

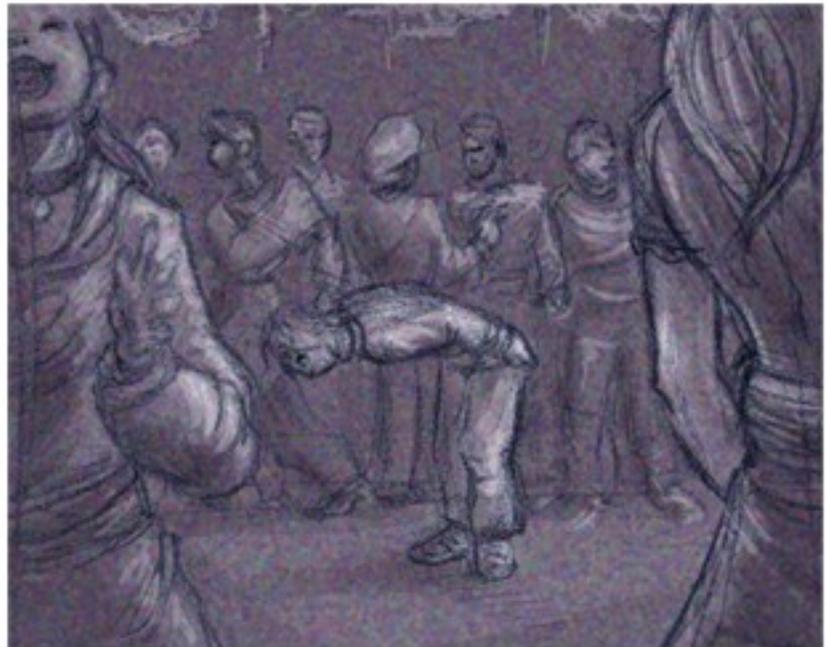
Saichi The Illuminated Peaks

by Scott Walker

Saichi deftly lifted a wooden cup from one of the drink trays being offered to guests of Lord Ishi's latest attempt to ingratiate himself with his subjects. Most of the local nobles at the affair dutifully hid their objections to brushing shoulders with commoners. The nobles may smile now, but Saichi knew there would be more than a few negative comments made behind closed doors later that night about how improper these kinds of events were (indeed, he would be making some himself). Still, if one managed to ignore the unpleasant aspects of the party, there was a great degree of pleasure to be had from the refreshments being offered. Lord Ishi was known to enjoy his food and drink, and tonight the house cook had prepared his famous pickled steak tartare - the staff was having a hard time keeping the serving dishes filled.

“Greetings, Saichi.”

Saichi turned to see Inaro Watasho, a local merchant and owner of The Blue Nightingale, still in a bowed position. Custom required that before a commoner could rise out of a bow after initiating contact with a noble, the noble must respond verbally or walk out of sight. This custom often lead to uncomfortable situations, especially at loud events, so Saichi was surprised by



Inaro's action. Saichi debated for a moment, then said, “Greetings Inaro.”

Inaro stood fully upright, smiled at Saichi, but he never quite made direct eye contact.

“I trust you are enjoying the entertainment tonight, Inaro,” Saichi continued. “I don't believe Lord Ishi's singers have ever sounded this good.”

Inaro smiled even more broadly, nodding in agreement. “I am sure their voices have found inspiration in the presence of Lord Ishi...and so many of the local nobility. I trust that we have been equally worthy of Lord Ishi's benevolence, given how well trade has prospered this



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year.”

Iinaro’s comment caught Saichi off guard. It wasn’t proper for a merchant to be soliciting financial favor from a noble, and it definitely was not something done by actively approaching a noble at a House Ishi affair.

Saichi looked over at the chorus of young men and women on the raised platform by the entrance. The singers accompanied Lord Ishi whenever he traveled or entertained, and they were a fascination to watch as well as listen to, for they dressed in simple robes and used heavy makeup to make their faces look as much alike as possible. But the curious convention of not moving while performing was what many found the most intriguing. Performances could last over an hour, and the singers would remain frozen still, not a single fold in their robes being disturbed. Several of the party’s guests had already spent the last 20 minutes carefully watching for one of the performers to break their statue poses.

Continuing to watch the singers, Saichi replied, “Yes, Lord Ishi is an inspiration to us all. He serves the Illuminated Peaks well, and we are, in turn, well served by him. It is only right that we return the favor, is it not? It is only right for us serve without question, without comment, and take satisfaction in knowing that we have done our best, is it not?” Saichi turned back to Iinaro, squaring his body with the merchant’s and putting his hands on his hips. A few nearby guests glanced over to see if there might be another show developing, perhaps one more entertaining than even the singers.

“Lord Saichi, we all aspire only for the betterment of House Ishi and Gallidon. Surely there can be no greater way to express our gratitude.” Iinaro flicked his gaze left, then right, looking for possible support. Finding none, he sought his only immediately available escape, and he bowed low. “Please forgive me, Lord Saichi, I did not mean to distract you from the party, I meant only to ensure that you are enjoying yourself. With your permission....”

Saichi finished his drink. He exchanged the cup with a full one from another tray and called out to his cousin. “Yoshiro, have you given up staring at the singers yet?”

Saichi said nothing to Iinaro, but remained where he was. Iinaro would have a hard time standing upright tomorrow, but perhaps he would learn his lesson...





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Illustration *Saichi* by Andy Underwood.

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