

EYE SPY

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A photograph inspired me to write *Eye Spy*.

It showed a neat arrangement of prosthetic glass eyes. When I saw it for the first time I couldn't stop looking at it, for it was both the most beautiful and the most repulsive thing I had ever seen.

I know next to nothing about surgery, and very little about eyes, and so it was impulsive of me to sit down to write a novel in which the protagonist is an eye surgeon – the greatest of his age.

I would ask therefore that you suspend reality for a short while, and allow me some liberties. I am hoping that the story fills you with delight and horrifies you in equal measure.

Tahir Shah

One

The waiting-room of Dr. Amadeus Kaine's practice was panelled in antique mahogany and smelled of Indian lemongrass.

The aroma was added to the air conditioning ducts twice weekly. It soothed the patients' nerves and transported their minds far away, to a realm beyond the rare and dignified landscape of the Upper East Side.

Drowning in awards and international acclaim, Dr. Kaine had made an art form out of ophthalmology, the study and treatment of conditions concerning the human eye. His services were in such demand that anyone without at least an A-grade referral was politely declined.

The stamp-cluttered pages of the surgeon's passport were testament to both his popularity and his extraordinary professional skill. Past clients included royalty, Nobel laureates, and presidents – a great many of them dictators from the former Soviet republics, from Latin America, and from Africa.

At 11.25 AM the buzzer sounded once, short and loud, and Mrs. Phelps, the receptionist, pressed the door release. Nearing retirement age, she was courteous yet a little brusque, her heavy dark-rimmed glasses unsettling to some of the more anxious clients.

A minute and a half after the buzzer sounded, there was a knock on the door of suite 1005. A moment after that, a pair of bearded foreign gentlemen, dressed in handmade woollen suits, were standing to attention in front of Mrs. Phelps' desk.

One of them was slimmer than the other. Both had almond-shaped eyes and thick fleshy faces, hefty in the jowls.

'We are here to see the doctor,' said the more slender of the men, his accent hard to place.

'And the name would be?'

'Drusnev... Vladimir Drusnev.'

Mrs. Phelps reached up with a clipboard and a pencil.

'Would you please fill this out, and give me full details of your condition, Mr. Drusnev?'

'I am not the patient,' said the man sternly.

'Then your friend. Could he complete the form?'

'But neither of us is Drusnev.'

'Oh, where exactly is Mr. Drusnev, then?'

'He is in Moslok.'

'*Mos...?*'

'*Lok... Moslok... It is our capital.*'

The heavier of the men leaned up to the desk. He was so close that Mrs. Phelps could clearly see the individual strands of bristle beneath his nose.

'Drusnev,' he said very slowly. 'He is our President.'

'Ah, I see.'

The doctor's assistant pressed a miniature brass buzzer on the underside of her desk. Then she pressed it again long and hard, signifying the arrival of a VIP client.

'You had better go in,' she said.

Two

Dr. Kaine was standing with his back to the desk, a delicate Limoges coffee cup in his right hand, his eyes fixed out on the street. The cup was empty, and had been for five minutes. But the doctor hadn't noticed. He was watching a plastic bag as it was tossed up on the winter eddies and swirls.

Behind him, the spacious examination room was quite silent, except for the tick-tick-tick of a mantel clock. In the magnificent world of Kaine's imagination, the London Symphony Orchestra was accompanying the melodrama of the plastic bag on its journey uptown, with a movement from Wagner's *Ring*.

Born on Manhattan, and educated privately on the East Coast, Amadeus Kaine was an Anglophile through and through. All his suits were tailored at Huntsman in London's Savile Row, and his shoes were made by Tricker's, where he had his own maple lasts. His white shirts were the finest English muslin, made to measure like everything else. As for his citrus aftershave, it was specially concocted for him by Taylor's, another Jermyn Street favourite.

Kaine was a long lean man, standing six foot two and a half. His shoulders were broad, his hands impressively wide, the nails expertly manicured. He was fifty-three, but could have passed for a man a

decade younger, his bottle-green eyes bright and mischievous, and his slender face capable of conjuring expressions of extreme gravity.

The buzzer sounded a second time.

Kaine blinked. Resting the Limoges cup on the desk's walnut veneer, he thought of that evening's meeting. The first Tuesday of the month meant it was the rendezvous of the Obscure Cuisine Dining Club, of which he was a proud member.

It was his night to host.

His ears having picked up the faint sound of a brass door handle turning, he smiled.

