

Futures

Tashni's first tunnel

Digging deep. By Robert Blasiak



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

"So how was your first day of ..."
But she never made it to the end of her sentence.
"Mum! There are Larvacians at our school! *Larvacians!*"

Vice-Admiral Amelia Shaw looked down at her son's beaming face, and couldn't help smiling back. Sure, she saw Larvacians every day, because their ships landed and departed from her base. But the excitement of a six-year-old is irresistible.

"Really? Did you get to meet them today?"

"There are three in my class. Their names are An-shouk and Tashni and Blansht. And Tashni sits right behind me."

"Did you say hi to them?"

"Well, kind of. Everyone had to stand up and introduce themselves. And I brought my green rock. And I did like we practised. And I told everyone my name and that I like to collect rocks. And ..."

She gave him a hug. It was a big step for a very shy boy. But all the silence and shyness of

the day evaporated when he was around her, and as they walked home, his day spilled out of him in hundreds of breathless sentences.

It was good news about the Larvacian kids. Yes, everything had changed when contact was established with the Larvacian civilization. But the shock soon gave way to pragmatism. After a few years, the first embassies were built. Then, a few years later, a handful of multinationals started setting up offices off-planet. Before long, whole families started making the long trip to be together.

Now, she thought, interstellar diplomacy would play out in boardrooms and government buildings, and on playgrounds, too.

The playgrounds had been a surprise for everyone. With their tails and claws and segmented carapaces, Larvacians didn't look like they would love swings and slides.

And they didn't.

But as long as there was a sandbox, they would contentedly scrape patterns in the sand. And as they grew older, they would start

to burrow, driven by the same instincts that led their ancestors to carve out the vast subterranean cities of Larvacia.

Dear Vice-Admiral Shaw,

Thank you for visiting us earlier this week.

We have now scheduled meetings with the parents of all the boys involved and will be closely monitoring the situation. As we explained, we have zero tolerance for this type of behaviour in our school, and we are striving to ensure an environment that makes everyone feel safe and welcome.

We will be updating you on the situation as things progress, and our staff are available at all times if you have any questions.

*With best regards,
Rector Windrop*

"I'm not hungry."

Shaw sat down on the bed next to her son, and looked out the window at the rain steadily falling on the azaleas. The silence stretched,

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and he continued with his book. On the cover, a man in a spacesuit was crouching behind a rock, with a look of determination on his face, laser gun in hand, and an aesthetic scratch on his upper cheek.

But laser guns don't look anything like that! Shaw thought, but she kept it to herself.

Instead, she put her hand on his knee, searching for a topic. "I heard today that Larvacia will be sending a royal delegation next month. The Crown Regent will be coming."

He put down the book, and she saw that he had been tightly clasping the green rock in his hand the whole time.

"So, will you be going? Is Uncle Sam going to come take care of me?"

"Actually, I'm going to check if you can join me this time. Let me see what I can do."

Finally, some energy started to come back to his face, and a smile spread across his face.

"Really?! Do you think I can?"

"I'm going to try, but I can't promise anything. Now let's go have some food and get you to school."

The smile evaporated and his voice went flat. *Too fast*, she thought.

"I don't want to go to school."

"But your teachers miss you. And everything is going to be different now."

No answer.

"Do the boys pick on the Larvacians too?"

"No. They used to, but the Larvacians didn't seem to even understand what was happening."

"Tashni's parents got in touch with me last week. They were asking about you too. Everyone's worried about you."

More silence. More rain.

After his mother left, he put the book down and went to look out the window. He placed

his cheek against the cool glass, and listened to the raindrops.

But then, at the base of the azalea bush, he saw something that hadn't been there before. The opening of a small Larvacian tunnel and, just in front of its entrance, a blue rock. A beautiful one. Maybe an agate? Or a lazurite?

He opened the window, leaned out into the rain and retrieved the rock. It was cool and wet from being outdoors, and it felt good in his hand.

He lay back on the bed, and realized he was crying. Later, he walked to the doorway, then up the stairs, and called out to his mother.

"Mum? I think I'm hungry after all."

Robert Blasiak lives on an island in the Stockholm archipelago and spends a lot of time thinking about fish.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Robert Blasiak reveals the inspiration behind *Tashni's first tunnel*.

There's an old Gordon Lightfoot song about rainy-day people. People who listen, who care, who absorb the world around them — and who know when they are needed. I'm lucky to have rainy-day friends in my life. When I wrote this story, I was thinking about my children and how my heart swells whenever I see them showing strength and courage. When I see them receiving love from their friends. When I see them giving it. And hoping that one day, when it seems that no one understands and no one cares, that a rainy-day friend will. And if their rainy-day friends are cool, burrowing aliens, even better.

