THE LEGACY OF SPALAX

A STORY BY RENA RÄDLE & VLADAN JEREMIĆ

An electric crackle jolted Imagilis awake. He shot upright. If he had eyes, he would have seen flashes of light on the panes of the cylindrical metal frame standing on his bedside table. Imagilis's sleeping chamber was briefly bathed in light; a human eye would have recognized a cave dug into the sand, a bed made of dry grass, and furniture fashioned from stones and roots. Spalax Imagilis—his full name—had been waiting for this moment. He smoothed the fur to the right and left of his snout—where his eyes would presumably be. Tilting his head back and forth, he scanned the magnetic field of his timekeeper, which stood right next to the spark-spewing metal thing on the nightstand: 4.7 billion years, 230 days, 7 hours, 2 minutes, and 53 seconds after the Big Bang. He had set the timekeeper to human years, because there was no room for misunderstandings now.

The timekeeper is a type of clock commonly used by the Spalax rodent which generates a magnetic field that they can detect with metallic receptors situated above their snouts. There had been recurring problems with these timekeepers lately, and Imagilis had decided to search for the causes on the surface. That's how he met Sergej Scheckler. Sergej had literally run right into him. He was in a predicament. That was also part of the reason he was still out so late at night on the sandy paths in the pine grove behind his apartment building. He'd had to interrupt his lecture at the Institute of Astro-physics that morning. An angry crowd had stormed the lecture hall, and he had no

choice but to leave the room. His theory had been the subject of discussion across the media for months: recent disruptions to the cell phone network were related to the increasing occurrence of gravitational waves, he hypothesised. This finding made him unpopular, especially among the supporters of nuclear time compression.

"Of course," he thought aloud, "it's a topic tied to enormous economic interests. But my theory isn't new—the entire space program, the deployment of satellites, all of that is based on it." He sat down in a clearing lined with birch trees and rested his head in his hands.

"It's no use," he muttered to himself, "they want measurable evidence of gravitational waves."

Imagilis committed the exact time to memory, hastily grabbed the metal frame, and hurried down the long corridor toward the eastern exit of his tunnel system. His first meeting with Sergej had taken place several months earlier. But at that moment, Imagilis recalled the conversation in the clearing. Sergej had given him a long-winded lecture on forces and finally announced:

"I'm on the verge of a breakthrough. With my theory, I can describe the force that lies behind both electromagnetism and gravity."

Tired of the long-winded explanation, Imagilis grumbled in reply:

"It makes no difference to me whether disruptions to the cell phone network are caused by electromagnetic forces or gravitational forces. However, if you're looking for measurable evidence of gravitational waves, I'd be happy to help."

He recalled with unease the mocking laughter Sergej burst into afterward. The professor struggled to calm himself, though after he let himself fall to the sandy ground, his laughter turned into a helpless chuckle which Imagilis ultimately found sympathetic. He pulled a root out of the ground, chewed on it for a while, and then taught the astrophysicist a lesson of his own:

"What you call gravitational waves, I can measure just as well as the currents you refer to as a magnetic field. Furthermore, I am not a mole, as you might think, but a member of the Spalax genus." Sergej's interest was piqued, so Imagilis continued:

"My ancestors survived the Ice Age by burrowing deep into the earth. According to legend, dust from magnetic rock settled on their bodies, and in the process, a magnetic sensor developed as part of their corneas. When they returned to the earth's surface many generations later, their eyes had forgotten how to see."

Lost in thought, Imagilis didn't even notice that he was already walking on the asphalt of the street leading toward the city. To get to Sergej Scheckler's lab, he had to take the bus. Luckily, a group of school children were waiting at the bus stop,

so the bus pulled over. He heard an unusually loud commotion coming from inside the bus, but got on anyway and slipped into a dark corner next to the driver's compartment. The passengers were in a state of great agitation.

A young man stood in the aisle and shouted:

"It's the test explosions at the equator that are disrupting mobile data transmission! The Time Compressors are behind it! They want to build a nuclear Earth accelerator to maximize their profits even faster. Just look at who's financing these tests: a cartel of the paleo- and neuro-industries!"

An older voice replied irritably:

"That's complete nonsense, and there's no way to prove it! You don't actually believe what that confused professor is spouting in his lectures, do you?"

