

## The Ice Palace, by Robert Swindells

The main character in this story is a boy called Ivan. A terrible thing happens to him: his little brother is taken away by Starjik, the evil child-taker. The village weeps but Ivan is determined that Starjik will not succeed this time.

Turn your face into the east wind, and if you could see for ever you would see Ivan's land. It is a land where summer is short and pale like a celandine; winter long and cold as an icicle. Ivan does not live there now for he grew old long ago, and is gone. But the people of the pine-woods remember him. They remember him all the time, but most of all they remember him in winter because they are not afraid of winter any more. They have no need to be afraid, because of something Ivan did when he was very small.

Ivan and his brother lived in the house of their father the blacksmith, in a village in the shadow of the great, dark forest. The people of the village were poor, but in the summertime they were mostly happy, so that the pale, warm air rang with their laughter and their singing as they worked.

But as the short summers gave way to autumn their songs became sad songs, and their laughter thin. For they knew that far away to the north, Starjik was greasing the runners of his sled and rounding up his wolves. Starjik! Whisper his name and it was winter in your heart. Hissing over crisp snow in the black of night came Starjik behind his hungry team. Their eyes were yellow and their fangs were white. When Starjik was in a village the people lay very still behind their shutters but always, in the morning, a child was gone. For Starjik was known in every pine-woods village as the child-taker, and those he took were never seen again.

One night when an icy wind whined through the black trees, and powdery snow sifted under everybody's doors, Starjik came to Ivan's house, and when Ivan awoke in the morning his little brother was gone.

All the village wept for the blacksmith and his wife, and for little Ivan who must now play alone. And little Ivan walked in Starjik's sled-tracks to the end of the village and stood there a long time, gazing into the north.

That evening, at suppertime, while his mother and father were not looking, Ivan took some of the dark bread from the big wooden board on the table, and slipped it into his pocket. Then he said, "Mother, I am very tired. I will sleep now." His mother lighted a candle for him and he carried the little flame into his room.

For a long time he sat on his bed, listening to the small noises his parents made beyond the door of his room, and to the wind outside. The wind made a sad, lonely sound, and as he listened it seemed to Ivan that something was crying out there in the night; something small and frightened that touched his window and moved away along the wall. And he lifted a corner of the window-curtain and pressed his face to the cold glass and whispered, "Wait, little brother. I will not leave you. I am coming."

