



VINTAGE

**THE POPE'S
RHINOCEROS**

LAWRENCE NORFOLK

Contents

Cover

About the Author

Also by Lawrence Norfolk

Dedication

Title Page

Chapter I

Chapter II

Chapter III

Chapter IV

Chapter V

Chapter VI

Chapter VII

Acknowledgments

Copyright

About the Author

Lawrence Norfolk was born in London
in 1963.

This is his second novel.

ALSO BY LAWRENCE NORFOLK

Lemprière's Dictionary

For Vineeta

The Pope's Rhinoceros

Lawrence Norfolk

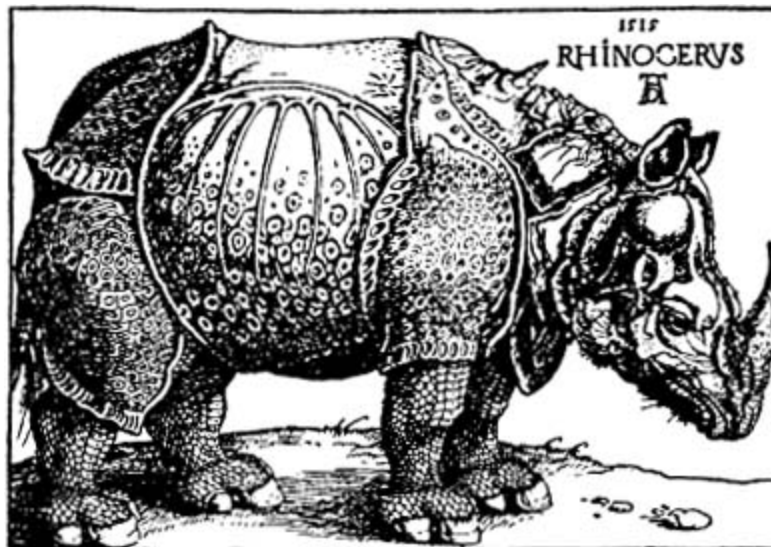


VINTAGE

All fishes eat. All fishes spawn.
Few fishes spawn where they eat.

Arne Lindroth

Vineta



THIS SEA WAS once a lake of ice. High mountains overlooked a glacial plain frosted with snow and scoured by the freezing wind. Granite basins curved up from under the ice-tonnage to rim it with irregular coasts. In ages still to come, boulder waste and till will speak of the ice pack's tortuous inching over buried rock and sandstone; moraines and drumlins of advances and recessions that gouge out trenches and shunt forward ridges. The sea-floor here was prepared long before there was a sea to cover it. In the interim came the governance of ice.

Faultlines and fractures healed and welded, grew invisible until the Gulfs of Bothnia and Finland, of Riga and Gdansk

were indistinguishable from the central basin that joined them. Northerly blizzards left their drifts of snow which compacted down and thickened until the earth's very crust tilted under the weight. Veins of frozen oil ran like the hawsers of a ruined fleet, looping and meeting in the dark far below the surface. Grit speckled the ice pack as though blasted out of the earth and suspended in mid-air, boulders shattered and hung immobile in the dark of this catastrophic freeze. Nothing breathed here. This must once have been the deadest place on earth.

This surface interruption: a pale disc of light germinating in the snow-flecked sky suggests a radical tilt to the axis below, gales cede to gusts and vicious whirlwinds, ice giants shout in the night. An inch of silt marks a thousand years, an aeon means a single degree of arc and by this scale a thaw is underway. There will be a century of centuries of snarling ice, an age of glacial strain until the first crystal's glistening melts to liquid spreads and seeps and creeps north across the frozen surface to make of it a mirror wherein the sun might see its face. Light slaps and dazzles the ice, sends thick fronts of heated air against the polar cold. Meltwaters dribble between ice and rock, refreeze and melt again. The nights are cold enough to strip the lungs of any beast foolish enough to venture on this wasted acreage, the wind which blasts across the vista turns hide and flesh to stone. An ice-blink sky glares down at the nights' reverses which are boulder waste, scree and brine cells locked in rime. There are shelves where the sun never reaches and salts forced by the pressure lie as powder on the surface.

But the days grow longer, water-sheets spread, mean temperatures rise and vent mists which boil off the blazing ice. Secret cables of water are trickling down and prising the frigid bole from its case of rock, meeting and joining on the stony floors which the sun cannot find. A thousand miles of ice floats in an inch of water. Different orders are coming

down the line. Crevasses and canyons rive the surface and snake forward cutting loose immense crystals which shatter and collapse. Water runs at the bottom of ravines a thousand metres deep, eating out the lowest levels of the ice pack and rising until the whole is cut with rivers fed by their own corrosive increase. The landscape resounds with the crash of ice-columns and ice-arches, the unheard thunder of a million wrecks. Glassy ridges sink and settle in pools which lengthen and rise, become fissures until this territory of waste is neither solid nor liquid but an archipelago of drifting icebergs dwindling in a sea of their own dissolved bodies and a fog so thick with damp it is neither air nor water. Unhinged mountains collide in the green subsurface light and send up rafts to the surface where the sun can melt them. Small floes bob and rock in the water's cradle while sunbeams draw them into the sky as clouds which spread in filaments, snap, and shrink to nothing. Where there was ice, is water.

