

Biography: Ieva Melgalve (1981) is a science fiction and fantasy writer with literary influences. She has also written books for children and young adults. Her first book was a collection that included her first short story and a play entitled *The Break- Even Point* (1999). In 2013, she self-published her play *The Un-humans*. In the same year, her fantasy novel *The Dead Don't Forgive* was published and subsequently shortlisted for the 2013 Annual Latvian Literature Award.

Synopsis: In the novel *The Cool Mind* (2018), the body of Helen – a transhumanist, computer scientist and military drone programmer – is found with its head severed. The investigation is quickly entangled in the issues of cutting-edge technology and the opportunities it can give to both ending and saving lives. Soon enough, the investigator faces a question the legal system is not equipped to satisfactorily answer: namely, is Helen really dead, and how does one determine that? Is immortality something to be sought, or avoided? The issues of transhumanist technologies and bioethics and the ongoing investigation flows parallel to the story of Satu, Helen's genderqueer lover, who struggles to cope with the death of her friend, as well as her own identity in a society where language itself allows little room for anything but a strictly binary gender expression.

Excerpt

I was feeling fickle. I had wanted to be whimsical and gorgeous but, seeing as I had to carry a box full of drones, rather than a skirt and platform shoes I had to opt for jeans and trainers. Besides, a man's checked shirt was the only thing to wear on top so not even makeup could save me.

We met in Bolderāja – in that weird, dodgy joint in Avotu Street – a place somewhere in the middle between meeting Helēna's taste and mine and the reason why neither of us really liked it. Helēna had suggested meeting in the Golden but I had categorically refused to meet there, not holding a cardboard box of toys, no ... not toys. Well, to be more precise, they were toys but ones representing an unusual form of fetish, and God forbid that any of the regulars at the Golden had anything like that. The club was closed anyhow during the day but Helēna didn't know that.

Of course, Helēna had suggested the Golden to please me but I didn't want to be pleased. I was annoyed by the fact that I was taking her that box. No, actually, it wasn't even about the box. I was cross at having to meet Helēna's friends – Remirs to be more exact. He was her brother's eldest son, he had been a student for a long time and was in the habit of calling by his family's home just to argue with his parents and sister. Whenever I met Remirs, he always regarded me with obvious indifference, as if my face was pleading, begging for the moon, and he had no intention of obliging me.

Helēna herself would definitely have preferred somewhere slightly more decent – the Apsara Tea House or the Theatre Bar. It wasn't that she loved the theatre especially, rather that she liked the little alcoves where the tables were set. But, as I said before, I was feeling fickle so we went to Bolderāja and sat in the two by three metre back room, big enough for two but usually crammed with four or five people, staring grimly across the Soviet-style coffee table. I tried to look as bored as possible. This whole enterprise was getting more complicated by the minute because Helēna was there and, in a funny way, the world was *better* when she was there. Even on that otherwise prickly and dusty day when I

would probably have rather gone to the beach or simply sipped chilled cider in a summery café, looking beautiful.

Helēna could think only about her drones.

'Did you have a look? Did you try them out?' she asked.

'Yes,' I said, 'I've tried them all at least a thousand times.'

I was exaggerating; I had tried them just three times at different stages of their development. That was until Pēteris managed to get the interface to the point that even I was able to issue simple commands, such as 'take a picture of me from different angles and convert it into a 3D image.' But that was back when I didn't like my looks.

She looked happy. Of course, no IT expert would ever appear fully happy talking about it, considering how many failures there had been, but this time she seemed won over by the results and certain that she would manage to deliver the project to the client.

'Pēteris said that Vilnis had got it all, so it should work after all.'

Vilnis was Helēna's brother whose intellect she didn't hold in high regard, who knows why. Certainly, marriage to a fanatical Christian and life in the shadow of the cross for more than twenty years did nothing to vouch for his common sense, but then again, there was no accounting for love. It was more than likely that Vilnis had never come across women who weren't reasonable and enterprising and the notion of thinking for himself had never occurred to him due to his innate laziness.

'Even I managed to understand it,' I added, gravely. 'You should stop testing it.'

Helēna stretched out her hand to touch my shoulder or maybe tousle my hair. I drew back.

'Thank you for bringing me the box,' she said.

'Sure.'

I wanted to add that she would have done the same thing for me before it dawned on me that it would have been exactly like that. Helēna would not only have carried the box for me; she would have carried me too along with all my five thousand problems. Problems involving the mind and body in general. She had taken care of me as no one before ever had done, and what did I give her? A pout and irritation.

This was partly because Helēna was the only person I could be pouty and irritable with.

Helēna was the only person I wanted to wear a skirt and platform shoes and be beautiful for. Helēna was the only person I went to self-defence classes for. Helēna was the only person I let myself buy coloured wool to knit a scarf for – a scarf I suddenly fancied but that no one would ever wear.

'I'm sorry,' I grumbled and went along the long corridor, lit with LED lights, to the bathroom to wash my makeup off.

