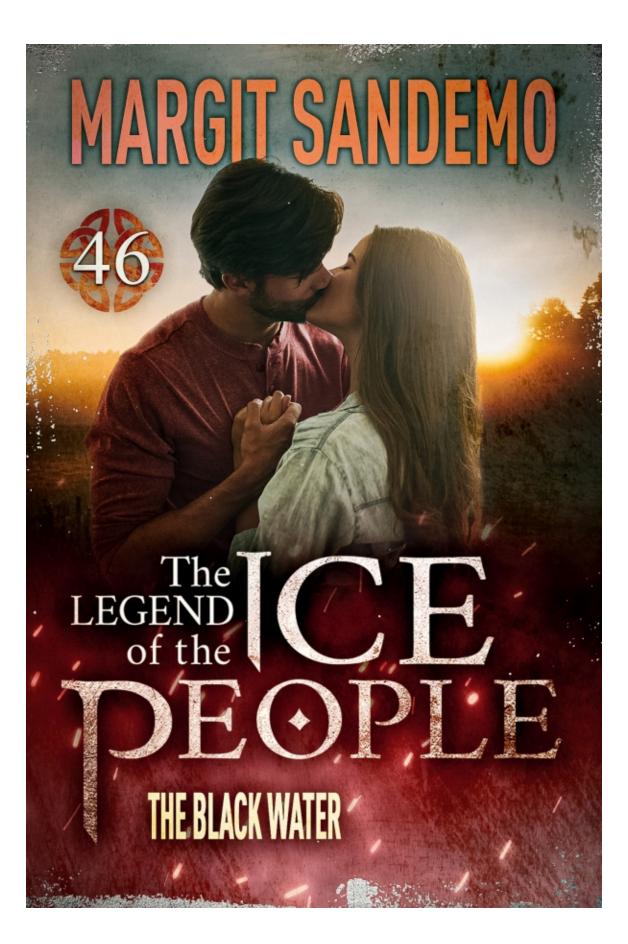
MARGIT SANDEMO

46

The LEGEND of the COLONIA THE BLACK WATER



The Black Water

The Legend of the Ice People 46 - The Black Water

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© eBook in English: Jentas A/S, 2020

Series: The Legend of The Ice People

Title: The Black Water

Title number: 46

Original title: Det svarta vattnet

Translator: Anna Halager © Translation: Jentas A/S

ISBN: 978-87-7107-720-9

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Acknowledgement

The legend of the Ice People is dedicated with love and gratitude to the memory of my dear late husband Asbjorn Sandemo, who made my life a fairy tale.

Margit Sandemo

The Ice People - Reviews

'Margit Sandemo is, simply, quite wonderful.'
- The Guardian

'Full of convincing characters, well established in time and place, and enlightening ... will get your eyes popping, and quite possibly groins twitching ... these are graphic novels without pictures ... I want to know what happens next.'

- The Times

'A mixure of myth and legend interwoven with historical events, this is imaginative creation that involves the reader from the first page to the last.'

- Historical Novels Review

'Loved by the masses, the prolific Margit Sandemo has written over 172 novels to date and is Scandinavia's most widely read author...'

- Scanorama magazine

The Legend of the Ice People

The legend of the Ice People begins many centuries ago with Tengel the Evil. He was ruthless and greedy, and there was only one way to get everything that he wanted: he had to make a pact with the devil. He travelled far into the wilderness and summoned the devil with a magic potion that he had brewed in a pot. Tengel the Evil gained unlimited wealth and power but in exchange, he cursed his own family. One of his descendants in every generation would serve the Devil with evil deeds. When it was done, Tengel buried the pot. If anyone found it, the curse would be broken.

So the curse was passed down through Tengel's descendants, the Ice People. One person in every generation was born with yellow cat's eyes, a sign of the curse, and magical powers which they used to serve the Devil. One day the most powerful of all the cursed Ice People would be born.

This is what the legend says. Nobody knows whether it is true, but in the 16th century, a cursed child of the Ice People was born. He tried to turn evil into good, which is why they called him Tengel the Good. This legend is about his family. Actually, it is mostly about the women in his family – the women who held the fate of the Ice People in their hands.