In the twenty-five years of his Madison Avenue practice, almost the greatest thrill for Kaine was meeting a new client for the first time. And the surgeon prided himself on his ability to size up anyone in the dozen paces between the door and the desk. Poised like an eagle, he would watch in silence as they entered before moving towards him.

The door opened and the two bearded gentlemen from Moslok paced in a hesitant diagonal across the room.

Kaine noticed their overcoats first – fine cloth, well-tailored and probably French, leading down to equally expensive English shoes. Their ties were high end, too, undoubtedly Hermès, as was the pair of matching alligator attaché cases.

The doctor took in the faces last.

He believed that a costume and the way it was carried could reveal so much more than a few inches of skin on the front of the head. Both of the men were rather weatherworn and unloved, as though they were executives in a more powerful man's employ. Even before they had opened their mouths, Kaine had come to the conclusion they were seeking a service for someone who had risen fast to power, and retained it with an iron grasp.

The pair stood to attention on the far side of the desk. The slender one dipped his head in respect, his expression so serious as to appear alarming.

'We have come from Moslok in the Republic of Bhochnivia,' he said, 'on the orders of His Excellency President Vladimir Drusnev.'

Dr. Kaine spat out a greeting, then scribbled half a line of words with a 2H pencil on a memorandum pad.

'May I enquire the nature of his condition?'

The thicker-built visitor opened his attaché case, removed a single sheet of paper, and slid it across the walnut veneer.

Kaine scanned it, his eyes narrowing.

‘It seems as though a ciliarotomy has been advised,’ he said. ‘I would be more than happy to examine President Drusnev. When would it be possible for him to come in?’

The first of the henchmen shook his head.

‘Drusnev is too busy to travel,’ he said, a touch of loathing in his voice.

‘That’s a pity.’

‘We will take you to him instead.’

The second henchman tapped his watch, a monstrous gold Rolex.

‘We leave tomorrow.’

‘We will fly direct to Moslok.’

‘Our aeroplane will be ready early.’

Kaine touched a fingertip to his lips in thought. He liked travel, especially to obscure Central Asian republics. The raw cultures appealed to him, as did the opportunity to indulge in obscure carnivorous gastronomy, his greatest passion of all.

‘What medical facilities do you have available in...’

‘Moslok.’

‘In Moslok?’

The slender henchman gave a thumbs up.

‘Very good!’ he exclaimed.

The second of the men opened his attaché case once again. He pulled out a brick of hundred-dollar bills, and dropped it with a thump on the desk.

‘We leave at sunrise,’ he said.

Three

The Obscure Cuisine Dining Club comprised six middle-aged men, and was dedicated to fare regarded as peculiar or outlandish in normal society. All the members were, like Amadeus Kaine, high-flying leaders in their fields.

Two were investment bankers who had done well despite Wall Street’s recent rollercoaster ride. A third was in aviation, a fourth was a

film director, and the fifth a bestselling novelist. They had all been friends for decades, and knew the intimate details of each other's lives.

Best of all though, was the fact they weren't out to impress each other – except on occasions when they were hosting the dining club. Each member had two opportunities a year to cook a meal. Their offering was rated on a scale graded one to five. In the club's history there had been plenty of threes and even fours but no one had ever achieved full marks.

The month before, Herbert Hoffman, the novelist, had hosted. His meal had been such a feast of epicurean extravagance that it had scored a four and a half – only the second repast in the club's eighty-year history to have done so.

The *pièce de résistance* of Hoffman's coup was a scorpion bisque flavoured with white truffles from Provence.

The thought of creating anything that could compete with it thrust Kaine into an anxious state of melancholy.

For two weeks he had spent every available moment considering the menu, and in sourcing ingredients. Many hours had been spent criss-crossing the by-lanes of Chinatown, on the trail of something fabulous and unusual.

One evening the week before, having given up hope, he was about to head back to his apartment, when a wizened old man selling Kazakh pork bellies directed him to a warehouse on Bayard Street. Somewhere near the back, in dim light, a blind man was peddling a variety of curious ingredients from a series of small barrels. They included sea slugs, large orange starfish, pickled shark's hearts, and a hard cheese infested with insect larvae.

Dr. Kaine bought three pounds of the slugs, and began experimenting with them. He found that their natural taste could be enhanced with an infusion of fermented lime juice and vintage Calvados.

Nothing in life fascinated the surgeon quite so much as the search for the perfect marriage of taste and consistency. Rather obsessive by nature, he kept a small Smythson notebook to hand, in which he documented the taste and consistency of all food that passed his lips.

