Praise for The Eye of the North

"A charming, thrilling tale of adventure, mystery,
and a Creature in a frozen world."
Kiran Millwood Hargrave, author of *The Girl of Ink and Stars*

"*The Eye of the North* takes readers on a twisting adventure to an otherworldly land. Emmeline Widget is a brilliant, gutsy heroine and O'Hart's writing crackles with imagination, from the ice-dwelling creatures of her frozen landscape to the chilling Northwitch and her evil plans."
Jennifer Bell, author of *The Uncommoners*

"*The Eye of the North* is a wonderfully exciting adventure complete with airships, ice horses and the Northwitch."
Abi Elphinstone, author of *The Dreamsnatcher*

"This book is pure middle-grade gold, pitched perfectly in tone at its audience. It is sure to be lapped up by girls and boys alike. This impressive debut is my first 5 star read of 2017. I hope it's a huge hit. It certainly deserves to be!"
Kieran Fanning, author of *The Black Lotus*

"Lovely writing and a fertile imagination in a unique setting
make this a truly enjoyable read."
Nigel Quinlan, author of *The Maloneys' Magical Weatherbox*

"A highly original fantasy novel for age 9+ with some cracking world building. Emmeline is an engaging character with real agency and I fell in love with her from the opening page. With echoes of Narnia and Philip Reeve, this is an engrossing, magical tale not to be missed."
Sarah Webb, author of the Amy Green books

"Sinéad O'Hart can spin a good yarn, and I hope
she's in for a long and thrilling career."
Janine Beacham, author of the Rose Ravethorpe Investigates series

For Níamh Éowyn, Emer Mary,
and Clodagh Réiltín, star of my heart

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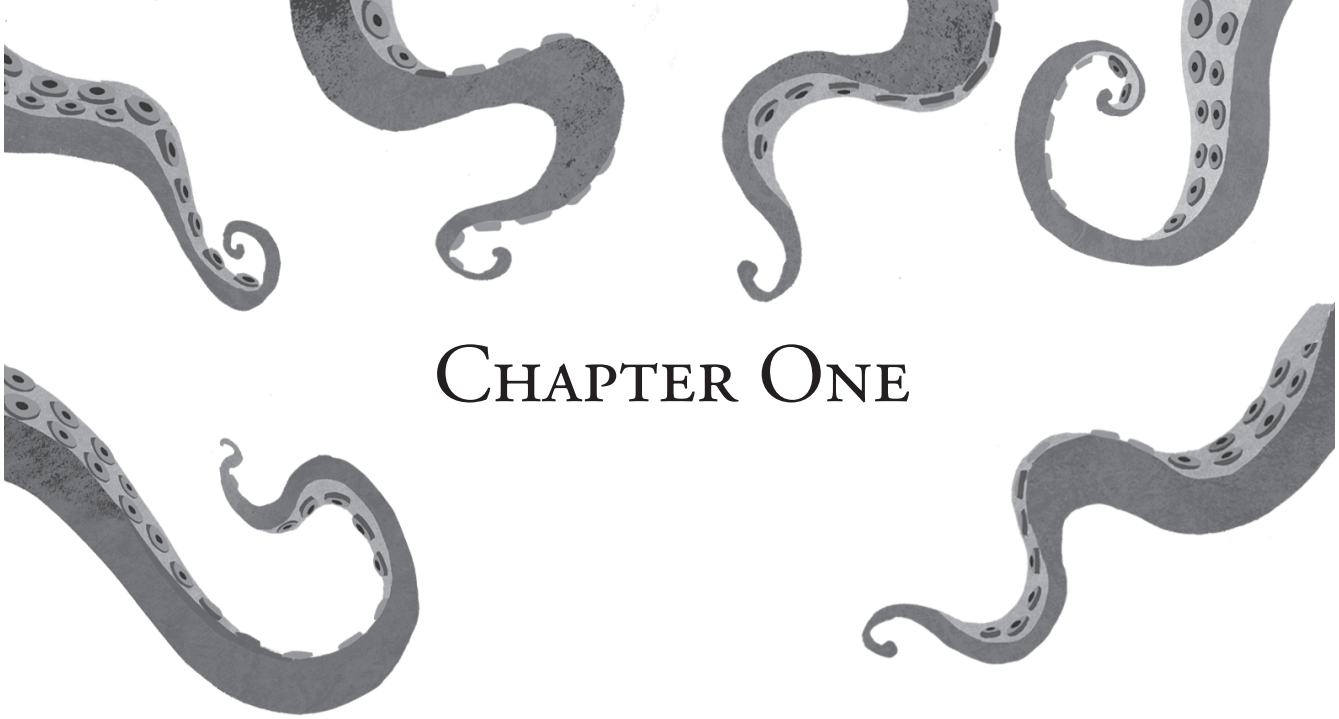
The Eye of the North