Still, this is an empty expanse. More temperate, more fluid, but the gulfs sprawl north and east, the central body curls south then west much as they did before. The change is local, confined to the westernmost strait, or most perceptible there. Are the northern mountains less towering, the Aland islands less numerous? Is the Landsort Deep sunk lower than before? The rise in water level is a matter of feet in a landscape of leagues, the product of differing coefficients - water expands, ice contracts - and yet this alone is not enough to drown islands and creep up cliffs. The movement runs deeper, reaches back farther. A compacted weight has lifted, an oppressed floor is rising, tilting back and tipping water south and west towards the Belts and Sound of Zealand. Low rocky sills seem to shrink before the slow surge of the lakewaters, are overrun as the thaw reaches the northernmost coves. The breach is made and water races west to join the seething grey of an ocean which has waited some million years for the arrival of this,

the last of its tributaries. Rocky lowlands offer little resistance to the forward flood; these shelving plains were always meant to be seabeds. Faster now, welling up and spilling over the scarps, forced on by the tilting basin at its back, the flood follows the lowest contours to meet the greater ocean. The battered coast is outflanked and overrun in one extraordinary moment as the first tongue of water trickles out of the dunes and runs down the shore, laps at the lapping waves and tastes the ocean's unfamiliar salt for the first time. An hour old and raw from the breach, it is the youngest sea on earth.

The thousand-mile ridge of rock that bars the northern gulfs from the ocean collects snow all through the dark of winter. Spring brings meltwaters tumbling down the mountainsides to boil in the ravines. A watertable of distant plateaus and barren fells feeds great rivers to the north and east. Showers are frequent, though rarely sustained for long. Short hot summers give way to drizzly autumns. The first men to gaze on these waters would have found a placid, temperate sea, thick with reed-beds. About its southernmost coast - for they came from the south - the waters meandered haphazardly, prising intricate spits and bodden out of the coast, baring reddish sandstone to the blast of the odd winter gale. Healing drifts of clay covered the ice-scarred granite of the seabed, purple heather shaded the long humps of eskers and drumlins back into a boggy foreshore. They were easy waters, and the thick forests of oak and beech through which they must have travelled might have supplied the timbers for a vessel. But something deterred them and sent them east along the shore rather than north across the sea. Some journeys are irresistible, some no more than the thudding of feet. They set their sunburned faces towards the interior mysteries and left behind them vague currents, placid convections and stirrings. Drift.

This strange and gentle sea, reed-fringed and resting in a granite cradle still rocking in the aftermath of ice, dotted with islands and bounded with stony northern coasts, fed by melted snow and rainwater, almost enclosed behind the jut of the peninsula, yet appears somehow lacustrine, an outbreak of water arrested at the edge of the ocean, frozen in the moment of joining. The bulk and heave of brine calls from beyond the strait, but its newest dominion still clings to an earlier being, of a freezing and preservative stillness. Weak inflows through Skagerrak and Kattegat signal distant oceanic storms, but mostly the sluggish currents roll under the impetus of debouching rainfall and snow. These yeasty yellow waters are almost saltless, almost tideless, almost stagnant in the deeps of Arkona or Landsort. The northern gulfs still freeze over five winters in ten. This sea will always keep something of the character of ice.

The first men never returned. Peat bogs, beech scrub, and moorland lay undisturbed for centuries while fish entered by the Belts, spawned in the brackish waters, grew fat on sea snails, brown shrimps, bristle worms and soft-shelled crabs. Atlantic salmon sped east with the sea trout and grayling to spawn in the great rivers whose mouths in summer would choke with the bodies of spent lampreys until shrieking gulls and goosanders plucked them from the water. Flounder, dab, sand-eels and lumpsuckers grazed the saline bottom waters while gudgeon, pike and dace hovered about the freshwater outflows. Cod spawned in Arkona Deep, grew huge, ate each other. The spring and autumn herring founded their colonies in the nearby shallows off the islands of Rügen and Usedom. A million undisturbed existences floated, swam, spawned, and died before the first keel cut the waves above and the nets descended to haul the sea's fat harvest ashore. Invasions, battles and slaughter were a vague clangour, dim thuds in the deathly air; the pale bodies sank quietly watched by lidless, curious eyes. Spars

and planks drifted off the exploded coast. Dim shapes sank amidst the skerries.