That evening, at a quarter to eight, the members of the dining club began arriving at Kaine's apartment, on the sixth floor of 775 Park Avenue. They made small talk for a while, clinked their flutes of Pol Roger together, toasting the meal to follow. Their host was regarded as a perfectionist as well as a gourmet, a point that only raised the sense of communal anticipation.

At six o'clock Kaine had judged the first batch of sea slugs to be ruined, having given it a little too much brandy. Enraged at his own stupidity, he had raced out to the street, hailed a cab, and directed it to the gloomy warehouse down in Chinatown.

Fortunately, the blind man still had a considerable stock. No one else, it seemed, had an interest in sea slugs. But, sensing the customer's enthusiasm for the product, he doubled the price.

At 8.30 PM the members took their seats, charged their glasses with a good Saint-Émilion, and declared their solemn oath to their fraternity.

'Gentlemen,' said Kaine after a long pause. 'I have struggled to create a dish that might come close to the delight experienced at our last rendezvous. And what a struggle it has been!'

A wave of courteous laughter rippled through the room. It was followed by the sound of gentle muttering. A moment later, an *amuse bouche* was brought out by the maid – a nugget of reindeer pâté from Lapland, served on a sliver of green fig.

Following tradition, Kaine gave a toast to Walter B. Smisstein, the founder of the dining club. Then, in line with another tradition, he took a nibble at the pâté to prove it wasn't a danger to human health. The custom of sampling one's offering first came about in June 1948, after an elderly member of the club expired mid-meal, struck down by suspect shellfish.

The five guests swallowed their reindeer, and each of them praised its distinct meaty tang. One of the bankers, Frederick Barton, who was to host the next month, made a joke about Rudolph, but no one laughed. They were far too intrigued by what Kaine had prepared for the main course. But before it was served, there came a pungent starfish consommé, itself accompanied by homemade beef-bread.

Fresh glasses were brought out, and a second red wine poured. An Australian Montara, it was dark and fruity, the vines having been ripened on the eastern slopes of Mount Chalambar.

Only when the wine had been tasted by one and all, were the plates of sea slug served. Pea-green, congealed and lightly fragrant, the dish was unlike anything that had been served in the dining club's history.

'Interesting,' said the film director. 'It reminds me of tripe.'

'Looks like you've surpassed yourself,' muttered the pilot.

'What is it?' asked a third.

Kaine took a sip of Montara and allowed the liquid to swirl around his mouth. He disliked conversing when eating, even with close friends. As far as he was concerned, conversation adversely affected the taste buds.

'You all know,' he said, in a slow deliberate voice, 'that I have searched for an eternity to find the perfect blend of texture and taste. Well, I think that at last, gentlemen, I may have succeeded in achieving my goal.'

The surgeon raised his glass, toasted the health of the fraternity once again, and said, 'I give you *limaces de mer au Calvados*, sea slugs in brandy.'

He took a spoonful of the dish and, following his lead, the other members dug in.

Within a few minutes all the plates were wiped clean and every tongue was describing the taste in superlatives.

Dessert came next.

A rich layered trifle, it was infused with a curious milk-like liquid from the Upper Amazon known as *masato*. Creamy and mildly intoxicating, it had been produced from the fermentation of masticated manioc roots. Kaine refused to reveal the source for his supply, although it was noted that his maid's jaw was bandaged on one side.

After the meal, the members of the fraternity cast their votes.

By popular acclaim Kaine was awarded four and three-quarter points. While maintaining a sombre veneer, he thanked his guests for their generosity.

But inside he was dancing.

Four

By the time the commuters of Madison Avenue were getting in to work, next morning, the Gulfstream G650 was cruising at 38,000 feet in the direction of Bhochnivia.

At LaGuardia, formalities had been minimal.

The bullet-proof black Mercedes of President Drusnev's henchmen had been waved through three security posts, and had then been escorted right up to the plane.

Amadeus Kaine was quite used to the world of the super rich, a realm in which private jets were one of many perks. As he ascended the steps, his luggage was loaded aboard, and he was soon sipping a glass of chilled Taittinger Champagne.

Uncertain of the President's exact condition, or the facilities on offer to treat him, the surgeon had packed a considerable array of equipment. There was no question of exceeding the limit. Indeed, as Kaine had learned over the years, when it came to dictators, the more demanding one was, the more seriously one was taken.

The flight of just over twelve hours gave the surgeon time to relax from the festivities of the evening before, as well as to read up on Bhochnivia. Asking the pretty young stewardess for a couple of extra pillows, Kaine pushed them into the small of his back. A skiing accident five years earlier had left him with chronic back pain, one that no amount of medication could cure.