She didn't say a word. I had a beer, Helēna had a coffee and we chatted about things at my office. Rather spitefully, Helēna insisted on referring to my self-employed status as 'work' and I had gradually got used to it. We discussed our plans for the weekend. Neither of us liked planning too far ahead; 'we'll go with the flow,' Helēna said and I nodded. Today she was going to be busy with the final tests and writing up specifications and other technical stuff. I on the other hand was free to go to the beach with someone else. Helēna wasn't jealous and I could never quite make out whether it was because she didn't take my

infatuations seriously or whether she thought it was only fair. After all, she spent most of her time in her world of codes and wires and her future plans mostly didn't evolve around weekends but our life after the singularity had set in. If we would still be *us* afterwards. Judging by the fact that, after such a brusque leap, only a very highly-developed artificial intelligence or human body and mind enhanced beyond all recognition could start singularity, that is, world evolution, I thought that the use of the word "us" for describing this strange intellect was naïve to say the least.

'It will happen soon, within the next fifty years,' Helēna used to say. 'So during our lifetime.'

I didn't want to remind her for the umpteenth time that she was already forty. But it was only me to have any misgivings as Helēna assured me that when her body ceased to function, it would be possible to print most of her organs in 3D and life expectancy wouldn't be less than a hundred years, apart from anyone involved in horrific accidents or who desperately wanted to die.

I helped carry the box right to her front door but didn't go in. It was one of the days when I felt too blurred, not in my own skin, and I knew that at her place I would most likely just talk all evening about how great I was. Helēna had to unpack all her drones and test them one more time, checking nothing had been broken by the children or that Vika hadn't hidden a crafty sub-program in the code again (the last time she had done so, the drones had flown in a swastika formation – undoubtedly a highly charged sign but one Europe would not have appreciated, let alone America).

'Shall we meet tomorrow?' Helēna asked.

'I'll log into Facebook.' I didn't want to promise anything right then.

We hugged awkwardly, the box between us like an overgrown child, then drew apart.

As I was leaving, I realised that I was smiling.

I don't know how Helēna managed it but I was invariably left smiling after we met, even if we hadn't been on the same wavelength and even if I hadn't wanted to kiss her, as indeed is usually the case.

*

Helēna

I lay in the bathtub and shivered, listening to sounds in the apartment and trying to work out what they were.

He hadn't arrived yet, indeed there was no way he would be able to get there so soon. For the first time in my life, I realised I needed a clock in the bathroom. It was probably the last time I would think such a thing, I reflected, and laughed silently to myself. I was cold.

Silence hung in the room. After completing their mission, the quadcopters had probably returned to their charging posts. After repeated attempts to find Raspberry using a control application to leave the data they had erased from their inner memory about the commands received - it was a precaution insisted upon by both SMTech and my common sense. After all, any one of the drones might be captured by a third party who would then have the chance to examine our code – this was highly undesirable. Certainly, the very fact

that the quadcopters communicated with the main program made them a security risk. In theory, it was possible to catch a drone, install some sort of Trojan malware on it and, from there, attempt to break into the main application, despite having done everything in our power to make such a break-in almost impossible.

I turned over in my mind every code and security system one more time. No. If it had been some widely available product rather than an experimental code, I might have thought that the perpetrator had been an external hacker. But in this instance, only a handful of people knew about the existence of this code and any one of them could have accessed it freely, without the need to employ a Trojan.

I closed my eyes and tried to follow the route of the box.

The box had been given to me by Satu.

Before that, my brother and his children had held it. Pēteris had shown the programming to his kids – well, not really kids anymore, Remirs and Laura were already grownup, no doubt trying to fend off criticism by the older generation.

Before that, it had been tested by Vika. Vika, who had brought rosary pea seeds back from India. Remirs had given her a good kicking for that, recognizing them instantly at her homecoming party and quoting from Wikipedia where it stated that the abrin poison they contain is stronger than ricin, one of the most toxic and unpleasant substances in the world.

Well before that, Pēteris had demonstrated the quadcopters to Jasper from SMTech. Not officially, of course, but Jasper had come to Latvia a week earlier than expected and Pēteris had insisted that, before the official presentation, they should show him the application at work to ensure nothing was amiss. I had missed that meeting. Besides, it had

been Satu's fault and, I might add, I hadn't regretted it for a minute. SMTech paid me to devise a program and test it, not to socialize with sociopathic boffins.

Of course, it would all be far more straightforward if it were possible to assume that the last person to touch the drones had also been the one to fill them with the poisoned darts. In practice, our new facial recognition program meant the drones were completely harmless until they hit their target.

I went through the list one more time – almost anyone amongst those involved might have done it, apart from my brother and his wife since they had both categorically refused to have any dealings with devices of any kind. Laura even replaced the batteries in their alarm clock for them.

Feeling drained with fatigue, I lifted my hand to erase my brother and his wife's names from the list on the wall. I was cold and felt dreadful. I reflected briefly that maybe there was too much cold water – it would be silly to die of hypothermia in such a situation but then, I concluded, it was too warm outside to freeze to death. Besides, to be honest – with me lying in the tub there wasn't space for much water.