Herring-lives circled such interruptions; supple cycles of eating and breeding stretched to allow their passage. Storms had brought no more than the puny challenge of barrel staves and broken oars in the past. As the rising wind churned the surface they would sink, whole shoals diving for shelter in the lee of the cliff until the swell died down and they could rise to feed. This storm was different, its course bending away from them, its first shudders familiar enough, but then exceeding all they had known before. They dived and waited, but the storm only roiled and thudded overhead, a bludgeoning throb reaching deeper than ever before. In the deep off Usedom, they shook as the tempest tore loose sea grass and kelp, sent fogs of clay billowing out of the trenches, buried its violence in the depths. They never suspected the transaction taking place above, so stubbornly held by the spit running off the line of the coast, so violent a wresting as the waves clawed this gift for them from the land. The thrashing surface-creatures above were yielding up a surpassing tribute to the waiting shoals, greater and more intricate, different in kind as well as scale, and more enduring.

The herring knew the coastal cities as compacted secrets, the ends of tunnels emerging at night under a moonless sky. Looping wakes converged there, linking each to each, one confirming the next as the vessels passed overhead with their dim shouts and the pressure of the hulls fumbling dully in the depths like minor showers on their way to somewhere else. The herring tracked them home to port, suffered grey death in the nets which were hauled aboard with the full-grown fish strung about the middle, trying to jack-knife free and drowning as the threads tightened over their gills. A foaming cloak of scum protected these places from prying herring eyes, thickening about the piers, breaking up in the wash beyond the headlands. Such a traffic, such a

thickening of these solitary creatures. Hungry places, these cities. But beyond the vague maw, the strange tightening and deadening of currents, where were the teeth, the gullet, the stomach?

This: felt first as a distant disturbance in the storm's fury, a vast crumbling or drawn-out collapse. Out of the battered cliff, great shards of clay were coming loose. Slabs of sandstone tumbled free, crashing down the sheer edge and dropping into the deep. The sea took great swings at the spit, cutting away until the weight above drove down its own foundation and followed it into the waters. A massive submergence, a vast pulse of pressure, clay misting and clogging their eyes and gills, clearing and revealing to them the scale of the displacement. Greater than the greatest vessel, this awaited mystery still locked in the aftermath of its deliverance, too strange and exceeding them all as it lowered itself to the seabed. There it was, laid out below the shoal, with all its people, buildings, carts and livestock stretching further than they could see with the reek they had tasted before only from a distance. Here it was thick and strong, all the tantalising stench blended together and curling thickly through the water. They waited and felt the surface grow calm. They saw each other's fat silver bodies turn this way and that before the yielded gift. And then the first few flipped their tails and descended. The thrashing creatures above had delivered as tribute a city.

The older herring swam with its citizens, circled their temples and overlooked their marts. Paddling in and out the doors and windows, they sought out the clumsy giants in flowing robes who promenaded through the drowned streets. Lurching in the waters' flow, they were more like plants than men. The herring rose, and sank, and rose again. Other shoals gathered about them. The upper waters glittered with fry. They would never forget the pact forged in the storm. The city would grow familiar to them as the sea-floor itself, and in time indistinguishable.

Gifts and years: bladderwrack creeps closer to the shore, loamy soils flocculate and wash away. Near-tidelessness means the survival of low landscapes and improbable islands. Sharks' teeth and whale jaws are the oldest bones in the sea. Weed rafts drift and are blown by northerly gusts into estuaries and lagoons. Sinking canvas wheels down into the darkness, goblets and bracelets glitter and are eclipsed. Spear shafts, scabbards, rope-ends and corn sacks take their own trajectories through the fathoms. Smashed hulls lurch while mast-heads dive, but all are voided and deposited on the seabed. Surface-creatures drown. If the ice was a barrier no object could breach, then the sea which took its place will accept all; a subtler poison, for everything sinks in the end. The herring understand. Not since the city - and that was a hundred generations before - have they clustered so thickly and so curiously as now. The tribute from above is always puzzling and clumsy, always awkward and misshapen; this is no exception. And yet it neither floats nor sinks, seeming to hover in the water like themselves. They move closer, and it begins to shake. They feel the waters agitate around it. A booming sound resonates with their otoliths and their fins begin to twitch. It is almost invisible in the murk of these depths; something hangs beneath it. What? Is this finally the key to the mystery of the city? Something snakes away above, tautens as they circle slowly, comes loose and disappears. The larger fish butt against the intruder. These are herring waters and this is the coldest water-layer. But perhaps they were mistaken, for it seems to be sinking now, tumbling down out of sight. Some turn away as deepwater currents take the intruder, weird tribute from above, drifting in the saltless tideless waters fed by meltwater springs, racked by memories of ice, scourged by serrated coasts, darker and deeper and farther down towards the city. Lost? No, not quite. Blunt herring noses butt against its sides. Their curiosity sustains it; its

own weirdness buoys it up. But what? In this sea a barrel is sinking, and in this barrel is a man.



