then I would have said the clay was good for selling to people

willing to take a chance on the stuff of legends—for clay men, clay armies are not unheard of, although they have been for some time, and furthermore, the goddess Nüwa is said by certain scholars to have crafted all mankind out of clay. I intended to sell your father a load of charms, that he might unload it on those credible and proud enough to believe that magic ought to spring from their persons to fill a well of magic.”

“Teacher, it *clearly* does not,” I answered, digging my fingernails into the limp skin of my right hand. It was patchy with white and black, and looked diseased to my eyes, although the discoloration had spread no further than my elbow.

Xu Fu looked at me thoughtfully, for a minute, then left. He returned, just as I curled up to sleep, with a dish of water, a dish of cooking oil, and a burning candle. He passed me the dish of water, and took the oil for himself. Gingerly, Xu Fu lit the oil; it burned so brightly and wide that I was afraid the room was not big enough to contain the burst, and that either my teacher, myself, the curtain, or my father’s silks, would scorch. Luckily, the oil burned out, with a few of Xu Fu’s glossy whiskers as the only casualties of the entire incident.

Then, laughing, he passed the candle to me.

I understood, and I doused it in the water.

“The clay does not care *who* you are,” he finished, a smile of satisfaction defining his face. “It is a matter of the elements which make you up. It does not make you better, than me, of course. I would not drink that oil to sustain me.”

Nevertheless, it was a week before I could bring myself to mold living clay. My father’s patience must have been wearing thin, because, I later learned, he had already managed to orchestrate the adoption of Yiren—prince of Qin, hostage in the Zhao court—by the childless Lady Huayang, wife of Lord Anguo, the Qin heir apparent. A shrewd move, for the old king of

Qin was failing at the time, and the health of Lord Anguo was hardly better. Moreover, Yiren was a nervous, malleable spirit, with a deep sense of honor and of gratitude to his benefactors. Indeed, this was the point my father would tie his life to the throne of the Qin. Yet, as my father would have been the first to say, products of a certain nature require a certain price. In expressing his willingness to returning the hostage prince Yiren to the State of Qin, Zhao had made Lü Buwei aware of a dire need for soldiers.

The first creatures I made of clay were not precisely what Zhao had anticipated, when my father whispered of loyal, fearless, bloodless fighters. I began with flowers.

It was a painstaking process, at first. I would heat the floor, and wrap my entire body in quilts, and surround the clay with heated bricks. I would wrap my left hand in cloth, and then grasp an ivory hairpin as best as I could. I carved and flattened small sections of clay, which was difficult, and then layered them on top of each other, which was much harder. At the end, I would touch the flower, as quickly as possible, with the smallest finger of my left hand, and then pass it through a candle-flame.

The bloom would warm to life, then, and bake then and there, without need of a kiln. It was a joyful thing, a moment of such pure happiness, to watch my creations finish themselves. The flowers might thin and refine the edges of my rough petals, or spring miniature thorns where I had only thought to create a smooth stem. Like a spark finding oil, the living clay needed so little encouragement that even the sloppy work of my wrapped left hand inspired it to become beautiful. Once the clay appeared dry and warm in color, it was safe, even pleasant, to touch. I could not bear to destroy a finished flower, and so I kept them all, even as my work improved. My distaste for the clay dissipated, like a quarrel between lovers, which left us all the more eager

for contact. Once my creations had attained a certain delicacy, Xu Fu sent for array of the finest pigments, in every color man could mix.

“Selected from my own chemical stocks, Lu Jin” he told me, as he tossed me the near-priceless bag. “So use them at *least* as carefully as I would.”

Xu Fu told me what each was made of, where it came from, what it cost, and how it would look once dry and cooked. I spent entire days contemplating the colors, and how to blend them. The flowers bloomed within my mind, far more vivid than any green thing growing in the soil. But I had no more than to lift a brush to realize that I was incapable of bringing that fullness to my clay. I asked for Xu Fu’s help.

He painted the flowers for me, exactly as I described, with more skill of the brush than I have ever attained. I peered under the curtain of the store room as he placed one or two of the finer pieces in a decorative bowl in the courtyard. I almost cried with satisfaction when a cousin, whose face I had not contemplated in years, stopped to stare in wonder at the beauty of the artificial flower.

That day, Xu Fu told me that my next task would be to craft a hand. I bit my lip, aware of the reason, but, I could not help laughing at the cleverness his cheerful manner belied. I would never be content, now to bring clay to life, dry and colorless. With sudden clarity, I saw every mote of dust in the store room. The treasures which had once overawed me with their value and brightness were poor indeed in comparison with what I might create—it made sense to me, finally, why my father would have swept aside and abandoned those goods once the abundance of my power became clear. For so many long months now, I had near buried myself alive, and now the color and textures sparked with such poignancy in my soul that I would bury myself in them.