Come on, get a move on, I mumbled to myself. *If there's one thing I can't stand, it's being idle.*

Vika

Vika was the first to wake up. She lay across the bed, her limbs tangled in the sheets – both the bottom and top sheets were wound around her, trapping her in bizarre but not entirely unpleasant dreams.

Satu slept curled up on the big beanbag. Or that's who Vika assumed it was. Still on the bed, she rolled onto her stomach to see the face of the sleeping girl or, possibly, boyfriend. Black hair cut short over the forehead and then in a kind of crisscross, easy to arrange in any style, male or female. Now, a strand of hair slid across the face and stuck in the corner of the mouth, which the owner started sucking. Black smudges from the previous day's make-up smeared on the cheeks. *Definitely a girl*, Vika concluded. *Perhaps because of her hangover.*

She herself didn't feel hung over in the slightest, the effects of the wine had worn off during the heavy thunderstorm and the herbal teas which followed. Not that Vika believed in the benefits of herbal teas as such but this particular concoction she had mixed herself, gathering the herbs an hour before sunrise in an abandoned meadow, deep in the countryside. That meant something, didn't it? If anything had a meaning at all, and Vika wasn't too sure about that. At such times, she drew closer to technology, magic, studies and even religion – that is what most people do after all when they sense they are falling. You don't cling to your own destiny but rather grab and hold on very tightly to something which might just hold you afloat.

This was one of those mornings. Vika got up and stepped carefully over the clothes on the floor. She wore just a loose top, well, more of a basic t-shirt really, from a charity shop with plain knickers beneath – no lace or pattern and, as such, as difficult to find as a luxury buy, not only in the specialized stores but also in the popular Maxima supermarkets. If Satu had been a guy, Vika would feel unsuitably attired, whereas as it was, it was just what she needed to make her friend feel comfortable so early in the morning.

She brushed her teeth and made her morning tea – she couldn't risk having coffee which lately made a terrible combination along with a hangover; *old age is at the door*, Vika thought grimly. Satu was still asleep.

She tried to find a suitable set of tarot cards from which to draw a card for the day but that morning they all seemed either too elegant or too primitive, too refined or too ordinary. Even vampires failed to attract her. Besides, Vika wasn't ready to start the morning opening a new set and then inspecting it. With a sigh, she at last took the heavy, painstakingly produced set of zombie tarot cards from the shelf.

Satu was still asleep.

Vika sat with her legs folded beneath her and started meditating. Thoughts darted through her mind, she didn't know what to start on first. Satu had come. The other sister witches hadn't, none of them, although Vika had invited them all. In addition, she had had to feign, in front of Satu, that everything was going as planned, that this was just a slightly awkward date or something. Of course, Vika had invited the witches at the last moment. But still ... perhaps they had fallen out somehow without her realising it. Maybe they had spoken about it behind her back and decided that Vika didn't belong, wasn't one of them. Maybe Vika just thought too much. Maybe Vika just thought too much of *herself*. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

She took another deep breath and tried to ground herself. She concentrated on feeling as if her spine were extending, streaming downwards - down, down, like a tube in the plumbing, running from the fifth floor down into the earth and then even deeper still. She focused on her spine as if it were opening out into a big fluff of tail before transforming

into a root that would draw all the earth's strength up from the ground, pulling its energy slowly and heavily up to the centre of Vika's body. The warmth it created spread out – to her shoulders, breasts, hands, face, up to her very tips of her hair – all strengthened, electrified, alive.

Vika smiled; the smile was tense and fierce, it struck sparks.

On other occasions she would perhaps, through meditation, have attempted to give herself not only a tail but wings, too. But it was clear that today wasn't the right time to do so. Wings were not easy to master; you either had them or you didn't – that odd itchy feeling in your shoulders, that strange airy, invigorating sensation, that unthinking awareness before going through a door that your wings may, at any time, get jammed in the doorframe.

She lifted the heavy deck of cards and slowly shuffled them.

Satu was still asleep.

Vika thought about maybe drawing a Celtic cross; she didn't seem to have anything better to do before deciding not to, at least not today, not this morning. The Celtic cross took a lot of work and that was out of the question when a girl or, perhaps a guy, was lying next to you and could wake up any moment and ask you – 'Oh, what are you doing? Are they really zombies? Can I have a look? Could I grab a coffee? Do you have any milk? Proper milk?! It's just I thought that all Vikas were vegan, hahaha.

But Satu was still asleep.

With her left hand, Vika split the deck into three piles, putting three cards on the corner of her sofa and, one by one, turning them over. A situation - an obstacle – and a target.

Six perils – seven perils – and four wands. Dangerous gifts, expectation and a celebration. Time, the book said, when "you may celebrate with family and friends. Alternatively, it may smash the celebration and swallow your family and friends." Vika laughed and shook her head. She wondered who her family and friends might be.

No sooner had she cleared the cards away, the telephone rang.

Satu reached out and grabbed it just before the incredibly out-of-date ringtone to the tune of "What does the fox say?" became too intolerable.

Still with her eyes closed, she answered, 'Hello?'

Her eyes flew wide open and her face became deathly white. Vika froze with the deck of cards in her hand.

Whatever it was, the tarot cards hadn't warned her about it.