Chapter 1

Deep in thought, Nataniel gazed over the Valley of the Ice People.

The rest of the world lay outside the valley, he thought, and nobody in the whole wide world knew that the hour of destiny was drawing frighteningly near.

If we can't the save the world now, we never will.

The task seemed to be far worse than they had reckoned with. Honestly. It seemed hopeless.

Tengel the Evil was in the valley now. He was on his way towards them and he had every chance of reaching them – because they couldn't get across here. Perhaps Tan-ghil might, Nataniel thought grimly.

Nataniel knew that this was *his* task. Marco had carried out his. Tova and Ian could only serve as supporters, and Gabriel only as an observer.

The final struggle against Tengel the Evil, the race to his hidden vessel of water, the fight for the wellbeing of the world, was Nataniel's task, and nobody else's.

The clouds hung heavily over the earth up here on the mountain heights. The valley lay frozen down below. The crater in front of Nataniel seethed and bubbled. Otherwise, not a sound could be heard.

It was obvious that they couldn't reach the vessel along this route. Over the centuries, the presence of the black water of evil had infected the surrounding countryside so badly that everything was ruined, sick and scarred.

The gaping, steaming hole in the ground showed where the vessel lay. But the earth around it trembled in sickly colours.

Nobody could put a foot on that ground; everything looked like a bottomless bog of atrocities.

"How about dropping a few drops of the clear water on the ground?" suggested Tova.

"We can't spare it," Nataniel replied. "We must go easy on the water right up until its final purpose. Is there anything left of yours, Marco? Or did you have to use it all on Lynx?" He didn't want to be reminded about the terrible, unfathomable thing that had happened to that man.

"I have a few drops left," said Marco. "A quarter of the bottle perhaps."

Nataniel nodded. He was now fully in charge of the group. "We must be content with what we have. Save every single drop."

"You're right," said Marco. "We can't start experimenting here."

They had withdrawn from the eerie area. Now they were back in a small glade, with the projecting cliff between them and what Tova called "the nameless horror" – the gaping hole in the ground.

"Well then ..." said Ian. "Then we'd better take Gabriel's strange dream as our point of departure. What do you think?"

"You're absolutely right, Ian," said Nataniel. "How did it go, Gabriel? 'Take the other thing first. Don't forget.' It's important, that bit about taking the second thing first! Wasn't that how the dream went?"

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. Although 'the other thing' could mean anything. But shouldn't we give it a try anyway?"

"Yes," said Nataniel firmly. "Yes, I think we'd better do that. Even if it seems a bitter thing to have to turn around – when we are so close to our target."

"Perhaps Tengel the Evil hid the key to the riddle there," Marco said. "Gabriel, who spoke those words in your dream? About

the chains of the dead and about the 'other thing', the important point, that was to be taken first?"

"I don't know, Marco. I don't know."

"I know. Nataniel, it was Silje's diary!"

"I thought exactly the same thing," said Nataniel, and immediately produced the age-old diary from his rucksack.

"Here's the map of the Valley of the Ice People," he said, and they all bent over the book. "This is where we are right now ... So where do we find what Sunniva the Elder called 'the other place'?"

Marco pointed at a fresh spot on the map. "There."

They looked up and gauged the distance above the mountain range. It was getting cold; the evening shadows were appearing over the valley.

So many days ... thought Gabriel. We left home such a long time ago. I've lost track of the days.

"Come on," said Nataniel, interrupting his thoughts. "Come, let's find the place."

Gabriel nodded to himself. Everybody was still more than sure that 'the other thing', the important thing that had to be taken first, was Tengel the Evil's other place up above the mountain summits.

It had to be that! They couldn't afford to waste any time on futile experiments.

Quickly, they began to walk along the mountain range, the valley below receding even farther.

"Do you know," said Tova quietly. "I feel we're being watched by a thousand hopeful eyes!"

Marco asked in just as quiet a voice: "Do you mean the animals are watching us?"

"Yes, we can't see them. I might be imagining it all because they *can't* be in this toxic valley. And yet I sense that anxious

eyes are popping up everywhere. Shy eyes – those of the fox, the reindeer, the hare, the wolverine ... Birds waiting up on the mountaintops and down in the passes. Eagles, rough-legged buzzards, grouse, small birds ..."

