

Futures

Practice on a pulsefish

A taste of things to come. By Steven Berger



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I shook the pulsefish by the tail, the last drops of blood draining from its opened throat into the dark waters. Between the pulsing vibrations of the fish and the sway of my boat, it was hard to keep my knife straight as I sliced through its ghastly skin. My hands were fully numbed by the time I plopped a white fillet onto the cutting board, as if I was watching someone else do it. The meat shimmered with resonant electricity.

A spacecraft announced itself through the haze of clouds, wailing like a kettle boiling over. I'd long since given up trying to outrun spacecraft in a sailboat, so I continued, cutting loose the ribcage and chucking it overboard. It was always safer to surrender a day's haul than to fight. After all, the sea swarmed with pulsefish.

The black ship thudded into the sea, its landing sending up a cloudy volley of water. A rain of dark mist cooled my skin. The ship, a modded hopper with chiselled-off guild markings, wasn't more than twice the size of my boat. A hatch popped open on the side and a young

woman came out, levelling a gun at my head. Beneath yellow eyes, a bandana wrapped her face. "Knife down, fisherman."

I set the knife between the fillet and a thin, clean blade. Her grunts, a pair of boyish men in long jackets with big belts buckled at the waist, threw hooks over the side of my railing and laid a plank across.

I kept my calm. "I wasn't expecting company."

She motioned with the gun and the grunts crossed, rope nets slung over their shoulders. "You try anything, then it's bang bang bang." She accentuated the point by cocking the gun.

I let my eyes follow the intruders as they brushed past me. One headed into the cabin and the other started rifling through side compartments, making a mess.

"The bow," I said.

He scowled and then went in the wrong direction.

"You have no idea what these things go for on the home worlds," the woman said. "And you're about to eat one for lunch."

"It takes a while for the Solar System to appreciate Europa's delicacies."

She rolled her eyes. "The Bounty Board had 'em pictured with coarse pepper and lemon."

"I've got the pepper. The lemon, though. I haven't seen one of those since I was a child."

Eventually they found my haul, on ice, and began chucking them directly into their nets. Not on ice. Outside. In the Europa heat.

I didn't say anything.

She did. "The crew thought I'd lost it when I said we're headed to the backwater to steal fish. But these bastards are the best pull per pound, and if there are more of you locals knocking 'round with compartments full, it'll be the easiest pull per pound, too."

"Clever," I lied.

"Force Fleet's put a huge price tag on 'em."

She hadn't noticed my entire boat was made of plastic, or questioned why I'd clung to the ancient art of sailing. I didn't give her time to put the pieces together. "First visit to Europa?"

She wiped her brow and flung the sweat off her hand. "Hopefully my last, too."

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One of the grunts passed behind me with a net full of thawing fish. They'd be tingling soon enough. That's the thing about pulsefish. They had to be pole caught one at a time, put on ice, and then frozen enough that they couldn't make electrobuddies with the next one to come off the hook.

The thieves' ship had been modded for spaceflight, but it was still a hopper, meant for short trips between islands. The set of thrusters underneath and the single, larger thruster on the back wouldn't have any kind of auxiliary.

The salt breeze whipped the woman's long hair. "Come on, boys, we got other ships to pay a visit."

The grunts hoisted full nets of fish. As they crossed back over to their ship, I noticed the ones on the bottom were wiggling. A pang in my gut told me to say something.

Instead, the corner of my mouth curled

upwards, and I said something else. "Maybe they'll have a table for four."

When the second grunt passed the woman, she whispered to him. He disappeared into the ship like the first. With her gun still pointed at me, she crouched slightly to yank back the plank with her free hand. The grunt soon re-emerged behind her and handed her something.

"Thank you for your cooperation." She lobbed a lemon towards me. It thumped onto the cutting board and rolled into the fillet.

She pulled down the hatch as the black ship's corrosive engine sputtered. I switched to the clean blade and portioned the fish into thick pieces of sashimi, and then cracked pepper over them. I took the lemon in my hands, scratching my dirty thumbnail into its flesh. I lifted it to my nose and inhaled deeply. It smelt of something far away from this filthy sea and

this filthy moon.

While the ship coughed upwards into the clearing sky, I sliced the lemon crosswise and palmed one of the quarters. I squeezed it, the fish underneath jolting from the rain of acid. I placed a piece on my tongue. It tickled.

The ship made it a few hundred yards in the air before the pulse hit. I savoured the fish, rich umami cooling the insides of my mouth, while the ship fell from the sky. Black smoke marked its noiseless descent.

As the ship crashed into the sea I slid the fish to my front teeth and halved it. The lemon really did add something.

Steven Berger is an speculative fiction writer based in Austin, Texas, who occasionally veers into humour. Or maybe it's the other way around. Find him on Twitter @steber.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Steven Berger reveals the inspiration behind *Practice on a pulsefish*

The first draft of this story focused on a mutiny, HMS *Hermione* reference and all. It featured a starship full of smugglers who were left stranded in open space after a tank full of pulsefish knocked out their power. They should have seen it coming — they knew their precarious cargo was likely to end up in a 'fish bomb', a sort of organic EMP that is faintly reminiscent of bat bombs, an experimental weapon developed during the Second World War.

In that draft, there was a throwaway line about militaries splitting their wholesale orders with sushi restaurants. Ultimately, that line became the foundation of the final story. No longer relegated to their window-dressing role in the tank, the pulsefish swarm in their natural environment. The fisherman survives by taking no shortcuts when navigating this environment — a lesson he chooses to withhold, with lethal results.

Although both versions of the story show the consequences of indiscriminate fishing practices, the fisherman's choice gave the final version an ominous turn.