Back to the Wikipedia entry on Bhochnivia.

The doctor had learned that the republic was a former Soviet territory, that it was abundant in gas, oil and opals, and that it was about the size of Moldova. The coat of arms bore a four-headed griffin, and was emblazoned on a background of deep blue to form the national flag. A quick browse of the Human Rights Watch site had confirmed Kaine's suspicions, that Bhochnivia was an autocracy of the most deplorable kind.

Vladimir Drusnev was leader of the only party. He and his family owned everything from the country's oil and gas concessions to its vast mineral reserves. Anyone daring to speak out against Drusnev was disappeared – taken to the opal mines – from which they never returned. The jails were, it was said, as full to capacity as the shelves of the shops were empty.

The small privileged elite – all of whom were related to the President – had private jets at their disposal for shopping jaunts to Moscow, Paris or Beijing.

At Drusnev International, the Gulfstream landed into the wind, and taxied slowly up to the end of a long red carpet. The engines powered down and, as they did so, the door was opened and Kaine climbed down.

The President's Chief of Staff was waiting on the tarmac.

With as much pomp and ceremony as he could muster, he welcomed the distinguished surgeon to the Republic of Bhochnivia, and invited him to inspect the guard of honour, as a film crew from the local BTV captured the spectacle.

Ten minutes later, Amadeus Kaine was sitting back in a silver Rolls-Royce Phantom, as it sped fast through the suburbs of Moslok. Out of the windows he couldn't help but notice the sprawling shantytowns and squalor, the kind that forms a dark and shameful balance to extreme wealth. From time to time they would pass another limousine, the windows blacked out, the chauffeur and passengers oblivious to the shoeless pedestrians outside.

The vehicle made a beeline straight to the Presidential palace, where the guards saluted, and then presented arms.

'His Excellency is waiting for you in the Throne Room,' said the Chief of Staff in a sour tone.

'I should like to have my equipment brought through,' Kaine replied, 'although I assume we shall not be doing any surgery today.'

'The surgery shall be carried out when His Excellency wishes. Do you understand?'

The surgeon nodded. Experience had taught him that, when in a Central Asian dictatorship, it paid dividends to go with the flow and never to attempt to call the shots.

The Rolls came to a halt.

As soon as it was stationary, the doors were opened by a team of officers in golden uniforms, matching capes pinned to their backs. The visitor was invited to scale a marble staircase strewn with rose petals. He counted them as he went – sixty steps, one for each of the President's years.

Despite having treated dictators and potentates the world over, not to mention a *Who's Who* of Hollywood celebrity, Dr. Kaine had never set eyes on such astonishingly horrifying kitsch.

Almost every surface was overlaid in twenty-four carat gold.

There were gold vases as tall as palm trees, vast marble fountains and colonnades, arched doorways and chandeliers the size of family cars. The floors were marble, too, shrouded with exquisite geometric rugs. As for the doors, they were solid gold.

'This way, please,' said an equerry striding up fast. 'The Supreme Leader is waiting next door.' He paused, took a deep breath, and said: 'The President dislikes being touched, and so please refrain from shaking hands, or achieving actual contact of any kind.'

'That will be difficult if I am to examine him.'

'Well... do your best to do it from a distance.'

The solid gold doors were pulled apart, and Kaine got his first glimpse of the Throne Room. It was so large that he drew breath fearfully.

A dark burly figure was standing in the middle of the room, as though he was somehow set on dominating the space. His face was brutish and rough, that of a gangster who had clawed his way up from the gutters. He was wearing patent leather riding boots with solid gold spurs, and a blood-red uniform, the chest entirely hidden in medals.

Flexing his shoulder blades and gritting his teeth, he waited for Amadeus Kaine to approach.

'Welcome to my country!' he boomed.

'Thank you, Your Excellency.'

'Your journey... it is good?'

'Very much so.'

'Good.'

Drusnev wiped a hand over his left eye, leaving the fingers moist with tears.

The surgeon lowered his head in a bow.

'I am at your disposal to examine you when you wish, Your Excellency,' he said.

The President flexed his shoulder blades a second time. It was clear he disliked being thought of as ailing. He clicked his fingers twice,

whereupon a partition wall descended electronically, revealing a full medical unit on the far side of the Throne Room.

‘We have hospital here,’ he said.

Doing his best to keep a distance, Dr. Kaine made an initial examination of the eye, and saw that lacrimal drainage surgery was required.