"I know what you mean. But apart from the buzzards, there surely aren't any animals here. If they *knew* they would be following everything we do with trembling hearts."

"Exactly!"

Gabriel tried to stick as close as possible to them on the stony slopes. "Those others," he whispered. "They've gone."

Tova peered down at the moor with its thin covering of snow. It was true what Gabriel had said. The eerie, black-dressed, deathly pale creatures that nobody could identify had disappeared. Just as inconspicuously and quietly as they had turned up.

They all breathed a sigh of relief.

"It occurs to me that we haven't eaten today," said Ian. "Yet I'm not hungry."

"How can that be possible?" muttered Marco. "I haven't thought of food for a second."

"Nor me," they all said at the same time.

They had experienced many shocking days, but this one was the worst of their lives.

And yet they didn't know what awaited them, and perhaps that was just as well.

Nataniel was concerned because dusk was falling. He wanted so desperately to carry out his task in a bright, hopeful dawn. Evening meant that everyone felt tired and dejected.

But they couldn't wait till the next morning. They only had this brief evening hour in which to walk.

Nataniel wasn't afraid of his task. After all, now that he had lost Ellen, he had nothing to live for. He might just as well risk

his life – which was precisely what he was doing. But he worried about Gabriel. Nataniel knew his sister-in-law well enough to know that Karine wouldn't be able to bear the loss of her only child. He also didn't want anything to happen to Ian. Marco would be able to manage. But how Tova would fare Nataniel didn't know.

She was happy now that she had met Ian. Nataniel didn't want her to experience new sorrow and adversity. Or even to die. If it was true that she was to have a child, then she ought to be allowed to see that child in the future. She and Ian.

Oh, dear, the future? Where was it?

Suddenly, Nataniel felt his burden like a bag of concrete on his shoulders. Everything rested on him. He had to see to it that Tova and Ian, and everyone else in the world, had a future.

He stopped and felt the icy wind penetrate to his marrow. The Valley of the Ice People lay there in the dusk: cold, watchful and secretive. The snow on the other side now looked blue. The frozen lake was criss-crossed by dark cracks that heralded spring. The mountaintops cast long shadows; the valley and the mountains were calm. From far below, they could hear the monotonous roar of the river, otherwise everything was as silent as the grave.

That was exactly what the Valley of the Ice People was: a grave. This was where so many of those who had once lived here were buried. Most of them had been outsiders, but there were also descendants of the Ice People. Near where Nataniel stood now was Kolgrim's lonely grave. It had to be under that slope over there.

Behind them was the vessel containing the evil water. Now they were walking away from it. They wanted to see what Tengel the Evil had hidden in the 'other place'.

None of them had any idea what that could be.

It was difficult to make progress close to the mountain wall, so they had to walk some way away from it. When Tova spoke, an unexpectedly loud echo came from the slopes.

She shouted to Nataniel: "If only we could have had some of our helpers with us here. Benedikte, for instance, with her ability to see *behind* things. See their story."

"Tula also possesses that gift," Nataniel answered, and his voice was also thrown back at them. "She's able to see straight through walls."

"We could certainly use her assistance right now," muttered Gabriel.

"And Heike, with his ability to sense vibrations of death and much else."

"I would have liked Targenor to be here," said Marco. "He possesses incredible powers."

Suddenly, all four of them stopped.

Nataniel felt it and turned around. His eyes expressed horror. They were all silent for a while.

Then Marco said slowly: "I don't think we need them. Not Benedikte, or Tula, or Heike, or Targenor, or anybody else."

Nataniel was confused. "What do you mean?"

"You're shining," said Tova, matter-of-factly. "You're shining with a blue flame."

Nataniel lifted his arm and looked at it. He twisted and turned his hand. Stretched out his foot a bit.

Everything was surrounded by a strong, metallic glow, as if he was dressed in electrified armour. He felt so strong, so ... full of enormous strength. His brain was as clear as glass, his knowledge unlimited, his willpower invincible.