They had practised in Ewald's pond, amongst the greasy weeds and fishbones. Islands of leafmould drifted in from the beech copse and stank along with the part-dried fish and stagnant black water rising off its scum-flecked surface. It lay behind the herring shed set back fifty yards from the shore. The summer before last Ewald had tried to drain it. To the left, the ground fell away; a trench cut through the turf and sodden earth beneath would draw the pondwater off, but the sides of the cutting had collapsed a day later and the pond filled up accordingly. Returning from the market at Wollin, Ewald had contemplated his pond's reappearance. He had fetched beer and sat at the back of the herring shed. When he had drunk himself into a morose rage, he had primed his fox-traps, then thrown them one by one into the stagnant water so he would never be tempted to try so foolish an enterprise again. They were still there, unsprung. He had warned the two of them, tried to discourage them, but they had gone ahead anyway.

'Higher, Bernardo! Higher!'

They had built a derrick but it had not worked well, so now three poles lashed together in a tripod with a longer one balanced in the fork served the same purpose. From one end of the pole a barrel was suspended over the pond. From the other hung Bernardo, who clambered up and down its length as muffled commands issued from within the tun. They had caulked its staves and cut a tiny window in the side into which fitted the glass filched in Nürnberg, then cased the whole in leather with lacings for the window and the top.

‘Now down, Bernardo! Down!’

He heard a *whump* as the barrel hit the water, felt it sink, then settle with six inches of barrel showing above the surface of the pond, the waterline cutting his viewing hole in two. The barrel had been borrowed from Ewald’s store – inevitably, it stank of fish. It gave him splinters too. He saw the pole from which he was suspended running back overhead and Bernardo clinging to it like an overgrown sloth. He tried a wave, and the barrel rocked alarmingly. The ballast-rock would cure that. Bernardo waved back, a great extravagant wave, which was actually Bernardo losing his grip, falling and releasing the pole which reared up at one end, fell heavily at the other, he braced himself – *dunt* – a direct hit on the barrel which tipped slowly onto its side then overturned and he found himself upside down in utter darkness and panicked.

Afterwards, prising the fox-trap off Bernardo’s foot while they dripped and shivered before the fire, contemplating the necessary repairs to their vessel, lying leaking by the pond, he was forced to concede that punching out the glass had been the course of action most likely to turn mishap into disaster.

‘That was coming here in the first place,’ muttered Bernardo. He yelped as the trap came free.

It had been so sudden, so swift a descent in the lightless water, and the dark so close; choking him in an instant, the water and his own terror somehow dissolved in one another and the world turned upside down. He could not stand it for a second, had to get out. He had punched out the glass and the water had rushed in. He was nailed inside the tub. He had begun to fight and scream, but only barked his knuckles, and the water had a dreadful thickness to it, like molasses. He had punched out the glass in a panic and Bernardo had strode in there to rescue him.

‘Shut up, Bernardo,’ he told him now. He had been lucky. Not so much the rescue – Bernardo did not know fear and

fox-traps would not teach him – no, in a crisis Bernardo’s presence could be counted on. Nor in the manner of the rescue, which was straightforward, a simple lifting of the barrel and its contents from pond to shore. But in the man himself, there fortune had favoured him. By himself he could barely shift their contraption when empty and on dry land. His partner stood almost seven feet tall and was built like an oak; he had lifted the vessel over his head filled with water and himself, then waded back to shore with a fox-trap on his foot. Bernardo was not clever, but he was big.

Later, hungry and cold as they lay in damp clothes, breathing smoke from the temperamental fire, the two men tried to rest. For a while the hut was silent but for their tossings and turnings. Neither slept. Tomorrow they would restore the glass, and experiment with the ballast stone. They would work with a strained enthusiasm to ready themselves and cheer their spirits, and in his own case to banish the fear which had got a grip on him with their late mishap. He was thinking that the pond was nothing to the sea, whose waves had advanced on the near inlet throughout the past weeks’ effort, seeming sometimes to beckon him on and sometimes to warn him off. The day after tomorrow Ewald had agreed to lend them the boat. He shifted irritably on the damp earth and heard Bernardo do the same. At length, the other man rose. They were both awake and there was no use pretending otherwise. He knew what would follow.

‘Tell me again,’ Bernardo said. ‘Tell me about the city.’