A woman chimed in:

"I asked my Intimus. According to Intimus, massive explosions can indeed trigger disturbances in the magnetic field structure. The professor is working on a new theoretical model. To that end, he wants to measure the effect of the explosions on gravitational waves."

Right next to Imagilis, someone was trying to calm a toddler who was screaming nonstop because the games on his tablet weren't working. A schoolchild pushed his way past Imagilis toward the driver's cab:

"Do I even have to go to school now?"

The bus driver joked:

"There's no reason to celebrate—I can find your stop even without a navigation system."

Imagilis pressed the strange contraption with its two discs as deeply as possible into his fur. He would have liked to join the conversation; recently, an entire Spalax population had been wiped out in one of the wars over minerals for the neuro-industry. But the level of excitement among the human nerve cells on the bus seemed too high to him to handle a talking Spalax. The bus driver would surely have unceremoniously thrown him out. Perhaps the above-average agitation was related to the fact that their nervous energy was otherwise being siphoned off by digital platforms. He resolved to talk to Sergej about the Intimi. The Intimi's data centers had rendered entire swaths of land uninhabitable for the Spalax. He got out of the bus at the institute. The door was open, but the auditorium was still deserted at that early hour. He made his way up to the third floor without incident. As far as he could tell, Sergej was alone in the lab.

Sergej had spent the morning tidying up the workspace of the "Gravitation and Unified Theories" department. He was far too excited to sit down at the computer and review the work of his doctoral student, Irina Tironova. Although it wasn't part of her duties, she had agreed to work with a bio-chemist friend to calculate the magnetic field strength required to convert electrical impulses into chemical processes. Imagilis had made what Sergej considered a naive suggestion: to research a way to make

the human vestibular system receptive to magnetic information. A project like this would require enormous research funding, but Irina—with her passion for interdisciplinary experiments—was immediately enthusiastic about the idea. The instrument, which was currently at Imagilis for testing, was a kind of simple replica of the magnetite-based sensor found in the cornea of the Spalax. Sergej wasn't overly interested in the neurological aspects of the whole thing, but apparently Irina had come up with some useful results—at any rate, she'd sent him a PDF that was many pages long. He couldn't concentrate on it because he was expecting Imagilis any moment, so he pushed the monitors on his desk aside to make room. He was certain that gravitational waves had once again caused the networks to crash, and that the magnetic field of their prototype must have reacted simultaneously with Imagilis's sensorium. Just then he heard Imagilis coming, opened the door, and greeted him effusively. Imagilis leaped onto the table in one big bound, pulled the metal construction from under his fur, and slammed it down in front of him.

Annoyed, he growled:

"That thing almost killed me. An hour ago, it was spewing a bunch of electrical sparks."

Sergej immediately burst into laughter again. Imagilis backed up to the edge of the table. He just couldn't get used to this human trait. Irina Tironova hurried over from the server room, realized that the experiment had succeeded, and joined in Sergej's laughter with tears of joy. The magnetic field between

the two discs had reacted more strongly than expected.

"This will make the effect of the explosions on gravitational waves clear to everyone—even the apologists for time compression won't be able to deny it!" Sergej exclaimed. A discussion ensued between him and Irina about how best to present the results of the experiment to the public:

"The timing is perfect; the public is in a state of total disorientation," Irina said, continuing: "Most people simply aren't able to navigate their daily lives without satellite navigation and mobile services. The data-intensive platforms of the Neuro Bosses are practically unusable because of the outages."

She paced back and forth excitedly.

"I think the extractivists have finally driven their perpetual mobile into the wall!"

While discussing, Irina and Sergej set about building a construction adapted to human size, featuring larger metal discs that could be worn much like headphones. In this way, two discs were placed on either side of the head, generating a magnetic field. The magnetic signals were then transmitted via headbands to the area near the vestibular system in the ears. Much to Imagilis's delight, they named the instrument Spalaxulum. Based on her calculations, Irina commissioned a special alloy for coating the disks from her colleagues in the laboratory. Imagilis perched contentedly on the desk, chewing on the root he had tucked away as a precaution.

Suddenly, he sensed the magnetic field of the new instrument with great intensity and concluded that the finished disks had arrived from the lab. Meanwhile, Irina was reflecting on her youth, when she had been active in the movement for a global basic income:

"We wanted to wring compensation out of the extractivists for the nerve energy generated by the platform users. But all efforts to form a union failed," she said resignedly. "The only ones who were interested were managers and engineers who had left the extraction industry for moral reasons." She sighed: "Motives like that have long since gone out of style."