Suddenly he smiled. They had not seen Nathaniel smile for a long time. Since the loss of Ellen, only seriousness had marked his noble face.

He laughed nervously. "I seem to be ready for my task." "Oh, *absolutely!*" gasped Tova.

He straightened his back. "Yes. I'm ready for the struggle. My time of being irresolute is over!"

They breathed out. All of them.

"Well, what do we do now?" Marco asked, allowing Nataniel to decide matters.

He stretched out his arms sideways. He tested them, lifting them with his palms turned upwards. It seemed that he was receiving information. Nobody was sending it and yet he knew. He grabbed it out of the air.

"Good God, my abilities are strong," he whispered in surprise. None of them reacted to the fact that Nataniel had invoked God. They knew that he meant it literally. His legacy from his father had given him a strong anchoring in religion, even if he had often quarrelled with his father, Abel Gard, about precisely that.

"What are you discovering?" Ian asked discreetly.

"There's a lot here," murmured Nataniel.

Marco interrupted him: "I'm also picking it up. But I don't understand what it is."

Nataniel stood completely still as if he was trying to fathom his emotions. He said: "I believe that we ... I think it will be a tough struggle. Tengel the Evil hasn't made things easy for us."

"Has anybody tried to give you that impression?" asked Tova mockingly.

"No, but there are many more obstacles ahead of us than we thought," said Nataniel. "There's a strong chance that he may arrive before we do."

"Then what are we waiting for?" asked Marco.

"You're right. Our first objective is the 'other place'."

"Can you sense that?"

"Yes, it's a very intense sensation, and it's much more important when solving the riddle than we realized before."

"What do you feel?"

Nataniel concentrated. "I don't know. It's so very strange." "Dangerous?"

"Definitely! But most of all ... strange! Come, let's go on. It's ahead of us somewhere."

Gabriel still stood there. Then he turned around. "We haven't heard him for a long time now."

"Tan-ghil?" said Marco. "No, not since he plunged down to the moor with his heavy burden on top of him."

"Do you think he died?"

"No, he didn't. But I hope he was inconvenienced for a while." Then they all dared to smile cautiously. But it was a stiff smile. They weren't yet so hardened against possible future dangers that they had become foolhardy. So far, they felt a great deal of anxiety in their hearts.

They crept slowly along between the cliffs that rose from the dead, ancient landscape.

Suddenly, they all stopped, as Nataniel held up his hand towards them. They had reached an open space between the cliffs. It was full of boulders that had tumbled down from the mountains above, but with some optimism it might be called a plateau, or even a glade.

"What's this?" asked Ian quietly.

"We've reached it," said Nataniel, who shone increasingly blue the closer dusk came. "This is the spot where Sunniva the Elder felt that *something* was close to her. Something that made her absolutely terrified, so much so that she had to flee from the spot. I feel the same right now – but we aren't allowed to flee."

Gabriel was already feeling that inexplicable anxiety, and he could see that Tova and Marco felt the same. Ian's face was

almost white and he looked about with an expression of terror.

They all felt the same as Sunniva had once done, and later Tarjei. They all knew with certainty that this was Tengel the Evil's work.

But they could see nothing.

"Can you find anything here, Nataniel?" asked Marco.

The bluish figure turned slowly towards the mountain wall, which was now quite a distance from them.

"I believe it's up there."

Marco nodded. They began to walk up the slight slope, and Gabriel was sorry to find that he and Ian were lagging behind the rest.

Perhaps this was just as well. Neither Gabriel nor Ian had the unseen abilities of the others.

After a short while, they stopped, slightly confused.

"I lost the trail," said Nataniel, frowning. "All of a sudden I no longer felt that I was on the right trail."

"Tengel the Evil's will is leading you astray," said Tova. "You can be absolutely sure that he knows where we are."

"Damn!" Nataniel muttered.

Marco had been wandering around.

"Nataniel," he called softly. "Come and see this!"

They went over to where Marco stood. He was bending over the ground.

"Somebody has been here before us," said Tova, nodding, when she saw the tracks that were visible under the thin layer of snow.

"Somebody – or something," said Ian. "They're so unclear they could be anything. They might not even be tracks."