SINÉAD O'HART

Stripes



Chapter One

For as long as she could remember, Emmeline Widget had been *sure* her parents were trying to kill her.

Why else, she reasoned, would they choose to live in a creaky old house where, if she wasn't dodging random bits of collapsing masonry or avoiding the trick steps on the stairs, she had to be constantly on guard for booby-trapped floorboards or doors that liked to boom closed entirely by themselves? She'd lost count of the number of close calls she'd already clocked up, and so she never went anywhere inside her house – not even to the bathroom – without a torch, a ball of twine, and a short, stout stick, the latter to defend herself against whatever might come slithering up the drain. She'd started her fight for survival early. As a baby, she'd learned to walk mostly by avoiding the tentacles, tusks, and whiplike tongues of the various

small, furry things in cages that would temporarily line the hallways after one of her parents' research trips. And she'd long ago grown used to shaking out her boots before she put them on in the morning – for, as Emmeline had learned, lots of quiet, dangerous, and very patient creatures liked to hide out in abandoned footwear.

Outside the house wasn't much better. The grounds were overgrown to the point that Widget Manor itself was invisible unless you managed to smack right into it, and that kind of lazy groundskeeping provided a haven for all sorts of things. The year Emmeline turned seven, for instance, her parents had come home from an expedition with a giant squirrel in tow, one with teeth as long as Emmeline's leg. It had wasted no time in getting loose and had spent three weeks destroying half the garden before finally being brought under control. Some times, particularly on windy nights, Emmeline wasn't entirely sure her parents were telling the truth when they said the squirrel had been sent back to its distant home. Even worse, a roaring river ran right at the end of their property, sweeping past with all the haughtiness of a diamond-encrusted duchess. Emmeline lived in fear of falling in, and so she never ventured outside without an inflatable life jacket (which, on its days off, doubled as a hot water bottle) and a catapult (to fight off any unexpected nasties she might find living amid the trees – or even, perhaps, the trees themselves).

As a result of all this, Emmeline spent more time in her room reading than did most young ladies of her age. However, she'd long ago dispensed with fiction, having digested everything that lived on the lower shelves of her parents' library (for Emmeline most assuredly did *not* climb, no matter how sturdy the footholds seemed, and so the higher volumes had to lurk, unread, amid the dust). Along with these literary efforts, she'd also worked her way through several tomes about such things as biology and anatomy, subjects that entranced her mother and father. This was unsurprising, considering the elder Widgets were scientists of some sort who had, in their daughter's opinion, a frankly unhygienic obsession with strange animals, but Emmeline herself had found them tiresome. Now she mostly read the sorts of books that would likely keep her alive in an emergency, either because of the survival tips they contained or because they were large enough to serve as a makeshift tent. She was never without at least one, if not two, sturdy books, hardback by preference.

All of these necessities, of course, meant that she was never without her large and rather bulky satchel, either, but she didn't let that stand in her way.

And, as will probably have become clear by now, Emmeline didn't have very many – or, indeed, *any* – friends. There was the household staff, comprising Watt (the butler) and Mrs. Mitchell (who did everything else),

but they didn't really count because they were always telling her what to do and where to go and *not* to put her dirty feet on that clean floor, thank you very much. Her parents were forever at work, or away, or off at conferences, or entertaining (which Emmeline hated because sometimes she'd be called upon to wear actual *ribbons* and smile and pretend to be something her mother called "lighthearted", which she could never see the point of). She spent a lot of time on her own, and this, if she were to be entirely truthful, suited her fine.