Sergej replied:

"What worries me much more is that logical reasoning apparently no longer makes sense to people. In the new sciences, probabilities are enough—the main thing is that the results are scalable and immediately usable."

Irina agreed:

"People's thinking is becoming more and more like that of the Intimi. They limit themselves to recognizing and reproducing patterns, but when it comes to making decisions, they ultimately let themselves be guided by emotions."

Imagilis was bored. He couldn't see any contradiction between logic and emotion. From their conversation, he concluded that the Intimi had something to do with exploiting emotions; he knew that emotions played a major role in people's social lives. He refrained from asking questions. Instead, he let himself

drift with the shifting magnetic currents emanating from the bodies in the room and was swirled into a vortex by Sergej and Irina's movements. He imagined what it would be like to move through the magnetic space with Sergej and Irina. They would likely be completely overwhelmed by the perception of the infinite number of bodies around them. And that is exactly how it would turn out.

Irina carefully put on the Spalaxulum and slipped the earpieces behind her ears. It felt as if her head were being submerged underwater from above. She felt pressure pulsing in different rhythms, and she could feel her hair standing on end. She turned her head, looked questioningly at Sergej, and was just about to say something when she lost her balance. She almost fell to the floor, but Sergej caught her just in time. It was as if her inner horizon had shifted. She closed her eyes. That was better. She felt a swirling sensation moving toward her left ear, instinctively took a few steps back, opened her eyes again, and saw Imagilis running toward her. She let out a short scream. Imagilis stopped, bristled, bared his teeth, and darted under the table.

"That's enough!"

Sergej cut through the commotion, pushed Irina into a chair, and pulled the device off her head. He had filmed the scene and held out his smartphone to Irina and Imagilis, who had returned to the table.

"This video could go viral!" he joked.

"It's worth a try," Imagilis agreed. He knew that videos featuring animals were among the most-clicked content on social media. "Why shouldn't a spalax become famous on the internet, too?"

Irina laughed in agreement:

"I have nothing to lose—as a doctoral student under Sergej Scheckler, I'm already on the blacklist anyway."

They decided to post the video as soon as the networks had stabilized again.

"This excessive interest in animals is a counter-movement to transhumanist ideas that predict a fusion of man and machine. These techno-optimistic fantasies are aggressively spread across the platforms, and that intuitively meets with rejection from many people," Irina explained. "Some go so far as to try to revive ancient myths about nature deities and mythical creatures." Irina had connections in that scene, even though much of it struck her as odd. "I can well imagine that these people would trust a Spalax more than a scientist."

She was right. The video went viral; Spalax Imagilis—and with it, the Spalaxulum—became famous around the globe overnight. Irina and Sergej optimized the device and published instructions so that anyone could build their own Spalaxulum.

When the Extraction Bosses announced the next nuclear test, Sergej, Irina, and Imagilis called on people to gather

in the streets wearing Spalaxulums in the event of a network outage. When the networks finally went down, the three met in the lab as planned. Irina and Sergej put on their Spalaxulums and blindfolded themselves so they could better concentrate on the magnetic currents. They were already familiar with Imagilis's magnetic signature and had no trouble following him through the hallway, down the stairwell, and across the auditorium out onto the street. Outside, they sensed movement coming from all directions, including what was flowing behind, above, and below them—much as if they were swimming in turbulent water. They let themselves drift and followed Imagilis's signature further. The movements around them grew steadily. They could barely make out Imagilis anymore. Sergej tore off his blindfold and found himself in an overwhelming, surging crowd. Everyone was blindfolded and wearing Spalaxulums. Their movements resembled a synchronized dance.

This gathering marked the beginning of a worldwide Spalaxulum movement. At all hours of the day and night, one could encounter large crowds of people who, blindfolded and wearing Spalaxulums on their heads, moved through the streets like schools of fish. Pets, birds, and numerous animals living in cities joined these colorful formations.