They had practised in Ewald’s pond, but it had not gone well. It was deep and still and black as night, and he had almost drowned. He drew a deep breath and stared into the fire. The city . . . They were too close now not to believe in it. The day after tomorrow he would be in the barrel, sinking down the fathoms to Vineta. There would be no one then to carry his lumpish craft to safety. There it was, leaning against the wall, the severed head of a monster, its black

mouth open to swallow him. The glass glinted on the ground beside it. Oak chips crackled in the fire and sent a harsh white smoke into the rafters where Ewald's herring hung on strings. It was the same smell, the same sight. Salvestro thought back to his mother twisting her knife in the fishes' white underbellies, spitting out the guts like a mouthful of worms.

'Well?' demanded Bernardo.

He sighed inwardly.

'There was a city,' he began, 'and to the men and women who lived there it was the greatest city on earth. There was a war that lasted a hundred years and a storm that lasted a night. . . .'

'Stop!' Bernardo interrupted him. 'You've missed out the part about what the city was like.'

'How many times have I told you this story, Bernardo?' he retorted. 'If you know it that well, why don't you tell it yourself?'

'Just tell the story properly,' said Bernardo. 'Without leaving bits out. What about the people who lived there?'

'They were a water people,' Salvestro resumed. 'The people who lived here then were fishermen, boatmen, pirates, and they made their homes in the marshlands. They built great cities to guard the rivermouths and the greatest of them all had walls built of huge tree-trunks and broken by four great gates. The slave market covered an acre and traders came to barter there; by ship from the lands of ice to the north, by horse and foot from the dry valleys of the south and the plains of the east. It grew to become the wealthiest city on earth. . . .'

He had found his stride now. This happened. That happened. The story rolled forward. He said, 'The people of this city loaded their temples with silver and in every house in every one of its stone-paved streets a table groaned under the weight of the food. Merchants flocked from every port to share the spoils and, in time, its very name came to

mean abundance. This city was called Vineta, the most prosperous and peaceable you could imagine.'

'That's better,' Bernardo muttered approvingly. 'That's one of the best bits. About the food, and the temples with all the silver.'

'Yes,' said Salvestro nodding. He remembered his earlier self leaning forward across the fire to catch his mother's words as she told him of their ancestors' city and its riches. Fabulous visions of it had formed in the firesmoke, bursting the walls of the mean hut that was their home. Now it was Bernardo who strained to catch the same words.

'Then the newcomers came,' he resumed.

'Henry the Lion,' said Bernardo. 'And his army.'

'No, you're muddling it up, Bernardo. Henry the Lion was later. Either listen or tell the story yourself. The first of them were . . .' He paused, unsure whether his mother had told him what they were or not. Perhaps he had forgotten.

'Planters,' he declared with authority. 'They called the lands here the New Plantation. There weren't very many to begin with. They built churches and drained the marshes. Anyway,' he was picking up the thread again, 'they felled the forests and sowed grass for their cows. More and more of them came, and they hated the people who were here before them. They muttered curses against their temples, and against their god Svantovit until Svantovit cursed them back. Then there was a war.'

'The war that lasted a hundred years,' said Bernardo.

'Yes,' said Salvestro. 'A hundred years, a thousand battles, and it ended here, on the island. When Henry the Lion reached Vineta.'

Sometimes his mother had paused there. Sometimes she had gone on directly to what had followed.

'They camped on the mainland - near the place where we crossed, Bernardo.'

Bernardo nodded quickly, eager for him to get on with it. But he was reluctant now. This part of the story was

stranger than that which preceded it.

'They could see the smoke from Vineta's fires, and the water was frozen to ice. They could have crossed that night, but they stopped. I don't know why. They pitched camp on the mainland and that night there was a storm.'

He thought of the women, the children, the priests, the last of their beaten armies all cowering behind the walls of the city amongst their jewels and their silver, great chests of treasure consecrated to the gods who could not save them.

'There was a storm,' he repeated.

'The storm which lasted a single night,' prompted Bernardo.

'It came from the north,' Salvestro continued, gathering his thoughts. 'A terrible storm, the worst they had ever seen. Waves broke through the ice and the winds flung boats into the air. The ice itself was broken into huge slabs. . . . It was the most fearsome storm that any man had lived through and Henry and his army could do nothing except pray for it to end. . . .'

'And God answered their prayers,' Bernardo interrupted then.

Salvestro glared at him. 'Yes, Bernardo, he did. The storm died away as suddenly as it came. When dawn rose, the sky was clear. They crossed the broken ice. They marched across the island. Vineta was built on an arm of land that stuck out into the sea. They climbed up to the point. . . .'

'And what did they find then?' Bernardo burst out.

Salvestro regarded the big man across the fire. He was agog, his thumbs twiddling with excitement though he knew the answer as well as himself.

'Nothing,' said Salvestro. 'Vineta had disappeared. Where it had stood there was only water. The storm had torn it loose with the land on which it rested and cast them both to the bottom of the sea.'