‘I shall need a little time to prepare. If it is convenient, I could complete the surgery this afternoon.’

Drusnev winced.

‘It will be painful?’ he whispered.

‘Not terribly so,’ said Kaine.

The President wiped his eye once again.

‘You are very good doctor, no?’ he said.

Five

The operation itself took fifteen minutes and was a complete success. Mindful that he had to be seen to earn his substantial fee, Kaine fussed about in the makeshift operating theatre for eight times as long. Checking gauges and examining computerized readouts, he strained to appear busy, alert, and in charge.

Despite this, his mind wasn’t on the operation at all.

The procedure was so simple that the most junior of surgeons could have performed it. Instead, Kaine was thinking about the Bhochnivian national dish which he had read about – a bloated pig’s stomach stuffed with day-old chicks.

As soon as the operation was over, news of the President’s successful treatment and his courageousness on the table, spread through the streets of Moslok and far beyond.

Ordinary people arrived at the palace with gifts of money and livestock – far more than any of them could afford. Mothers wept on the steps of government buildings, and their children waved little banners they had made at home. The national anthem blared from loudspeakers on every street corner, and the Imperial Guard marched up and down through the streets.

In public all were joyful that the Supreme Leader was back to health.

Sitting in his suite at the Moslok Sheraton, Amadeus Kaine watched it all on Bhochnivia TV. As with most tin-pot dictatorships, it was clear the general populace would have been coerced into putting on the frenzied celebrations. Kaine cursed himself for having colluded with yet another despot, and a particularly depraved one at that. But, sipping a miniature Jack Daniel's from the bottle, he congratulated himself as well.

As he did so, there was a knock at the door.

He opened it to find an Imperial messenger, dressed in a flowing golden tunic, holding a purple scroll.

'A state banquet is to be held in your honour, Your Excellence,' he announced.

The surgeon did his best to seem pleased.

'When is it, the banquet?' he asked.

'Tomorrow night, Your Excellence, at eight o'clock.'

'Please extend my thanks to the Supreme Leader and say that I will be honoured and most humbled to attend.'

The messenger took a step back so that he could bow very deeply. When he was vertical again, he clapped his hands. As if from nowhere, a factotum appeared. He passed the messenger a small gold presentation box, borne on a salver.

'The President would be pleased for you to accept this as a token of his gratitude,' he said.

'What is it?'

'A Bhochnivian delicacy.'

The messenger and his attendant disappeared, and Kaine stepped back into his room. He opened the box with curiosity and found a little pastry inside. It was sprinkled with what looked like icing sugar, and was unusually heavy for its diminutive size.

He sniffed it, but there was no obvious smell.

I'm beginning to like Bhochnivia, he thought to himself, taking a bite.

Beneath the thin layer of pastry lay a succulent interior, moist but not overly so. Kaine chewed ponderingly and, as he did so, a kaleidoscope of flavour tantalized his senses.

He took a second bite.

It was even more delicious than the first. His mind reeling, and his taste buds tingling, he flopped on the couch.

‘This is it,’ he exclaimed in a whisper. ‘The most perfect food in the world!’

Six

The next morning it rained and the streets of Moslok glistened like cut glass, reflecting the myriad of banners, bunting, and the multitude of portraits featuring the Supreme Leader.

At 9.15 AM, President Drusnev went on state television. He proclaimed that, as a gesture of goodwill, he would be releasing a dozen prisoners, and would provide free bread from his own kitchens to those schoolchildren most in need. An animated and impromptu discourse followed in which the President condemned what he called ‘subversive forces’ set on overthrowing his benevolent rule.

The oration lasted four and a half hours.

As soon as it had finished, the speech was repeated in case anyone had missed it the first time around. All other programmes were cancelled. But it didn’t seem to worry anyone. After all, as the only television channel, BTV rarely broadcast anything that wasn’t a celebration of President Drusnev’s glorious reign.

After breakfast, a tailor arrived at Kaine’s suite, and measured him for evening dress, white tie and tails. An Albanian, he had learned his trade in the service of Nicolae Ceausescu, before being disgraced for pricking the Secretary General’s finger with a pin during a late night fitting.

Standing there in a shirt and boxer shorts, Kaine cocked his head up to the presidential portrait on the room’s far wall.

‘What’s he really like?’ he asked delicately.

‘He’s a good man, Sir, very loved by the people.’

‘By all of them?’

The tailor ran the edge of his tape down the American’s inside leg.