Sergej watched these developments with skepticism. He believed the situation was far too serious, and that the Spalaxulum was no mere gadget for animal lovers or recreational

activities. Nevertheless, he had let Irina talk him into giving his next public lecture on the effects of the test explosions jointly with Imagilis. They were actually supposed to meet at Imagilis's office, but at Sergej's request, they had moved the meeting to the institute. Unfortunately, an appointment with the institute director had run over time. When Sergej finally arrived at the lab, Imagilis and Irina were already waiting. He signaled to Irina to put on her Spalaxulum to make sure they wouldn't be surprised by uninvited guests. Threats against Spalax had recently surfaced on campus. They paused briefly but could detect no foreign human signature in the building.

Sergej began the conversation:

"I'm afraid there will be targeted actions to prevent the lecture. The crisis is having serious repercussions on the Extraction Bosses' project. They'll stop at nothing to achieve their goals."

Irina agreed with him:

"Above all, the neuroextraction business isn't doing as well as it used to. The Intimi aren't being trained enough; they've become flawed and unpopular. Ever since the Spalaxulum became so popular, people have been spending significantly less time online."

"That's true," Sergej replied, "but I still believe that people aren't making full use of the Spalaxulum's potential. They don't understand that it's the Unified Theories that can describe the Earth's cosmic energy balance. The Spalaxulum provides the

proof! Extracting energy from living and dead organisms—that's completely unnecessary."

"A cult of the dead!" Irina interjected, "a deeply human trait."

"Oh, come on, it's simply economic interests that are preventing the most obvious and effective solutions. It drives me crazy!" Sergej shouted. "Even the Spalaxulum won't change that if people keep wearing it on their heads as a fashion accessory. We shouldn't have released that ridiculous video clip—why on earth did I even suggest it!" He slapped his forehead.

Irina looked at him seriously.

"It takes time," she said, "it's good that people are coming together and experiencing a connection with other species and physical matter through the magnetic sensorium. We're developing a new consciousness. And your lectures are drawing much larger crowds than they used to."

Imagilis was getting impatient. He knew where both of them stood and interjected:

"Let's announce the lecture as soon as possible and hold it in the auditorium. There are plenty of exits there in case things get chaotic."

He pondered: had he let himself get too deeply involved in the whole thing? He'd long since gotten used to his timekeeper malfunctioning from time to time. But what did he gain from being, as Irina put it, the movement's "mascot"? It was already late, so they didn't discuss it any further. Imagilis was the first

to say goodbye and hurried out of the building so as not to miss the bus.

At the bus stop, he sat down on the bench. Two young men approached and boarded the bus. One of them spoke to him:

"I'm a big fan of yours—please, come sit with me!"

Imagilis hesitated. He usually avoided talking to people. The other man sat down across from him and talked about a new language model that was soon to be released and would replace the well-known version of Intimus:

"I can't reveal much about it, but one thing is certain: the system my company is working on will restore trust in artificial intelligence." He looked at Imagilis defiantly.

Imagilis smoothed the fur on either side of his snout and tilted his head. Something was troubling him. It was a good thing his stop wasn't far away. The other man stood up, held onto the back of the seat, and leaned over Imagilis.

He said quietly:

"We're willing to pay you a manager's annual salary if you help market the new Intimus version."

T here was a pause. The bus was moving quickly; they were already on the country road. The men were clearly expecting an answer.

"Otherwise," the man sitting next to him finally said in a strained voice, "we can't guarantee your safety."

The bus stopped. Imagilis had already disappeared

through the door as the two men pushed their way down the aisle. Even before the bus pulled away again, he dashed across the street. He leaped over the ditch and raced up the slope toward the pine grove. In front of the easternmost sand dune of his burrow, he made sure they hadn't followed him. To be on the safe side, he checked all the sand mounds, sealed off the entrances, and disappeared into his tunnel system.

Spalax Imagilis has not been seen since, nor has any other member of its species ever been spotted again. After Imagilis stopped participating in the lectures and events organized by Sergej and Irina, interest in the Spalaxulum began to wane. A few groups continued to stage flash mobs featuring Spalaxulums and called for a boycott of the Neuro Bosses' platforms. Others gathered at places where they believed they could sense the Spalax's movements underground and fanned out in synchronized formations to greet the Spalax.

Sergej Scheckler was dismissed a few months after the lecture, on the grounds that, as a scientist at the institute, he was not permitted to make public political statements. Irina Tironova was supposed to have been his last doctoral student. The two had little contact after he left, but every now and then they would meet in the small pine grove behind Sergej's apartment building. They ran from one sand mound to the next, and each time they were delighted to discover that a few new hills had appeared.

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