

## **TIE TWO BIRDS TOGETHER (Binde zwei Vögel zusammen)** by **Isabelle Lehn**

Sample translation of Chapter 3 by Katy Derbyshire

On the first night I sleep badly. They say the dream you have on the first night in a strange bed will come true, and in my dream I'm still wearing the sensor harness. I feel the battery between my shoulder blades, the sharp edges digging into my back, and when the box starts beeping because the sensor harness is an explosives belt, I know everything's going to be fine, I can get away from them, and at the moment when I explode I open my eyes and see the light with the curtain moving in front of it. I reach down beneath my body, pull out the alarm clock and remember how to press the snooze button. Then quiet. All that's left is the pressure on my chest and the feeling of being tensed up to bursting point.

In the village we could hear the explosives at night, fired off by the Taliban at the edge of the camp. In the evening, when we went into the barracks, they got into their pickups to drive up the hill and keep the soldiers awake all night long. The Taliban slept during the day. They weren't played by extras, they were soldiers who were above the laws of the village, and when the supervisor called out *Village life!* and the rest of us walked out onto the street, the Taliban withdrew to their quarters. The shutters stayed closed and the men didn't leave until the evening. Soon enough we'd see the flash grenades soaring, red light tracing an arc across the sky before it spiralled back to the ground. The sight was reminiscent of a celebration, plus the smoke, the wailing as if from fireworks, and in the night the echoing call of the sirens when they yelled commands sent a patrol out into the darkness of the terrain. It only woke us at the beginning. Later we'd learned to mistake the sound of battle for our dreams, and only the morning after did I feel as though I'd been fighting a battle by night. The days that followed were exhausted days, and since Faruk had been gone I sat alone on the terrace and fought off sleep with Aladdin.

From a bird's eye view, on the satellite images, the Taliban must have looked tiny and black, like ants. Tiny and black like the man who'd walked in circles for hours in the garden of his hideout in Abbottabad. We had all heard about these images, and one

of the Taliban thought it was funny to start walking in circles as soon as one of us civilians approached him. Then we'd stand to attention before him, because he was a top terrorist and at the same time a soldier, reminding us that the soldiers had squashed the top terrorist like an ant. His game suddenly made everything real – this place that the troops used as a training arena, just like the reconstruction of a hideout in Abbottabad before it, built in the woods of North Carolina. They had abseiled down from helicopters there and practiced storming a fortress, nailed together out of slats of wood, construction fences and shipping containers, secured by a ditch and bordering on a piece of furrowed land that looked like a wheat field from the drones' perspective. Faruk said they'd built it all over again for a movie – the fortress and the reconstruction fortress; Abbottabad was in the desert of New Mexico, and there too the names and places were so interchangeable that even the trees only seemed to have been planted on the edge of the woods because trees had grown on the edge of woods elsewhere. In North Carolina or at the foot of the Franconian Jura, which simulated the Hindu Kush behind the security fence, circling a bastion that perhaps wasn't here at all but somewhere in New Mexico and had once been the state prison, before it had been made into a movie set. The security fence was original. It wore a five-metre crown of barbed wire, which looked even higher through the camera, and Faruk said the top terrorist and his family were played in the movie by Iraqi exiles.

I go into the bathroom and hold myself up against the doorway. My girlfriend is awake. She's tipped out my backpack, standing in the middle of my laundry and holding up a pair of jeans I never wore in the village. It's all still clean, she says. I answer that she doesn't have to do that. She looks at me and laughs – of course she doesn't have to do it! She shakes her head and I can't tell her what bothers me about her going through my laundry. I pull my T-shirt over my head, climb out of my boxer shorts and throw them both on the pile she's made. Apart from underwear, I hardly wore anything in the village and I washed Aladdin's kaftan, which I wore over the top, almost every day until the water in the trough no longer ran red. I tried to wear myself out with the washing. It was the only vaguely strenuous activity I was permitted in the village, and after six weeks Aladdin's kaftan was so threadbare I could almost see through it. I gave it back before my backpack was searched, and I liked the thought that it couldn't be used again, that the company would have to give Aladdin new clothes. He'd never look the way I'd looked in him again, there wasn't even a photo of us, and perhaps he really had got away from them. It's strange, but I never belonged to them as Aladdin. It's my name in the files, I get the money, it's my signature with which I pledged non-disclosure, while Aladdin only started trembling when the barrel of a gun was aimed at his temple. It's still dirty, I say and I stuff the

rest in the machine.

Once she's left I lock myself in the bathroom. I turn the key, just because it's possible, and the first thing I do is shave off Aladdin's beard so I don't look like his reflection any more. I nod at him one last time, Aladdin nods back, and then I brush white foam over my face and run the razor across the picture, Aladdin's eyes still looking out at me. The skin on my chin is pale but the rest seems still to belong to him; only a day or two more, I tell myself, and then he'll be gone, left behind in the village, and the memory will gradually shrink. The images will dry out and the knocking will get quieter and quieter too, the knocking from inside the container sealed behind my temples, Aladdin's voice slowly suffocating. And until then I'll shave, every morning, once a shadow's come over my face as though Aladdin wanted to take possession of me again.

I spend the rest of the day doing things I imagined doing on my return. All of us had our own list in our heads – things we wanted to do when we got back home, because we didn't just get our freedom back. We had to fight for it, even if only by locking ourselves in the bathroom because there were locks on doors again. The supervisor had warned us – not all of us would deal well with getting out, where the village rules no longer applied. Once he'd gone we joked about it. It wouldn't be easy to go back to drinking and fucking, we said, watching the World Cup and not being watched while we took a piss. We told each other what we had planned for the first day. It felt like waiting for our meals together, and I dreamed of locking myself in the bathroom and spending ages on the toilet. I imagined flicking through the city listings magazine, highlighting gigs in the events section and seeing what films were still on. I pictured sitting in a darkened room, putting on headphones and streaming videos while the sun shone outside and nobody missed me. No one would know I'd come back. It's gonna be bloody hard, I said to the others, trying my best to look serious.

And now here I am. I'm under the shower and no one's banging on the door to remind me the hot water will soon be used up. I hear the washing machine spinning, I wash my hair, my feet, my dick and I think about my girlfriend sitting in the next room and waiting with breakfast. I don't think anything else, and that's liberating too – not having to feel horny all of a sudden just because I happen to be alone. I dry myself, my skin softened and peeling from my body like scraps of sleep.