

CHAPTER ONE



Hal smiled to himself as the *Heron* cut smoothly through the water, rising and falling gracefully; swooping over the small, even waves and sending showers of spray high into the air on either side of her bows as she sliced down into the troughs.

It was good to feel the slight vibration in the tiller and the surge of the deck under his feet once more. He and his crew had spent the winter building this new *Heron* and he was enjoying being back at sea, and in command.

They were off the Sonderland coast, well to the west of Hallasholm, carrying out final sea trials on the new ship.

‘She’s definitely faster than the old *Heron*,’ he commented to Stig, who was standing close by, keeping an eye on the taut curve of the sail.

His first mate smiled. ‘That’s only to be expected,’ he said. ‘She’s two metres longer on the waterline.’

Hal nodded. The extra length would make the ship faster through the water. But he had also had time to

experiment with the cut of the sails – to shape them and reinforce them with extra seams so they formed a smoother, more efficient curve when the wind filled them. In addition, he had increased the height of the mast and yardarms, so the new ship carried more sail than the old.

All in all, he thought, it was a good result. But there was one thing that bothered him slightly, and that was one of the reasons they had put to sea – to test the new ship under a variety of conditions and see if she would deliver maximum performance.

‘Coming about!’ he called to Ulf and Wulf, who were crouched amidships by the sheets and halyards that controlled the sails.

Wulf signalled that they had heard him and were ready.

‘Tack!’ he called, putting the helm over and swinging the ship into the eye of the wind.

The twins brought the current sail down to the deck and hoisted its opposite number as the ship turned.

There, thought Hal, sensing a slight hesitation as the bow came around. But she had enough speed and momentum to carry her through the manoeuvre and, within seconds, the new sail had filled with a dull booming sound and was driving her firmly on the opposite tack, the slight hesitation left behind. But, still, he thought, it had been there. He had first sensed it earlier, when the wind had been lighter than the brisk breeze that drove them now.

‘Let out the sheets!’

The twins allowed the ropes that controlled the sail to loosen, and the sail to billow out somewhat, losing the

tight, hard curve. As the pressure reduced, the speed fell away until *Heron* was coasting along, with the wind over her port side.

Hal waited, conscious of Stig's watchful gaze. Thorn, in his position by the fin keel, was watching as well. Both of his friends knew what was on his mind. They had discussed it earlier that day when they had set out on these final trials.

'She's griping still?' Stig asked quietly.

Hal nodded. 'I'll try her again,' he replied, then raising his voice, warned the sail handlers. 'Coming about!'

Wulf signalled that he and his brother were ready and Hal called out the executive order.

'Tack!'

The tiller went over and the bow started to swing up into the wind. But this time, without the same speed and momentum behind it, the movement was slower and more tentative. Hal felt the resistance that shuddered through the hull as the bow pointed up and tried to cross the wind's eye, then fell back to starboard, the sail shuddering violently and losing the wind so that *Heron* sagged off, away from the turn, and wallowed to a halt, sail flapping and sheets loose. Then the bow began to fall off further to starboard and the wind caught the sail, so that when Ulf and Wulf hauled in on the sheets, it filled once more and the ship steadied and slowly began to cut through the water, back on the original port tack.

Stig shook his head, a worried look on his face. 'The old ship wouldn't have failed to come about like that,' he said.

Hal shrugged. He was relatively sure he knew where the problem lay and it would be easy to fix. 'Her bow is

sitting too low in the water. It's causing resistance to the turn,' he told Stig. 'She simply needs re-trimming.'

He called to Ingvar and Jesper, who were watching events, crouched in the rowing well on the port side, several metres astern of the mast.

'Move the cask back a metre,' he ordered, and the two of them scrambled up onto the raised centre deck, where a twenty-litre cask of water was standing on the centre line, and where Hal had chalked a set of half-metre measurements.

They wrestled the cask back along the chalk line, settling it on the mark that Hal had indicated, taking a few seconds to make minor adjustments so the positioning was perfect. They knew that when Hal said *a metre*, he didn't mean a metre and a bit, or ninety centimetres. He meant a metre.