It was not such a horrible business as one might imagine to cut off the lifeless limb. It was hideous to watch indeed, but I had lost all feeling in my right arm, besides the ache of blood chilling in the extremities of the fingers and then re-entering my elbow. I deliberately leave no specific instructions, for I have since learned how this magic may be misapplied; suffice to say that we gathered the blood lost in the operation, and fed it into the hand and forearm of clay. Suffice to say that the hand was joined to mine, and that it had a delicacy of articulation which my natural hand could never have attained. Suffice, indeed, to say that of the works I have wrought with clay, this was among the goriest but also the least terrible.

Suffice to say that, with an arm of living clay, I could imbue clay with the vital spark in a more controlled manner. An ant requires less warmth than a duck does, a horse requires a frightening amount, and a clay human tugs at the spirit, asking for more vitality than it contain, and more than a body can give.

## **Chapter 2**

The first men I made were hardly deserving of the name—they were rough-hewn, poorly-decorated creatures. I found that I could hardly bring myself to invest them with life, for their only purpose was that of dying on the battlefield. At the time, I told myself that it was my duty to my father and teacher to create what they asked of me.

If I could have made them in a hurry, perhaps the thought would have rung with truth to the end, but that was not the case.

First came the man who fell apart, only half-finished. I built him solidly out of the clay—limbs, head, central cavity—and he lacked the support that bones lend to us men and

women of flesh. I moped for a week, nearly, before beginning once more, telling the alchemist that making a man was surely above my abilities, and that it was cruel to expect so much of me.

Xu Fu nibbled at the food I had left upon my plate while he considered, then pushed aside the dish, and left the room with a wink.

Apparently, he spoke to my father, although I know that was a task he avoided whenever possible. For, within a week, a young potter's apprentice had been hired away from his master, and led blindfolded to the store-room.

He had a reddish, sloppy face, and a listless temperament which to me bespoke low-class so I wondered why Xu Fu thought the man could be trusted, and for a moment I questioned my teacher's judgement. After all, I had been tasked to build a military force, and a secret weapon loses its potency once the secret is spread out by careless lips.

"I'm supposed to teach a *girl*?" were the first words he said, when Xu Fu took off his blindfold. Of course, I realized, as I watched the youth's face turn from golden-red to a state of solid magenta—with myself as a pupil, he would hardly brag to his fellow apprentices that he had been hired to teach someone sculpture under strictest vows of secrecy. He would invent some other story—that he had been brought to assess some fortifications, perhaps, but never that he had taught a merchant's daughter his craft in a curtained-off store room, under the supervision of an alchemist who, apparently, thought the whole situation a magnificent lark.

Ma Dahzu grumbled as he showed me to wind strips of clay around each other into a hollow torso which did not sag in on itself. He frowned all the while that he showed me to make molds, looking at me as if it were I the vulgar one. In truth, I remembered then that not all merchants are as highly regarded as my father, and thus, in technicality Ma Dahzu outclassed me. Yet, my hands—the flesh and the clay—were smooth, while his were callused; even living

in a store-room with rare visitors, I presented myself elegantly, in soft, rippling silks which he, in his coarse garments, would not afford even if his skills doubled. At the time, I did not know why his displeasure at the sight of me had bitten my spirit so. But, then, I had so little exposure, then, to men of my age, that perhaps it is no surprise I let his insulting regard irritate me to the point where I felt that it was *I*, not he, who wore a plain and scratchy tunic.

“You can leave, then,” I said, “Without your pay, if you find it so insulting to teach me.”

Xu Fu frowned, then, and softened my words to the potter’s apprentice.

“She did not mean to insult you, my friend” I heard him whisper, and then, to my mortification, “Quite the opposite.”

Ma Dahzu made a stifled sound, and looked at the floor until a dreadful silence had filled the entire room. It was his embarrassment which gave me an upper hand. I took every chance to brush his hand while he taught me the artisan way with sculpting, over the course of a month. By the end, we were stealing secret kisses, sending Xu Fu out with pleas of missing tools, although, Xu Fu, no fool and well into his middle age, surely knew what we were up to. I had learned enough of womanhood from before my confinement to take no greater liberties, or risk a bastard child. It was a simpler, more innocent love, concealed in snideness and blushes and brushes of the hand—in my forgetting, or pretending to forget, that he had pimples and his forgetting, or pretending to forget, that he should not be teaching me his craft—which imbued the first clay soldier I ever finished with a poet’s tender heart.

The potter’s apprentice had left the house in his blindfold, and the alchemist was asleep. The clay man lay finished, with a sword in his hand, and a face that looked suspiciously like that of Ma Dahzu. I tossed and turned, unable to find a comfortable way in which to sleep, knowing that I should wait until the morning—but I could not rest. So, I stood, and wrapped myself tight

in a quilt. I lit a single candle, and reached my clay hand forward. Gently, I touched the clay lips, and watched them tremble to life.