As Nataniel scraped the snow away from one of the tracks, he said slowly: "Ye-s. You can see the direction something has been going in here. But *what* it is, a person or an animal ... I don't

think anybody can tell."

"Anyway, they're pretty old," said Tova. "From before the snowfall."

"Yes," replied Marco. "But there are many of them. I believe ... it's ... not exactly a trail but it can't be one creature that's walked here just once."

"It could be the same creature that has been here several times," Nataniel said.

"Yes, or several. Anyway, the main thing is that they're all heading in the same direction."

They looked up. Although the trail was unclear, there was no doubt that it led to the mountain wall.

"Let's take a look," said Marco grimly.

The dusk was heavy now, but they had grown accustomed to it. They shivered in the cold of the approaching night. The toxic landscape was affecting them. Tova muttered to Gabriel that she was pleased that she wasn't here alone, and he agreed.

They had followed the tracks as best they could. Now and then, the marks disappeared completely but they found them again. They led ever closer to the steep heights of the mountain.

Finally, Tova said in surprise: "The tracks end here!" They stopped.

"Yes, you're certainly right," said Nataniel.

"Amusing," muttered Tova. "What do we do now? We're not Shira, who can open a cliff face with Mar's torch."

Nataniel's hands were working across the surface of the cliff.

"It seems solid, and much too smooth and irregular in its contours to be able to hide a door."

Marco nodded. "You're right. Abracadabra won't work here!" Then Gabriel said, slightly awkwardly: "The snow."

They looked at him enquiringly.

This made him feel confused. "Well, it snowed recently.

Perhaps the snow is hiding something?"

Marco praised Gabriel: "Very well thought out!"

Nataniel was already squatting, and began scraping the snow away from the ground in front of the cliff wall.

After a while, he said: "No."

Tova grew excited. "Can't you see what you've done, Nataniel? You've uncovered new tracks, and they go on!"

They followed these diffuse prints along the cliff wall.

"This is where they stop," said Ian.

Nataniel immediately bent down and scraped away the thin layer of snow.

"Step aside," he told the others and moved back slightly.

"What is it?" Marco asked, who hadn't had a chance to see.

"You're treading on something. A flat stone, a hatch or something. We can't risk that ..."

Gabriel asked in a tremulous voice: "A burial chamber?" "We'll see."

Everybody helped to brush the snow aside. The stone appeared bigger and bigger.

"This leads to a crypt," said Tova.

"Shut up!" muttered Nataniel, with Gabriel in mind. "How was he able to build this? Up here in the wildest wilderness?"

"Remember that he was out here for a whole month at that time," said Marco. "Thirty days and thirty nights, wasn't it? When he hid his vessel of water."

"That's true. Now ... now."

They gazed at the stone. It was a rough slab, undoubtedly found nearby. Slate, of which there was plenty in the mountains.

Gabriel muttered the vital words that were preoccupying them all. "How do you move it?"

The three men tried to lift the slab, but quite in vain. It was not

only heavy but also stuck. They couldn't move it at all.

They stood up slowly. They were puzzled.

Nataniel glanced around and said quietly: "I don't like this place at all."

"I couldn't agree more," replied Marco in just as quiet a voice.

Tova whispered: "I've had this feeling all the time in my back.

You know: 'Run! Run for your life!'"

"Exactly," replied Marco.

"Me, too," said Ian. "But I hardly dared tell you. I thought it was just my own cowardice."

Nataniel smiled almost imperceptibly. "Hardly! Whatever you are, Ian, you're definitely not a coward!"

"You don't know that."

"It doesn't hurt to be slightly scared. If not, you're stupid. How are you feeling, Gabriel?"

The boy started. "Me? I've been afraid of wetting my trousers ever since we stepped out of that glade."

"So we all feel the same. An almost frantic sense of anxiety."

"So we should," said Marco. "It's very obvious that this is Tengel the Evil's 'other place'. What Sunniva the Elder described. But what did he hide here? What did he hide under this block of stone?"

Tova didn't reply. She thought she knew what was hidden under the slab, and the thought made her feel extremely ill at ease.

It looked very much like a gravestone ...

Tova could tell by the faces of the others that they felt the same way.