One day, then, when Emmeline came down to breakfast and found her parents absent, she didn't even blink. She just hauled her satchel up on to the chair next to her and rummaged through it for her book, glad to have a few moments of quiet reading time before she had to start ignoring the grown-ups in her life once again.

She was so engrossed in her book – *Knots and Their Uses,* by S. G. Twitchell – that at first she ignored Watt when he slipped into the room bearing in his neatly gloved hands a small silver platter, upon which sat a white envelope. He set it down in front of Emmeline without a word. She made sure to finish right to the end of the chapter (about the fascinating complexities of constrictor knots) before looking up and noticing that she had received a piece of Very Important Correspondence.

She fished around for her bookmark and slid it carefully

into place. Then, ever so gently, she closed the book and eased it back into the satchel, where it glared up at her reproachfully.

"I promise I'll be back to finish you later," she reassured it. "Once I figure out who could *possibly* want to write to me." She frowned at the envelope, which was very clearly addressed to a Miss Emmeline Widget. Private and Confidential, it added.

Just because it happened to be addressed to her, though, didn't mean she should be so silly as to actually *open* it. Not without taking the proper precautions, at least.

In the silence of the large, empty room, Emmeline flipped open her satchel again. From its depths she produced a tiny stoppered bottle, within which a viciously blue liquid was just about contained. She uncorked it as gently as possible, slowly tipping the bottle until one solitary drop hung on its lip, and then – very, *very* carefully – she let the drop fall on to the envelope.

"Hmm," she said after a moment or two, raising an eyebrow. "That's odd."

The liquid didn't smoke, or fizz, or explode in a cloud of sparkle, or indeed do anything at all. It just sat there, like a splodge of ink, partially obscuring her name.

"If you're not poisoned," murmured Emmeline, quickly putting away the bottle (for its fumes could cause dizziness in enclosed spaces, like breakfast rooms), "then *what* are you?"

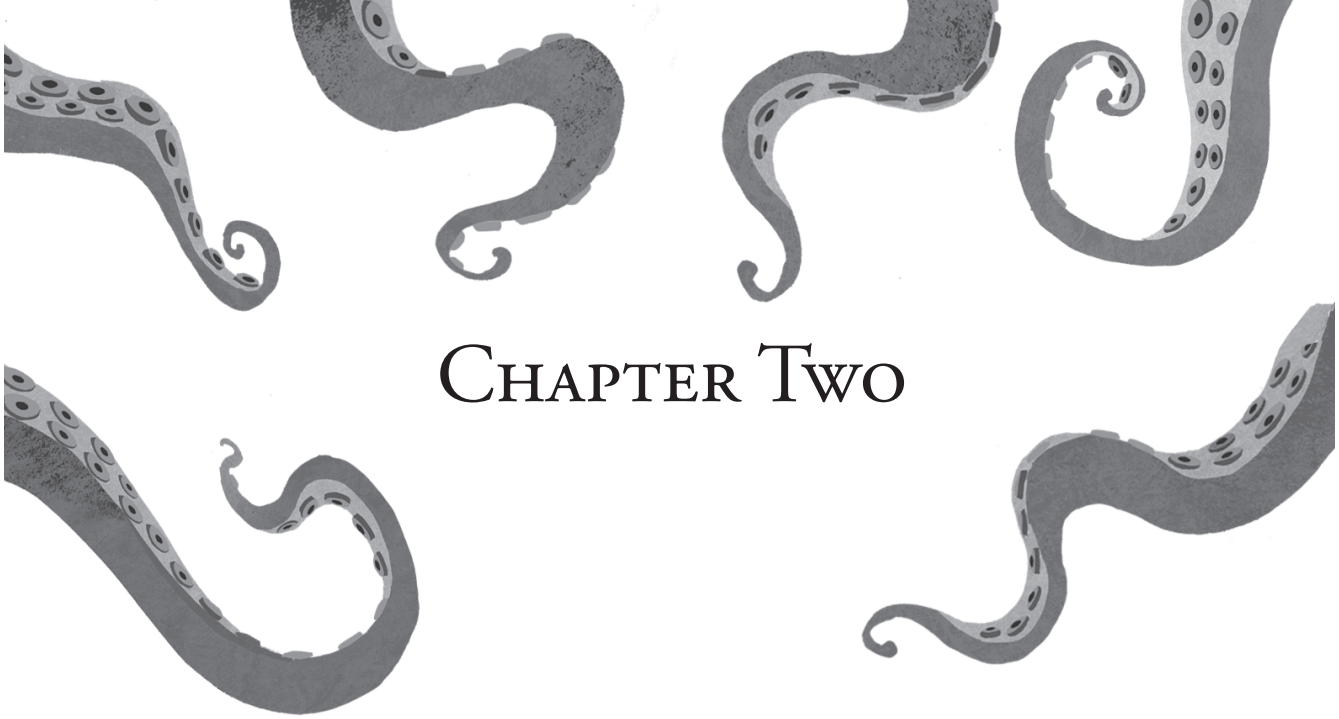
In the side pocket of her satchel, Emmeline always carried a pair of thick gardening gloves. She put these on, and then she picked up – with some difficulty, it has to be pointed out – her butter knife. Suitably armed, she slowly slit the envelope open, keeping it at all times directed away from her face.