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘He is loved by all Bhochnivians,’ he said firmly. ‘Even by those who have not yet been born.’

Seven

Before lunch, the surgeon slipped out of his suite and made his way down to the hotel foyer. He had hoped to have the chance of wandering the streets alone, to soak up the atmosphere of Moslok, and of sampling a few more culinary delicacies.

But, no sooner had the elevator doors opened, than a line of a dozen dignitaries stepped forward in greeting. Some of them bowed. All of them smiled.

'Your limousine is awaiting, Your Excellence,' said the first, a Presidential Aide-de-Camp.

'Where will it take me?'

'On a tour.'

'A tour of what?'

'Of the marvels.'

Amadeus Kaine frowned.

'Which marvels would those be?'

'The marvels of the President's realm.'

A five-hour excursion followed in a procession of bullet-proof Range Rovers, escorted front and back by police outriders. All the while, the Aide-de-Camp spewed facts and superlatives, in an effort to remind Dr. Kaine of the Supreme Leader's Imperial might.

They visited the National Monument, the centrepiece of which was a statue of Drusnev fashioned from pure platinum. There were real sapphires in the eye sockets, and pigeon-blood rubies made up the lips. When Kaine asked how such a precious sculpture could remain so intact, the Aide-de-Camp held a hand up to the sky.

'In Bhochnivia there is no crime!' he bellowed.

'None at all? How can that be?'

The officer glanced at the ground sheepishly.

'Because of the great adoration of the President,' he said.

After the National Monument came the Imperial riding stables, where a performance of dressage just happened to be under way. A visit to a school came next, where the children sang the national anthem, before running out onto their central quad.

The surgeon was taken to look out from an upper floor classroom. Peering down, he saw that the children had spontaneously

arranged themselves into the shape of the President's face. The fact that their various uniforms managed to create Drusnev so perfectly suggested that the next generation had cause to practise the feat often, and had been specially attired to do so.

The Aide-de-Camp had tears in his eyes.

'They love him so,' he said.

As the cortège of Range Rovers left the school, the children sang the anthem once again, and the vehicles purred away through silent streets to the next rendezvous.

It came in the form of a farmer's market on the outskirts of town. The place was pristine. All the stalls looked as though they had been styled for a film shoot, the produce and the people attending them immaculate.

The women were dressed in embroidered aprons, their hair tied back with ribbons, and the men were wearing prim tunics, the hems of which were lined with colourful brocade.

Kaine was invited to taste a local apple. It was crunchy and flavoursome, and somehow reminded him of the delicious pastry he had tasted the evening before. As they strolled through the market, ordinary citizens drifted about almost as though a movie director had shouted 'Action!'

Whenever Kaine attempted to deviate from the predetermined path, someone or something happened to block the way, and he was corralled to walk forward.

Unable to get the pastry out of his mind, he asked whether he might purchase some. The Aide-de-Camp's expression froze. He swallowed hard.

'They are reserved for the President and his guests,' he said sternly, leading the way back to the car.

In the afternoon, the fitting took place. The tailor having excelled himself, no alterations were required.

At six PM, Kaine made a short examination of the President's eye. When it was over, an equerry briefed him on the formalities of the evening.

'You are to be presented with the Imperial Order of the Diamond Cross,' he said, 'Bhochnivia's highest civilian honour. After you have received it, you must kiss the right wrist of the President,

signifying eternal servitude. After the ceremony, the banquet will begin.'

The equerry looked hard at Kaine, as though uncertain how to deliver difficult news.

'There will be fourteen courses,' he said, 'one for each year of the President's reign. The dishes they...' the official swallowed hard as the Aide-de-Camp had done. 'They are sometimes regarded as unusual by visitors,' he said.

Amadeus Kaine raised an eyebrow.

'Unusual?'

'A little different.'

'Well I am hoping to taste again the mouthwatering pastry that was brought to me last night.'

The equerry seemed to breathe easier.

'Oh yes,' he said assuredly, 'I can guarantee you will be dining on a great many more of those tonight.'

Eight

Held in the Great Drusnev Hall of the People, the banquet was attended by almost a thousand guests. They had been drawn from the ranks of the new nobility, the elite of the burgeoning armed forces, and from the few diplomatic missions to have representatives in Bhochnivia. All the guests were clothed in their finest formal attire.

The ladies of the Supreme Leader's extended family were awash with tiaras and gems, the chests of the military were obscured by medals, and the ambassadorial costumes were adorned with silk sashes and magnificent decorations.