"We need to move the stone," said Marco sadly.

"Yes," answered Nataniel.

They all squatted and touched the edge of the stone.

It was Ian who found the solution.

"Here," he said. "There's something here."

Nataniel copied him. "Yes, you're right. There's a mechanism here. Primitive but ... Tova, see if you can feel another one where you're standing. On the same side."

Tova fumbled with her hand under the ice-cold stone.

"Yes. The slab is resting on something."

Marco stood next to Tova. His sensitive fingers had discovered a detail. "It's as if the slab is clinging onto the surface. It's very simple, Nataniel. If you and Ian lift over there, Tova and I will do likewise here."

They tried.

Gabriel, who was lying on his stomach and had a better perspective, said: "No, push the slab backwards. Move it in the opposite direction of what you think!"

They did so, lifting at the same time – and with a natural movement, the stone slid down on its side.

Ian said, matter-of-fact: "That was simple, wasn't it? When you know the trick."

A dark hole had appeared. Automatically, all five took out their torches. Gabriel was pleased to see that they all had good-quality searchlights.

It was so dark outside that they needed some light. Together, they let the cones of light shine down into the opening.

It wasn't exactly a staircase. Only naturally placed stones, so that it was possible, with some difficulty, to get down into a chamber that was tall enough for a person to stand upright.

"What do you see?" asked Tova.

"Nothing," replied Marco. "Certainly not a burial chamber."
Nataniel was somewhat nervous and said: "Let's go down. My intuition tells me that it's not safe up in the glade anymore."

Gabriel looked over his shoulder. Perhaps he was imagining things, but he thought he saw the tall dark shadows of evil creatures all around the glade.

"Yes, let's get down there," he said.

Anything seemed better than the glade, with its creeping, invisible horror.

Very quickly, all five were down.

Ian asked: "Ought we to put the slab back on top?"

"No," said Nataniel. "I think we should leave that route open.

Besides, I don't think we can manoeuvre it from here."

They found that they didn't need light down there because Nataniel was now radiating so much strong, blue light that it was more than enough.

That had to be a legacy from the black angels. It said in the chronicles that Imre had once appeared with a bluish glow about him.

Imre ... that had been Marco. Of course.

Nataniel was still fascinated by the blue, dancing flames around his arms and hands. His clothes also shone.

The crypt was so cramped that they couldn't see anything at all.

"A rectangular, empty room," muttered Marco. "This couldn't have been it."

"Perhaps what was once here has turned into earth," said Tova quietly.

Their expressions showed that they understood what she meant. If so, all they had done had been in vain. If it was simply a grave that contained nothing at all.

But they couldn't give up that easily!

Suddenly, Nataniel said: "Shine your torches here. Here, on this wall!"

All the torches were directed onto an area on the short wall. Marco followed a small crack in the wall with his finger.

Then he said: "There's something here. Unless I'm mistaken,

it's a kind of door or gate."

In the blue light that he had created himself, Nataniel said:

"That's exactly what I thought. But there are no hinges here."

Marco answered: "There's nothing here. Nothing at all."

Tova's face became almost visionary. "There's an entrance ... leading to what?"

Nataniel made a calculation. "From what I gather, it leads straight into the mountain."

"Yes," said Ian. "The mountain wall is directly above us."

Tova decided the matter. "Then we must go inside, no matter what!"

"Careful with your promises now," Nataniel admonished her. But Tova's face still glowed with the visions that were working away in her subconscious mind. The others gave her a questioning look. They realized that she was picking up something.

Gabriel broke their concentration. "Can you hear something?" he whispered breathlessly.

They listened.

"Yes," Marco answered. "Do you mean that quiet whirring?" "Yes, that's what I mean."

"It's coming from inside the mountain," said Nataniel. "Behind this wall."

"Could it be a brook?" Ian asked, his eyes showing that he was disappointed.

"No, I don't think so," replied Marco slowly. "It sounds somehow ... roaring. But from so far away that it turns into a whirr."

After a long silence, Nataniel said: "How are you, Tova?" "I'm picking up something. Can you help me, please? Somebody wants to get in touch with us!"

"Ian and Gabriel, please remain silent," said Nataniel.