A thick sheet of creamy paper slid out on to the silver platter, followed by a stiff card. Emmeline, who'd been holding her breath in case the act of opening the envelope released some sort of brain-shredding gas, spluttered as the first line of the letter caught her eye. As quickly as she could, given that she was wearing gloves more suited to cutting down brambles than dealing with paperwork, she put aside the card and grabbed up the letter.

She stared at the words for ages, but they stayed exactly the same.

Dearest Emmeline, the letter began.

If you are reading this, then in all likelihood you are now an orphan.



Chapter Two

"An *orphan*? How unfashionable!" Emmeline blinked and took two or three deep breaths, then read on.

If this note has found its way to you, then it is probable that your father and I [for it was her mother's handwriting, of course] *have been kidnapped. If so, then chances are, unfortunately, that we shall never see you again. The police are unlikely to find us, for reasons I cannot explain here, so it might be best if you don't waste time or money on that route. The house is yours, and Watt and Mrs. Mitchell are paid up in perpetuity, so you need have no worries on that score. However, your father and I have left instructions with Watt to see you to the boat (ticket enclosed) that you will take to Paris. You will – without fuss or commotion, and drawing no attention to yourself – make your way to the address below, and you will ask for Madame Blancheflour in your best French. You will*

live there with her until you are eighteen.

There is to be no resistance to this, Emmeline Mary. You will not plead with Watt, or Mrs. Mitchell, or anyone else, to allow you to stay; you will not barricade yourself in your room; you will not refuse. I hope I have made myself clear.

Yours with warmest wishes, and a fond farewell,

Mum

Emmeline read the letter three times before she put it back on its platter. *Paris,* she thought. She slipped her hands out of her gloves and picked up the ticket with fingers that quivered only slightly.

Admit One Passenger, Plus Valise and Luggage, it said in stylish gold lettering. **Inside Cabin, Shared WC, Starboard Side, Room 66B. No refunds or cash exchanges. Boat will not wait for tardy passengers. No money back in case of cancellation due to act of God or similar.**

Emmeline wasn't really sure what most of this meant, but her eye kept getting drawn back to the word at the top of the ticket: *Paris.*

A throat, politely cleared, made her blink and look up. Watt stood at the ready, stiff and upright in his crisp uniform.

"Miss?" he said, glancing meaningfully at the carriage clock. "I've taken the liberty of packing a few bits and pieces for you. If we're to make the boat, we'd best leave in the next five minutes. She sets sail from the port of Belfast at eleven,

to catch the tide through the Bristol Strait, and there's no delaying that. More's the pity," he added softly to himself.

Emmeline stared at the ticket again, feeling faint. "Watt, my parents … are they dead?"

"Quite sure I couldn't say, miss." Watt was perfectly calm, his hands behind his back. "Let's hope not, eh?"

"But they're *mine,*" said Emmeline, tossing the ticket on the table. "It's not fair for someone else to just *take* them. *Is* it, Watt?"

"Life's a very unfair thing, miss," sniffed the butler. "Or, leastways, it is for some."

"Do you know this Madame –" Emmeline looked at her mother's letter again, just to be sure – "Blancheflour?"

Watt gave a small cough. "Can't say I do, miss, but I'm sure she's a right fine lady who'll take great care of you and keep you safe for Mrs. Mitchell and me."