Amadeus Kaine had been amused by the world according to Drusnev, but he was now ready to leave. He had asked for the jet to be made ready at dawn so that he might, as he put it, cease to be a burden on the President's gracious hospitality.

Making note of his request, the Secretary of State said he would seek the advice of the Supreme Leader when the appropriate moment arose.

In advance of the banquet, the presentation took place.

Dressed in Imperial robes woven from genuine gold thread, President Drusnev moved slowly towards a podium that had been

arranged at the far end of the hall. The extraordinary weight of the attire made his movements slow and clumsy.

One or two members of the audience wondered whether he was drunk. Naturally, they refrained from mentioning it, even to their spouses. After all, like all top-notch dictatorships, Bhochnivia was held together by a spider's web of informants and secret police.

The President tapped a fingertip to the microphone and silence prevailed at once.

'We people of Bhochnivia pleased,' he said in a commanding tone, 'to have Mr. Excellence Professor Kaine from New York-land. And, we people of Bhochnivia, give big honour to Mr. Excellence Professor Kaine. We people give him Imperial Order of Diamond Cross.'

A cheer resounded through the Great Hall and on cue Amadeus Kaine stepped forward. Struggling under the weight of his golden sleeves, the President pinned the medal onto the American surgeon's chest. Then he presented him with an orb on a stand. About the size of a tennis ball, it was inscribed with the name of every hamlet, village and town in the realm.

Having given thanks, once and then a second time, Kaine remembered to kiss the right Presidential wrist, although it seemed like a strange thing to do.

Drusnev then nodded to his Chief of Staff, who signalled to the Aide-de-Camp, who in turn waved discreetly to the officer in charge of banquets.

A moment of silence passed in which everyone present feared that a long and patriotic discourse might be about to begin. But, thankfully, a troop of liveried heralds stepped forward and proclaimed the commencement of the banquet.

Once the President and his guest of honour had taken their places at the head of the elongated table, the dignitaries filed mutely to their seats. Few of them wanted to be there, but they all knew very well that failing to respond to an invitation to dine at a state banquet was tantamount to signing one's own death warrant. There was nothing that riled the Supreme Leader more than when his family or his citizens failed to obey his wishes.

Thirteen courses followed, each one more odd than the last.

The meal began with white ant eggs in a fatty yak-meat gravy, and was followed by lambs' brains in caviar. After that there were a range of delicacies that included silkworm larvae, stewed duck gizzards, and poached frogs' heads.

The President seemed to relish everything set before him. It was no surprise, of course, as he had chosen the menu himself. From time to time, he patted the air in front of him, declaring with a sparkle in his eye,

'Best food still to come!'

Other than the Supreme Leader, the only man at the table who was actually enjoying the meal was the eye surgeon. As a true gourmet, he was quite willing to try anything once, and was thrilled by culinary experimentation. Between each course he scribbled a comment in his Smythson notebook, which he kept discreetly on his lap.

As the plates of the thirteenth course were removed by the legions of serving staff, a hush fell over the room. Assuming that their President was about to make an address, Kaine looked at Drusnev, who was seated adjacent to him.

'Now best of best... best of Bhochnivia!' he bellowed.

A throng of servants swept out from the kitchens, bearing salvers made from solid gold. The dishes were so heavy that they were borne to the banquet table by specially trained valets, some of whom doubled as athletes in the national Olympic team.

Kaine swivelled round.

To his surprise and sheer delight, the golden salvers were covered in the very same pastries that he had sampled the night before.

A pair of them was put before the American, and he wasted no time in devouring them.

Overcome with pleasure that his guest appreciated the dish, Drusnev shrugged.

'You like?' he asked energetically.

'I adore them!' Amadeus Kaine declared. 'They are quite unlike anything I have ever tasted. So moist, so firm, so subtle in their kaleidoscopic taste.'

The President clapped his hands and a golden tray of the pastries was laid before the American.

'Eat more!' he said.

‘Thank you, thank you! I certainly will.’

Seated beside the surgeon, the President’s Aide-de-Camp pushed the pastry served to him around his plate with a golden fork. He was perspiring, as if greatly vexed. The Supreme Leader jabbed a finger at his plate and then at his mouth.

‘You not eat?’ he hissed.

The officer broke off a corner and shovelled it through his lips, chewing half-heartedly.

Kaine watched.

Then, glancing down the table, he noticed that almost every guest had left their pastries. He didn’t understand why. After all, the delicacy brought him more pleasure than anything he had ever tasted.

‘Your Excellency,’ he said, making the most of the silence, ‘I would be fascinated to know what exactly these extraordinary pastries contain.’