Synopsis of the remaining chapters:

*This story is based on the history of the rule of Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi. I intend to follow just about all of the historical events very closely, save for the fact that many of them are the intentional or unintentional result of the story's protagonist (Lu Jin) and her ability to work with living clay, at that certain individuals who appear as humans in the historical text of the time aren't exactly that, and that thousands of individuals who appear as clay in the Emperor's mausoleum, aren't only what they appear.*

LJ makes clay soldiers, some of whom she has a difficult time convincing to leave and fight, but which she manages in the end, although unsure in her heart whether it is right. In the middle of this, her living brothers die at war.

After much political machination, Lu Buwei, with the influence won from Lu Jin's clay army places Yiren on the throne of Qin as King Zhuangxiang, with LB himself as chancellor—LJ assumes she will be done with clay-crafting for others' benefits, and intends to forge a mid-ranking identity for herself at the court, hopes that Lady Zhao, the dancing girl from LB household, will not recognize her. King Z dies after three years though (potentially through some accident involving the clay? Or, simply, that LB picked a candidate that he knew would be weak enough to allow him influence, but didn't count on the man's ill health).

When King Z's son, the future emperor Qin Shi Huangdi, ascends power, LB is the regent, but along with the power comes danger, as LB's relationship with Lady Z becomes problematic. LB asks LJ to make a suitor for Lady Z, to distract and create a side-scandal, which LJ does—only to find out (as she could have seen before, from the first clay soldiers), that the clay suitor Lao Ai does not intend to do her bidding. She made him to be fearless of danger, and absolutely committed to getting what he wants for himself—so LA goes beyond simply seducing the dowager queen, and attempts a coup. The coup backfires on LB, who commits suicide rather than be executed.

LJ is safe in the court, due to her false identity and the fact that LB never divulged the secret of her clay magic, so only a few, mainly Xu Fu, Ma Dahzu, and Lady Z, have an inkling of her power. However, she blames herself for her father's death, and generally has a rough time of it. Lady Z, convinced that it is XF who had the clay magic, pleads with him to help, which he relays to her. At first, LJ refuses—and sneaks out of the court for a while, with only the clay on her back. She is a nobody and a nothing. During that time, she loses some of her snobbery, but also finds she misses the sense of control she had over her life when she made the clay. She also realizes that, to most people, it is not the personality of the emperor and the pettier power struggles at court which affect them—and regrets throwing away her chance to make changes in the world because of a personal dislike.

It is when her stores of clay begin to run dry, and her clay soldiers come back in need of extra limbs, that she realizes she will not be able to stay in hiding. She returns, and throws herself into working for the empire from behind the scenes. She becomes confidante of the replacement chancellor, Li Si, during the period of unification (possibly, she has already met him, since he

had visited LB's court). She eventually comes to feel that she is following in LB's footsteps, and that he would have liked for his family to be turning the wheels of power even through the unlikely character of herself, for what she considers right. But, she never forgives the Emperor, who was implicated in LB's death, and maintains a strong personal dislike contrasted with Li Si's professed dedication.

The third assassination attempt on the Emperor's life succeeds. Afraid of a panic at court, of herself and others losing their position, and chaos, she creates a clay replacement. The clay replacement is unable to keep up with the job, so, around the time when the historical Emperor ordered that speaking of his whereabouts would be punishable by death, she creates another couple from the same mold. In making them, she invested them with too much of how she thought the old Emperor to be, but, like LA, they are headstrong and very independent of her. Not only that, but, unlike her other clay people who were happy to return to the clay, they desire to be immortal individuals.

LJ tries to discover from XF if that is possible, and, after his expedition to the Zhifu island where the living clay is made, she learns the secret of the blood magic at the heart of the clay. Meanwhile, many of her other clay people are unhappy, finding themselves at the edges of society, unable to have children and thus lineages of their own, and they rally around the clay king who promises them eternity in and of themselves. She eventually convinces XF to tell them it is impossible, and he is executed along with many others, at the urging of LS.

[...not all the details worked out around the ending; the terracotta warriors are the army, which she leads to the mausoleum, but I haven't decided whether I want her to have (a) tricked her own creations into thinking they will survive underground, or (b) decides that they deserve a life apart from all the political machinery she has participated in, or (c) they are there, waiting to re-emerge at some later date, convinced that the time is not now...in any case, LJ contributes to the death of the clay emperor, the clayness of which a dismayed LS conceals by having carts driven alongside the royal procession...and she is left wondering whether her power was used for good or for bad, and whether she was right to make and then try and remove the clay people]

[Also, he might make herself a great clay animal sidekick at some point, have not decided]

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