His mother had usually stopped then. He would be left suspended, rooted to the top of the point and staring down

into the water as though he were actually amongst the conquerors and prey to the same bafflement. He looked across at Bernardo who was rocking back and forth on his haunches.

‘And Vineta is still there,’ he murmured, ‘with all its temples and their treasure. . . .’

And its people too, his mother had said. Our people. When the water was clear, she told him, you might see them walking in the watery streets. Svantovit was down there with them. He could not save them, but neither could he desert them. Salvestro’s thoughts drifted.

‘So what was that ruin?’ Bernardo broke in, and for once Salvestro was grateful for the interruption. He did not want to think about Svantovit. He did not want to think about his mother.

‘Ruin?’

‘On that cliff, where you said they were all looking down at the water. There’s a ruin there.’

For a moment he did not understand. The previous day they had stood on the beach and Salvestro had pointed down the coast to where the land rose and extended out for a little way into the sea. The point ended abruptly, as though the storm had cut it off with a sword. ‘There,’ he had indicated the patch of water in front of it. ‘Vineta lies there.’ Bernardo had stared and nodded, then looked inland again, to the top of the point.

Salvestro’s puzzlement disappeared. ‘It’s not a ruin,’ he told Bernardo. ‘That’s the church. They built it after Vineta sank. To stand guard, so the islanders say. Monks live there.’

A suspicious look which Salvestro knew only too well spread slowly over Bernardo’s face.

‘If it’s a church,’ the giant replied, ‘how come half of it is in the sea?’

The church *had* looked different, Salvestro reflected. It had been so many years since he had last seen it and even more since he had paid it any attention. There was a monastery

built about it, but no one ever went there. And no one, so far as he could remember, had ever seen any of the monks, except as distant figures clothed in grey, patrolling the precincts of their domain.

‘Perhaps it collapsed,’ he shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter anyway. The monks won’t bother us. Let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow we’ll fix the barrel and have another go in the pond, then I’ll talk to Ewald about the boat.’

There was silence. The fire hissed softly.

‘And the beds,’ said Bernardo.

‘What?’

‘You’ll talk to Ewald about the beds.’

‘Bernardo, I never . . .’

‘The beds you promised when you said, “Bernardo, we’ll have plenty to eat, a roof over our heads, and proper beds to sleep on.” Those beds. The beds your old friend Ewald was going to give us, along with the roof, which leaks as it happens, and the food, which so far as I can see is fish, and more fish, and more fish after that. In fact, Salvestro, I’m sick of fish, and I’m sick of sleeping on the ground, and I’m sick of this stinking shed. A dog wouldn’t live here.’

‘It’s not a “shed”. It’s a hut, and anyway it’s not so bad. . . .’

‘Not so bad!’ the giant erupted. ‘It’s cold. It’s damp. I’d rather be back at Prato lying face-down in that bog. I’d rather be in the snow on top of a mountain. You promised beds, and what we get is this. I’d rather be in a ditch than here. How can you tell me it’s not so bad?’

‘Just shut up, Bernardo.’

He was tired. He did not want to hear this.

‘No, really, I want to know.’ Bernardo sat up now and gestured around him angrily. ‘How can you think that this is “not so bad”? Eh, Salvestro?’ The big man thumped the ground for emphasis and spat into the fire.

There was a short silence before Salvestro replied.

'I suppose, Bernardo, I think it's not so bad because I'm used to it. This is where I was born.'

The short silence was succeeded by a rather longer one.

'Here?' Bernardo said eventually, trying to keep the incredulity out of his voice, and failing. He sounded hesitant. The fight had gone out of him, Salvestro reflected. Bernardo's fits of outrage never lasted long.

'We lived here, once,' he said. 'My mother gutted fish for Ewald's father.'

Bernardo grunted, digesting this fact.

'And that's how you and Ewald are friends.'

'Yes,' said Salvestro.

He looked up at the fish strung high above their heads, row after row of them. How many had he strung by the gills and hoisted up there? Hundreds? Thousands? Whole shoals. . . .

'He didn't look very pleased to see you,' Bernardo ventured then, 'seeing as how you're such old friends. He didn't look happy at all to me. In fact, he looked shocked.'

Salvestro shrugged, thinking back two weeks to the moment when he had knocked on the door of Ewald's hut. What had he expected from the man who had opened it and stood there, not recognising him at first, then his face falling when he did, his jaw dropping? Joy? Ewald had looked from himself to the giant standing silently behind him. The expression on his face had been worse than shock. Dismay?

When Ewald had finally recovered himself he offered a belated and half-hearted welcome. Bernardo and he could stay in the drying-shed, Salvestro's old home. He loaned them the barrel, some old blankets, even the use of his boat when the fishing season ended. The day after tomorrow. . . . Another thing he did not wish to think about.

