

ON THE HOOK

By Julian Domain

Soto awoke with a start. The boat rocked hard to port and gravity sent the hull flying back to starboard twenty degrees. About forty five seconds later the vessel was slammed again. Tide change. Soto watched the stars through the porthole as the craft swung at anchor in response to the force of the Pacific. The Moon, almost full, lay low on the horizon. Peeping from behind the mast as the river and ocean fought for control of his boat.

Soto yawned and wondered if it was too early for making coffee. The tidal exchange was hard, it will last much longer than Soto's ability to get back to sleep. Coffee it is. After a quick walk around the deck to check his anchor and drogue lines that help keep his boat correctly aligned with the current. During tide change the swinging of the boat can leave them entangled.

Grabbing the handholds above his bunk Soto swung his feet to the sole of the cabin. **FFFTWUMP!** A log, apparently of some size, hammered upon his hull as it drifted down the Columbia. The boat rocked gently from the push of the log's passing. Making his way to the aft hatch Soto hope the log passed by his anchor line and wasn't hanging on to it from a branch. Soto hurriedly slid the hatch above his head open and began removing slats. **BRRRAACCKK** Shrieked a heron rudely awoken by Soto and now flying low above the shore of Sand Island to find a new roost.

Soto popped out of the cabin quickly but touched his foot upon the deck gently, checking for ice. It was early October but the wind can freeze the dew on deck regardless of the forecast. Cold fingers of dew clung to Soto's bare feet. With each step forward the chill deepened as more cold water clung to his soles. The anchor line hung true and unencumbered. Soto made his way aft to inspect the drogues.

He had them on lines only thirty feet long tied to cleats port and starboard. But when he went aft the lines were merged into a ragged twist hanging straight down into water so black it looked alive as it swirled past his sailboat. Grabbing the lines Soto felt them vibrate like piano wires. Slowly, with great effort, the load began climbing upward and Soto moved his hands more rapidly as gravity and current lost its battle with inertia. The twisted mass slowly surfaced. But once the load rose an inch above the waterline Soto could pull no more.

The water weight combined with whatever got snagged on it weighed too much for his arms and back. Soto took the line to the starboard side winch for the job sheet. Looping the trailing end around the winch Soto pulled on the tight line holding the fouled drogues. He got a handspan. Tightening the line on the winch again Soto waited. He was rewarded with almost half a fathom as water drained from the sacks. Pulling quickly on the trailing end the line rolled smoothly enough for Soto to use the leverage the winch gave him. Crack, crack, crack with the bell undertone of the turning winch filled the night. But suddenly it ceased. The line was stuck. Leaning over the side, Soto could see the nylon straps of the drogues twisted Gordian knot like and a good half of his drogues. The rest hung taut in the swift current.

Despite the moonlight Soto could not see what was snagged upon his drogues. Turning to the port lazarette Soto unlatched it and pulled out the spotlight nestled amongst the winch handles and other cockpit needs. Utilizing the plug in the gunwale Soto got the lamp ready to go. Peeking again over the side, Soto wiggled open one of the nylon socks. Shining the light down the vee of fabric Solo only saw the flapping of loose cloth in the water. The other sock then.

This one resisted his fingers and Soto felt the muscles in his forearm strain as he lifted this bag open. Shining his spotlight down the throat of this one all he saw was a twist holding sloshing water. Swinging the arm holding the mouth against the current Soto slowly unspun the sock. At six o'clock the load on his arm softened with a jolt, but only a small fraction. Six fathoms off his stern a leafed branch surfaced. But the drogue was still ensnared on something. Looking again, the spotlight barely illuminated the interior before Soto dropped it and the drogue into the water. With shaking hands Soto desperately grabbed at the power cable before the current pulled the plug out. He jerked the bobbing lamp almost back into the boat with his first quick pull.

Hoping what he saw was a branch or a piece of dead animal, a raccoon perhaps, Soto gingerly pulled the drogue open again. Bile entered his throat before he turned the lamp on. A hand, flesh ragged and waterlogged, barnacles adhered to the fingernails and a bracelet of green moss and seagrass trailed along the arm and down the small outlet hole of the drogue. Chills rolled across Soto's skin as he twisted the lantern outside the fabric and focused the beam into the ebon water. Again he could not believe what he saw. An Asian face, skin as bloated as the hand, pencil thin strands of seagrass bracketing his lips and trailing in the current. Hazel eyes forlorn and anguished stared up at him pleadingly. What Soto mistook for moss was a chain trailing down a meter where at the edge of illumination Soto could see another hand.

Soto had to lean back into the cockpit. Sweat beaded on his face despite the cold river air.

How?

In his panic Soto grasped onto the hope that somehow they were still alive. Soto threw open the lazarette and pulled out the winch handle. Quickly he began pulling the line up until the boat canted to starboard. Slowly the drogues started clearing the waterline. In anticipation of seeing better Soto grasped the lamp and spotlighted the end of the drogue just as it cleared the water.

It was empty.

There was no going to sleep now.

A light breeze from the East signaled the coming dawn.