TRANSLATION WORK

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In the land of Ingaria, where things like seven-mile boots and invisible hats really do exist, it's bad luck to be born the eldest of three children. Everyone realizes that if all three of them go off in search of happiness, you will be the first to fail - and fail badly.

Sophie Hutter was the eldest of three sisters. And it would be nice if she was born in the family of a poor woodcutter - that would promise at least some hope for success. On the contrary, Sophie's parents were well-to-do people who ran a ladies' hat shop in a thriving town called Market Chipping. Sophie's own mother died when the little girl was two, and her sister Letty - just a year old, and then her father married a younger saleswoman, a pretty blonde named Fanny. Very soon Fanny gave birth to a third sister, Martha. This was supposed to turn Sophie and Letty into the Evil Big Sisters - ugly, of course - but in fact all three girls grew up very pretty, though no one doubted that Letty was the prettiest. Fanny was equally affectionate to all three girls, and never singled out Martha in any way.

Mr. Hutter was proud of his daughters and sent them to the best school in town. Sophie turned out to be the most diligent. She read very much and soon enough found out how little chance she had of an interesting future. This was a great disappointment to Sophie, but she was quite content with this life, looking after her sisters and preparing Martha for a happy destiny, for she knew it was coming. Since Fanny was always busy in the shop, Sophie had to look after the younger ones. The younger ones often yelled at each other and even pulled each other's hair. Lettie was not going to accept her failure, for it was clear that she was going to fail miserably after Sophie.

- It's not fair! - she shouted. - So what if Martha is the youngest? Does that make her better than us? When I marry the prince, then you'll know!

Martha snorted irritably, saying that she was sure to get rich without marrying anyone. So Sophie had to pull them apart and mend their dresses. She was very good with a needle. Soon she was dressing her sisters herself. Last May Day, shortly before our story began, Sophy made Letty a dark pink dress, which Fanny said looked like something from the most expensive store in Kingsbury.

About that time there was talk of the Witch of the Swamp again. It was said that the Witch had threatened to kill the King's daughter, and that the King had ordered his court wizard, the Wizard Saliman, to go to the Swamps and deal with the Witch. Apparently, the Wizard Saliman did not deal with the Witch, but died by her hand.

So when, a few months later, a tall black castle suddenly appeared in the hills near Market Chipping, spewing clouds of black smoke from four tall, thin towers, everyone was sure that the Witch had left the Swamp again and would terrorize the whole area, as she had done fifty years before. In Market Chipping they were frightened. No one left the house alone, especially at night. The scariest thing was that the castle never stood still. Sometimes it loomed black on the peat bogs to the north-west, sometimes it loomed over the cliffs to the east, and sometimes it came down from the hills and sat among the heather just beyond the last farm to the north. Sometimes you could even see it moving, and dirty black puffs of smoke wafted from the towers this way and that. For a while everyone thought that the castle would soon descend straight into the Vale, and the mayor began to talk about sending to the king for help.

But the castle continued to wander in the hills, and then it became known that the Swamp Witch had nothing to do with it: the castle did not belong to her at all, but to the wizard Howl. Howl was a very evil sorcerer. Although he didn't seem to be leaving the hills yet, everyone knew that his favorite pastime was kidnapping young girls and sucking their souls out of them. And some said he devoured their hearts. He was the most heartless and unscrupulous of sorcerers: if he took a girl by surprise, she was finished. Sophie, Letty, and Martha, like all the other girls in Market Chipping, were strictly forbidden to go out alone, which made them very angry. They wondered, they laughed, why the wizard Howl needed so many stolen souls.

But they soon became preoccupied with something else, for Mr. Hutter died just as Sophie was preparing to say goodbye to the school for good. That's when it turned out that Mr. Hutter had overreached in his pride in his daughters. Because of school fees, the shop was up to its eyeballs in debt. After the funeral, Fanny sat down in the parlor - their house was next door to the shop - and explained the situation to her daughters.

- I'm afraid I'll have to take you out of school," she announced sadly. - I've done the math, and no matter how I look at it, from top to bottom, from left to right, I can see that if I want to run my business and set you up properly, I'll have to give you apprenticeships in good places. It's not practical to keep you three in the shop. I can't afford it. So I've decided. First, Letty.

Letty looked up, her eyes shining with a beauty and health that neither grief nor mourning dress could hide.

- I'd like to go on studying," she said.

- And you will, swallow," Fanny assured her. - I've arranged for you to be apprenticed to Caesari's pastry shop in the Market Square. They treat their apprentices like kings and queens, so you'll do very well there, and it's a useful trade. Mrs. Caesari is a great customer and a good friend, and she has agreed to do me a favor and take you.

Letty laughed in a way that made it clear that she was not at all pleased.

- Well, thank you," she said. - It's a good thing I like to cook.

Fanny breathed a sigh of relief. Sometimes Letty was just awfully willful.

- Now Martha," she went on. - I realize you're too young to work, so I've been thinking a lot about how I could arrange it so that you could study longer and more quietly, and then you could use it for whatever you decided to do. Do you remember my school friend Annabel Fairfax?

Martha, thin and blond, stared at Fanny with big gray eyes almost as willful as Letty's.

- Was it the one who was always cracking up? - she clarified. - Isn't she a witch?

- Yes, she's got a nice little house and a lot of customers all over Foothills Hollow," Fanny said, nodding hastily. - She's a very kind woman, Martha. She'll teach you everything she knows, and she'll probably introduce you to her influential friends at Kingsbury. You'll be settled in the best possible way!

- 'Yes, she's all right,' Martha agreed reluctantly. - Good.