Satisfied that they had the cask correctly positioned, Jesper turned and signalled the fact to Hal, then the two of them dropped down into the rowing well, their eyes fixed on the young skirl at the steering oar.

Hal nodded, saying quietly to Stig, 'That should do it.'

The cask, full of water, weighed twenty kilograms. Moving it aft should have raised the bow slightly, altering the trim of the ship. Hal brought the ship up towards the wind. Ulf and Wulf, out of sheer habit, went to haul in the sheets and power up the sail, but he called out to stop them. He wanted to keep the speed and the power down to see if his slight adjustment had made *Heron* more responsive.

He glanced at the sail and at the wind telltale. The sail

was full but bellying slightly. The wind was blowing over their port bow.

‘Ready to go about!’ he warned, then, ‘Tack!’

He shoved the tiller over and the bow swung up into the wind. This time, he didn’t feel the hesitation as it crossed the eye of the wind. The bow continued to swing sweetly and under control as the sail shuddered and collapsed. Then Ulf and Wulf hauled it down and sent the starboard sail up in its place.

There was the familiar *WHOOMPH!* as the sail filled and the twins hauled in the sheets to set it in a firm, taut curve. The *Heron* surged forward on the new tack, gathering speed as she went. Hal allowed himself a satisfied grin.

‘We’ll try it again!’ he called, and they repeated the action – allowing the speed to drop off, then swinging the ship to starboard, across the wind.

And again, she completed the manoeuvre without hesitation, turning smoothly onto the new tack and powering away once more. Hal’s grin grew wider as he moved the tiller slightly from one side to another. As ever, he enjoyed the feeling of the slight tremors passing through the tiller to his hands – tremors that told him the ship was a living being, not a lifeless assembly of timber, ropes and canvas. She was his, ready to do his bidding and to do it gracefully and smoothly. Gradually, the speed built up and she began to heel more to starboard as the twins held the sail taut.

‘Loosen up a little!’ he called, and the ship came upright.

The bow slashed through the water like a giant knife, sending spray high on either side. Contrary to

expectations, releasing the sails a little so that the ship was more upright allowed it to plane, reducing the drag of the water on the hull so that she actually moved faster, sitting high out of the water.

It was an exhilarating feeling, but there was one aspect missing. On the old *Heron*, some fault or flaw in the hull or fin keel had created a slight vibration through the ship when she rose onto the plane this way, setting up a hum that resonated through the hull.

It had been a flaw, but Hal had always enjoyed it. Now that the hull didn't vibrate the same way, he found he missed it. He wondered if there was some way he could induce that same hum on the new hull and keel. He made a mental note to experiment when they returned to Hallasholm.

'Hal?' Stig said quietly.

He came back to the present. Planing like this was exhilarating. But it also had its dangers. The ship was very close to being out of control and, to signal this, she began to roll from side to side, the roll becoming more pronounced with each movement.

If this continued for too long, the roll would take over, so that the helmsman was always behind the movement, unable to check it. When that happened, the motion became more violent and more rapid, until the ship spun out of control or capsized.

'Slacken off!' he called to the twins, and they quickly spilled wind out of the sail so that the ship sank down off the plane and the rolling ceased, leaving *Heron* sailing smoothly and docilely on her way.

Stig shook his head. 'I never enjoy that feeling,' he said.

Hal nodded. 'No wonder they call it a death roll.'

Sensing that the experiment was over, Thorn made his way aft to join them. He gestured at the cask, sitting on the central deck.

'That seemed to do the trick,' he said. 'But are we going to have to sail with a barrel of water sitting amidships?'

Hal shook his head. 'I'll rake the mast back a little when we get home,' he said. 'That'll put enough weight aft to keep the bows up.'

Thorn nodded. He was an experienced sailor and he knew the feel of a ship. As a result, he had also noticed that she was crabbing slightly during low-speed tacks. But having the technical skill and know-how to fix it were beyond him. Those things he would happily leave to his young skirl.

'Whatever you say,' he replied.

Seeing that the experimental manoeuvres were done with and *Heron* was heading for home, Stefan had resumed his normal lookout position on the masthead. His voice reached down to them now.

'Sail ho!' he called. 'Sail on the port bow!'