'He thought I was dead,' said Salvestro. 'But we were close once. It was a long time ago.'

More than just close, he thought. Ewald had been his only friend on the island. And the island might as well have been

the world. Now, across the fire, he saw Bernardo yawn. The giant was losing interest. Whatever substance it was that his complaining was rooted in was sinking, or dissolving, or seeping away. The hut *was* damp, and cold. It did stink of the fish and always had. He remembered his mother sitting where he sat now, one hand cradling a silver body, the other holding the knife.

She gutted fish for Ewald's father and another man. When they brought the catch he and Ewald had to wait outside so they used to play in the woods. Sometimes they fought but Ewald always lost. He showed his friend three ways through the peat bog and how to get into the Haases' loft to steal cabbage. He tried to teach him to swim. They told each other their secrets.

He ran to meet the boat when it came but Ewald would not speak to him with his father there and the other man crossed himself and looked away. He spent his other days wandering the island, looking for things to tell his friend. Greengages grew wild on the eastern side in an orchard overgrown with nettles and whippy ash trees. Little sticklebacks swam in the peat bog and eels came ashore at night to cross the narrow band of land, winding through the stringy grass near Koserow. He could swim underwater with his eyes open and hold his breath until he fainted. He told all these things to Ewald, but his best secrets were not his at all. They were the things he heard from his mother.

She told him wolves ran in packs. They had yellow eyes and could see in the dark. In shape they were much like dogs, but bigger and with longer legs. They were frightened by fire. Bears were frightened of nothing. They stood twice as tall as a man, could run like the wind, climb trees, and loved to eat children. They could not swim though and for that reason there were no bears or wolves on the island. If attacked by a bear, she told him, run for the sea. These things were on the mainland, where he had never been. Sometimes, from the south side of the island, he saw men

riding up and down the coast road. He watched the fishing boats sail east in the morning and west at night. They berthed in a great port farther down the coast, his mother said.

She told him these things while she gutted the fish. She worked by firelight. By touch. He watched the knife slide down the belly until it found the vent then, one two, up and down very quick, with a twist to cut them loose and the guts would shoot out. He strung them by the gills and hung them in the roof. He sat in front of her when she worked and if he talked too much she made a quick movement with her hand and the guts would hit him in the face. She never missed. Once they landed in his mouth. He watched her hands moving in the gloom of the hut, the white of the fishbelly, the quick glint of the knife, the silver of her bracelet as it bumped about on her wrist. He told her she should take it off but she said someone else had done that once and lost it forever. She had found it washed up on the beach after a storm. He could not remember how old he was then. Did he want to know where it came from?

He had nodded.

That was the beginning, he thought now. That was what had brought him back, or perhaps driven him away in the first place. His eye wandered around the hut where she had told him these things. She had been shunned by most of the islanders. They were different, she and her son. Vineta made them different. Vineta and her gods.

She told him about Svantovit, who had a hundred eyes and lived in the sky. He used to sleep on the smoke from their fires, she said, but when the fires were put out he fell into the sea and drowned. Now all you could see were his claws. The people who lived there now thought they were islands, but she knew they were his claws. He had tried to drag himself from the sea but the water pressed down on his back and held him there until he drowned, but there were still places on the island where he was strong. He

nodded, pretending not to understand. She meant the holm oak grove. One night he had followed her there, creeping noiselessly through the undergrowth. He crouched down under the brambles and watched her pick up sticks around the clearing. The oak in the centre rose high over the beeches, the weight of its branches pulling them almost to the forest floor. He saw her stoop and straighten, moving closer and closer to the tree. His mother had the blackest hair on the island. He heard her cry out words he did not understand. He had crawled backwards, watching her until all he could see was the great oak's trunk and a blur of white wrapped about its base. He had fled.

Then she said that Svantovit had once been strong all over the island, and the mainland too. The people who had worshipped him built a great city here. But there had been a war, and a storm. The city, she said, had been called Vineta.

After that she told him everything, and as many times as he wished until he knew the whole story by heart. He began to comb the northern beaches, quartering the sands under the eye of the monastery which stood at the limit of the point, a grim keep overlooking the sea. The fishing boats rarely cast their nets in the waters there. When Ewald's father said they came up empty and often torn, he thought of Svantovit ripping them open and feeding on the catch. He never found anything on the beach except driftwood and crabs. He tried to imagine Svantovit himself, but if his mere claw was the size of the island then the rest of him exceeded anything he had seen, except the sea and sky. He threw stones at the goats until the neatherd drove him away, watched boats sculling over the Achter-wasser, pissed in the pond behind Riesenkampf's manse until it stank. Svantovit and Vineta were the best secrets he had ever heard.