"But she *could* be a horrible old hag!" Emmeline's nose was starting to feel like it was melting inside. Irritated, she swiped at it before wiping her hand on the tablecloth. She blinked up at Watt. "If I *have* to go, can I send you letters, at least? Just in case I'm being locked in a basement or something?"

"Not sure the postman'll pick up letters from a locked basement, miss." Watt turned to her and tried to smile, but it didn't really work. After the third attempt he gave up.

"But if they – if they come home, Mum and Dad, I mean, won't you let me know? So that I can come back?"

"Don't ask *silly* questions, miss," said Watt, drawing in a deep breath and sticking out his chest. "You saw what your mother wrote, didn't you? So let's get a move on."

"But, Watt, I—"

"Now, miss. I know you was told not to plead or kick up a fuss or do anything like that. Come on. You've got your satchel?"

"But, Watt—"

"No buts! Chop-chop. We're running out of time. Good lass."

And that was that. Emmeline slid down off her chair, put the letter, envelope, and ticket safely in a satchel pocket, and followed Watt to the front door, her head spinning. As she walked down the tiled hallway, which seemed to be closing in around her, she became engulfed in a large and slightly sticky hug. It smelled rather cinnamony.

"Mrs. Mitchell," she gasped after a few moments. "I can't breathe!"

"Have a safe voyage, my pet," Mrs. Mitchell whispered, patting Emmeline's head with a floury hand. "And we'll wait for your first letter from Par-ee, so we will."

"Thank you," said Emmeline, overwhelmed by the thought of writing letters from anywhere that wasn't Widget Manor.

"Good girl. Now get trottin'. Watt'll have the car started for you." With warm, wet kisses drying on her cheeks, Emmeline fumbled her way down the rest of the hallway and staggered out into the day. Before she knew it, Watt had her tucked into the backseat of the car, bags of clothes and shoes and other useless stuff all around her, and they were driving off down the gravel lane that led to the Rest of the World, the house and its ferocious garden fading into the background. Mrs. Mitchell stood on the front step, flapping and waving, until they turned out on to the road, and it was at that point that Emmeline's heart started to pound, just a little.

"Everythin' all right there, miss?" called Watt, peering at her through the mirror. "You're very quiet— Eh! You billabong-nosed baboon!" he yelled, swerving out of the way of another driver and honking loudly. "Not you, miss," he clarified quickly, but Emmeline hardly heard him through the pounding of her heart in her ears. She grabbed the handle of the car door in sweaty-palmed panic as they drove on.

"Watt, will you keep my books safe? For when I get back?" she asked, breathing deeply through her nose and focusing her gaze on the horizon. She'd read somewhere that these were good measures against travel sickness. So far she wasn't finding them terribly effective.

"O'course. Either that or ship 'em off to you. Whichever," replied Watt. He paused to pound on the

horn again, this time at a poor delivery boy who happened to step out at just the wrong second. "Take care, you pilchard brain! Honestly, some people shouldn't be allowed in public without supervision, I tell you…"

As Watt muttered under his breath, Emmeline unstuck her fingers from the door handle, feeling her circulation return to normal. To distract herself from Watt's driving, she fished her parents' letter out of her satchel again. *You will make your way to the address below,* her mother had written, and printed at the bottom of the letter was the following information:

Madame Gramercy Blancheflour
224 Rue du Démiurge
99901 Paris

How on earth was she ever going to find this place? She'd never been to Paris – she'd never been *anywhere.*

She read the beginning again, hearing her mother's voice in her head as her blurring eyes skipped over the lines.

If so, then chances are, unfortunately, that we shall never see you again…

Emmeline noticed her fingers shaking a little as she replaced the letter, and she formed two fists on top of her satchel, her knuckles whitening. At the same time she told

herself in no uncertain terms that she was to grow up and stop being such a nincompoop.

But that, of course, was easier said than done.

About the Author

Sinéad O'Hart lives in County Meath, near Dublin with her husband and their daughter. She has done many jobs in her life, including working as a butcher and a bookseller. She has a degree in English and History, a PhD in Old and Middle English Language and Literature and can read Middle English with perfect fluency. *The Eye of the North* is Sinéad's first book.

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