And Sophy, listening to this conversation, thought that Fanny had done exactly the right thing. Lettie, the middle sister, had nothing much to look forward to, so Fanny had put her in a place where she was likely to meet a handsome young clerk, marry him, and live happily ever after. Martha, doomed to be successful in her quest for happiness, would benefit from powerful friends and the ability to conjure. And as for Sophie herself, Sophie had no doubts about her future. So she was not at all surprised when Fanny said:

- "My dear Sophie, it is only fair that you should inherit the shop when I retire, for you are the eldest. So I thought I'd take you on as an apprentice myself and give you the opportunity to learn our trade thoroughly. How's that sound?

Not that Sophie felt as if she had been born for the hat business, but she thanked Fanny warmly nonetheless.

- Well, that settles it! - rejoiced Fanny.

The next day Sophy helped Martha to put the dresses in a box, and the next morning they all saw off the carriage of the carriage driver, on which sat the future witch, small, straight, frightened. For the way to Foothills Hollow, where Mrs. Fairfax lived, lay through the hills, just past the walking castle of the wizard Howl. Martha shouldn't be afraid.

- It'll be all right," said Letty. She refused to help with the packing, and when the driver's cart was out of sight, Letty simply pushed all her belongings into a pillowcase and paid sixpence to a neighbor boy to wheel them in a wheelbarrow to Mrs. Caesar's confectionery in Market Square.

Lettie was pacing behind the wheelbarrow, and she looked much more cheerful than Sophy had expected. In truth, Letty even seemed glad to shake the ashes of the hat shop off her feet.

The boy returned from Letty's with a stubby note saying that she'd unloaded her dresses in the girls' common room and that Caesar's was ah, fun. A week later, the carter brought a letter from Martha, saying that Martha had reached the place safely and that Mrs. Fairfax was "just lovely and puts honey in all her potions. She has bees." And then Sophy did not hear from her sisters for quite a long time, for the day Martha and Letty left, her own schooling began.

It goes without saying that Sophie was already well versed in hatmaking. When she was still a little girl, she used to run around the yard, where they soaked the blanks and stretched them on the brim, and made flowers, fruit, and other decorations out of wax and silk. She knew everyone who worked there. Many of them had served in the shop since her Pa had been a boy. She knew Bessie, the only saleswoman left. She knew the customers who picked out the hats, and the carter who brought raw straw hats from the village - then they were dried on bolsters in the barn. She knew all the other suppliers, and how felt was made for winter hats. Fanny had already There was almost nothing to teach her-except the best ways to persuade a customer to buy a hat.

- A lady must be led to the right hat, little swallow," said Fanny. - First show those that do not really suit her - then she will immediately feel what the difference is when she tries on the right one.

In fact, Sophie did not often have to sell hats. After she had spent a couple of days in the workshop and then visited the fabric store and the silk merchant with Fanny, Fanny put her in charge of decorating the hats. Sophie sat in a niche in the back room of the shop, sewing roses on bonnets and voilettes on velour, sewing on silk linings and making elegant bouquets of rag flowers, ribbons and wax berries. She was very good at it.

She loved it. But little by little Sophie became lonely and a little bored. Those who worked in the workshop were not much fun: they were old and treated her as a bit of an outsider and a future mistress. Bessie treated her the same way. This Bessie was only able to talk about the farmer she was going to marry the week after the May Day. Sophy was a little jealous of Fanny, who could fly away from the shop to the silk merchant at any moment.

The most interesting thing was to listen to the conversations of the customers. It was impossible to buy a hat without gossiping. Sophie sat in her niche, nimbly wielding her needle, and listened to the mayor's dislike of greenery, the wizard Howl's castle had moved into the hills again, and that the scoundrel had really... And shoo-shoo-shoo-shoo, and shoo-shoo-shoo-shoo... Whenever the conversation turned to Howl the wizard, the voices invariably lowered, but Sophie still realized that a month ago he had caught a girl in the valley. "Bluebeard!" - The customers whispered, and then began to speak in full voice again, because that fool Jane Ferrier had done something to her hair. That's the sort of woman that the wizard Howl would never lay eyes on, let alone decent men. And then, quietly, fearfully, they'd add a word or two about the Swamp Witch. Sophie was beginning to think there was a connection between the wizard Howl and the Swamp Witch.

- It seemed like they were made for each other. I wish someone would see them off," she said to the hat she had in the works.

By the end of the month, however, the gossip in the shop was all about Letty. Apparently, various gentlemen crowded into Cesari's pastry shop day and night, and each of them bought mountains of cakes, demanding that Letty be the one to serve them. She's had ten proposals of marriage and she turned them all down, saying she was too young and inexperienced to make up her mind.

- Well, that's sensible of her," said Sophy to the bonnet, to which she was just sewing a flesh-colored ruffle.

Fanny was very glad to hear such news.

- She was sure that everything was going to work out for the best for her," she exclaimed happily. Sophy thought how glad Fanny must be that Letty was no longer here.

- Letty would have been very bad for trade," Sophy explained to the bonnet, as she adorned it with silk ribbons of a pinkish-gray shade like cheesecloth. - She'd be a beauty even in you, you silly old thing. Other ladies would look at her and be sad.

As the weeks went by, Sophie talked more and more to the hats. She had no one else to talk to. Fanny was away almost all day running errands or standing behind the counter, trying to stimulate trade, and Bessie was busy as a bee, pestering everyone with her pre-wedding dreams. Sophy was in the habit of putting a hat on a dummy, as if it were a head without a body, and then, for a change, telling the hat on whom it would be worn. Sophie flattered the hats a little, because the customers had to be flattered too.