He had been waiting under the beech trees as usual. He watched the men pulling the fish-barrels into his mother's

hut, Ewald dawdling behind them. When the men were inside he waved and Ewald ran across to him. He was out of breath, but instead of talking he simply grabbed him by the wrist and they both ran off into the woods. Ewald had a secret to tell him, something better to show him than eels and sticklebacks.

They ran and ran, past the herring shed, past the Ronsdorffs' hives, until Ewald pulled him up short and told him what he was about to see was his best secret, he must never tell anyone, and swore him to silence. He nodded eagerly. He had no one to tell in any case.

They ran again. They slipped by the monastery. They wove a path through the strange mounds about Krumminer. Behind the next rise was the Stenschke farm. They crept along the side of the chicken run and through the yard. The Stenschke dog knew Ewald and hardly raised its head, but he was scared. Stenschke had let the animal loose on him once when he had walked along the top of his field and his daughters had screamed that the Savage was coming to get them. That was what the other children called him. Not Ewald though. The dog had bounded after him but he lost it in the peat bog. Ewald squatted down and pressed his face to the wall. He could hear the low bubble of talk inside. Ewald rose and beckoned. There was a crack for him to look through. He crouched and took the other's place. Inside were Stenschke's daughters. They were pouring water over each other and the steam was all around them like clouds while they scrubbed and rinsed and unwound white sheets from their bodies, which were naked. He watched, and felt Ewald watching him. He thought of his own confidings: plums, peat bogs, eels, swimming. Ewald's was a different kind of secret.

They walked back by the path through the woods. Scrubby little ash trees started tripping them up and Ewald wanted to go around the longer way but he kept on walking. Ewald said he was definitely going to marry Eva, his father knew

Stenschke pretty well and he used the boat sometimes. Erica was all right too. Why didn't he say something?

He thought of the three girls pouring water out of the jug, their arms plump and red from the steam, the dog chasing him into the swamp, his running away. Ewald was right beside him but his chatter was distant and tinny. It was almost dark and the trees were black skeletons jumbled together in the sky. They were almost at the clearing. He stopped and Ewald stopped too. He knew the secret he was going to tell. He exacted the same oath from Ewald he had sworn himself and they crept forward in silence until they stood before the oak. He took off his clothes and told his companion to do the same, then they joined hands about the tree and he began to tell Ewald about Svantovit. When he told him about the islands and Svantovit's claws Ewald started to cry. Then he tried to get free. The oak seemed to grow colder. It was dark, and the moon was hidden by clouds. Ewald was struggling. His chest scraped against the rough bark and his hands were clamps about the wrists of the other who was jerking to get away. Words were coming from his mouth, harsh and guttural, the same chant over and over again. He heard them fade and be replaced by forest silence, the clash and scrape of wind-stirred branches, the secret creak of roots. His hands released their captive. He saw Ewald run howling into the wood. He dressed slowly. Walking back to the hut, he began to wonder what he had done.

But he knew what he had done, he thought now. Bernardo was motionless, perhaps already asleep. I knew even then, he thought to himself. He had told Ewald his best secret because Ewald's secrets were better than his own.

The following week the catch did not arrive. It had never happened before. He waited under shelter of the beech trees for his friend to arrive until darkness fell but no one came. His mother had to call him in. She waited through the week that followed, but when Ewald's father failed to appear

for the second time she told him to build her a drying rack. The stench in the hut was overpowering. The herring were beginning to rot. He set to work where the trees ended and the cleared land began in which their hut stood, carrying bundles of staves back and forth from the woodland. Dropping the final bundle he looked down and saw that there were footprints in the earth, a confusing jumble of them and, a little further on, behind an alder bush, a pair deeper than the others, as though a man had stood there for hours without moving.

He should not have told Ewald his mother's secret. Dead leaves crunched underfoot and brambles snagged his shirt as he stalked the woods about their home. He left the paths and crept through undergrowth, his gaze sweeping left and right. Each night he quartered the wood and once he thought he saw the figure of a man, far off and barely visible through the moonlit trees. But as he watched the man turned and melted into the night. Perhaps it was the man who left his footprints by their hut, perhaps another. He knew why these men were here, and whence they came. Svantovit was angry so he had sent these demons to frighten him. He dreamed of heads rising out of the sea, bodies marching up the beach, men coming to get him and drag him down to Vineta. He was fearful of what he had done. They were waiting for something and he wondered what it was. If it was not himself, then it was his mother. He wanted to tell her everything, but he did not. He said nothing.

When the third week came, she rose unexpectedly one night and left the hut. He almost told her then, but instead he waited until her footsteps had faded into silence and followed.

It was late summer and the moonlight fell in white shafts where the canopy opened. He crept forward into the wood, imagining that at any moment his mother would leap out and collar him and march him back to the hut. He was some