The Aide-de-Camp seemed to perspire all the more. He put down his fork and waited for the President’s reply.

Plucking one of the smaller tartlets from the platter, Drusnev swallowed it whole without chewing. He wiped a hand boisterously over his mouth, belched, and exclaimed:

‘My honour... to serve my people and to get rare food. *This* rare food. Rarest food. Secret food. Not in your country. Only in Bhochnivia!’

The eye surgeon was intrigued. Leaning forward discreetly, he asked:

‘And what exactly would the secret ingredient be, Your Excellency?’

President Drusnev sucked his upper lip. He grinned, wiped his mouth again, and didn’t seem so much nervous as guarded.

‘Magical food,’ he said, ‘heals the body food. Very very good.’

The Supreme Leader gave a double thumbs up, and Dr. Kaine shrugged.

‘I beg you, please tell me what it is.’

The Supreme Leader strained to look meek.

‘You think me naughty,’ he said.

‘Naughty? Surely not. No, no, that would be impossible, Your Excellency.’

The President let out a high-pitched little giggle.
'Inside pastries is Bhochnivia people eyes,' he said.

Nine

Amadeus Kaine didn't sleep a wink that night.

All he could think of was that he had descended into a state of cannibalism, and how publicly reviled he would now be. He thanked providence that the only diplomats present were representatives of other tin-pot dictatorships, and none from anywhere near his own homeland.

The thought of having cooked human eyes moving through his intestinal tract was almost too much to bear. Returning to the suite at the Moslok Sheraton after the banquet, he decided to force himself to throw up.

He padded into the bathroom and stuck his fingers down the back of his throat but, curiously, nothing came up, except for a sludgy grey residue. So he slugged down a couple of JD miniatures, followed by a little bottle of Grand Marnier.

Then he sat on the couch and let out the deepest sigh of his life. What would the boys of the Obscure Cuisine Dining Club make of his experience? He spat out a chuckle at the thought of it, and at the irony that he, a celebrated ophthalmologist, had found human eyes quite so delicious as he had.

The next morning, Kaine was showered by six.

Although he hadn't slept, he felt totally invigorated. The ever-present pain in his back had disappeared, and his face seemed flushed, as though somehow a decade younger than the day before. He put the transformation down to the high altitude of Moslok, and made a note to sing its praises as a tourist destination when he reached home.

The President's Aide-de-Camp knocked at the door of his suite a little after nine. There had been no effort to make the presidential jet available before then. It seemed that President Drusnev was reluctant to allow his distinguished visitor to leave.

'His Excellency was most pleased by your enthusiasm at the banquet last night,' said the officer. 'He has enquired whether you would not go hunting with him in the forest. An expedition is being prepared, and shall leave the day after next.'

'I'm a terrible shot,' said Kaine quickly. 'And I don't really like guns.'

The President's Aide-de-Camp seemed disheartened.

'His Excellency so enjoys interesting gentlemen such as yourself on a shoot,' he said.

'Out of interest,' said the surgeon, 'what would we be hunting?'

The officer looked down at his boots. The tips were expertly polished and shone like mirrors.

'Prisoners,' he said apologetically.

'Prisoners?'

The Aide-de-Camp nodded.

'They are released into the great forest, and given a day or so to run before the hunting party sets out.'

'I really must be getting back to New York urgently,' Dr. Kaine replied, lying. 'You see, there's a matter I have to sort out with my ex-wife. She's causing a lot of trouble. I wonder if I might perhaps return another time for the hunt.'

The Aide-de-Camp perked up a little.

'That would be very good,' he said.

Kaine couldn't leave Moslok without knowing the truth about the mysterious pastries. He beckoned the officer into his suite.

'There's something I need to ask you,' he said.

'Yes, sir?'

'At the banquet last night, President Drusnev told me that the pastries were a national delicacy of Bhochnivia, that they are prepared using human eyes.' Kaine drew breath sharply. He paused. 'I must have misheard him,' he said.

The Aide-de-Camp looked down at his boots again, as his mind searched for a suitable answer.

'In Bhochnivia we have many ancient traditions,' he said, 'and one of the oldest is to consume certain body parts of our foes.'

'They were made from the eyes of your enemies?' asked Kaine.

'Sometimes that is the case. But, we have not had the fortune of capturing any of late, and so the pastries you consumed were prepared with the eyes of prisoners.'

'And where are they kept, these prisoners?'

'In the opal mines,' replied the Aide-de-Camp.