



# The Mousehunter

*Written and Illustrated by*  
ALEX MILWAY



## PROLOGUE

# Welcome to Old Town

THE NIGHT HAD BEEN QUIET SO FAR, ONLY THREE bodies to speak of, and none of them carried anything of worth to Mr Droob. It was a bad night's work if fewer than ten washed ashore, and to bide his time he sat quietly spying the river, rubbing his hands to keep warm.

At the riverside, the Pirate's Wharf gibbet creaked and swayed in the breeze, the last remains of its long-dead pirate struggling to cling to its irons. Mr Droob watched the thin fog roll off the water, enveloping the dying glow of the street lamps. He saw his assistant leap up to ring the warning bell: another body approached.

Mr Droob strode down to the river, buttoning his jacket on the way. His assistant waited silently, watching as the body floated nearer. In his arm rested a long hooked pole, and with a looping stretch he dropped it onto the body. It caught at the waist, and he pulled it in.

A quick glance showed clearly that it was the body of a man, and a sailor at that: his blue flared trousers, dirty and torn, and his blood-stained shirt were the clothes of the merchant navy. Bodies always look bloated and peculiar when they're dead, but you get used to this when you see them regularly.

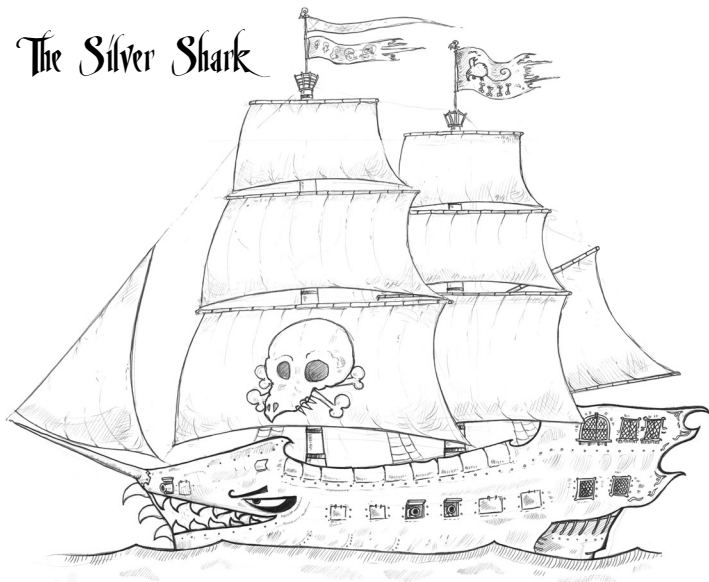
With a stomach-churning groan, his assistant took hold of the heavy, lifeless body and dragged it up the bank. The smell was tremendous, as with all the bodies that washed ashore, and with little ceremony he searched the corpse, checking for rich pickings. There seemed nothing of any worth, no pocket watch, knife or coins, but tied to the man's neck was a small wooden box.

Mr Droob picked it up and shook it gently. It weighed very little, but there was something inside.

Nailed to the box was a metal plate with an inscription, and Mr Droob's eyes sparkled when he read its words.

'Well, well, well,' he said. 'What a find . . . what a find indeed!'

# The Silver Shark



# The Flying Fox





## The Mousekeeper

EMILINE ORELIA RACED ACROSS THE HALLWAY TO THE bottom of the grand stairwell. Her rusty mousekeeper's armour clattered noisily – it was way too big for a twelve-year-old girl, and she clutched it firmly to stop it falling around her ankles.

Sitting on the bottom step of the stairs, quietly preening itself in a beam of light, was the fearsome Sharpclaw: the very same exotic and supremely expensive mouse that escaped from the mousery only hours earlier. Not even Emiline had reckoned on its claws being *that* sharp.

Sharpclaws were sneaky and mischievous little devils, but despite being only the size of a hand,

absolutely nothing could be left to chance. Emiline's armour covered everything from her shoulders to the tips of her toes, and a pointed helmet covered her face to the bottom of her nose. The only recognisable feature that remained was Emiline's blonde hair, which crept out onto her shoulders and curled slightly at the end.

Being a mousekeeper was a far from glamorous job. Emiline had to clean cages, feed the hundreds of mice that lived in her care, and do every other menial task imaginable. She was particularly good at it, though, and showed talents far above her station. It was for this reason that she found herself in her current predicament, armed to the teeth with mousenets, hooks, ropes and light explosives – anything and everything that could be used to capture the dastardly mouse that was running free.

As she approached, the Sharpclaw continued to clean itself with great attention to detail. Each claw flicked out in turn, receiving a refreshing lick as it sparkled in the light. The mouse let her creep closer and closer without making a move.

Emiline watched and waited, breathing quietly so as not to alarm it, and when the time was right, she lunged forward and threw out a net. The mouse remained calm, lifted a single claw and sliced the net to a thousand pieces in a torrent of incredibly quick flicks. It jumped three steps upwards and relaxed back onto its haunches, seizing a moment to snarl in her face. It then gave a sharp, shrill squeak and scurried off, just fast enough to keep Emiline slightly out of reach.

Stair after stair, they scrambled their way up. The third-floor landing passed, then the fourth and the fifth. The mouse still hurtled upwards, and despite the weighty armour, Emiline kept going. Suddenly, as they reached the sixth floor, the mouse veered off and made a beeline for the mousery. Her heart sank as she realised the door was open, and the Sharpclaw shot inside and out of sight.

Emiline lit the lamps, provoking a chorus of squeaks and chirrups from the menagerie within. The Howling Scent Mouse started to wail, setting off the Whooping Brown Mouse who hollered uncontrollably, bringing the Weeping Tearjerker Mouse to tears in a fit

of bawling blubber. The noise was deafening.

At least a hundred and fifty different mice lived there, all housed in beautiful cages that mimicked their habitat. It was a collection worth millions, the best in Old Town, and out of the corner of her eye Emiline saw the Sharpclaw. It had caught her attention by jumping up and down, waving its paws high in the air. It wanted her to see it destroy a cage door. The mouse sliced it easily with a flick of a claw, then jumped along and swiped at the next cage, once again waving its paws in the air in a fit of excitement. Emiline screamed for help. The mouse wasn't going to stop there: it was going to set the whole collection free.

She slammed the door shut and called once more. Some of the rarest mice in the world were seeing freedom flash before their eyes. The Sleepy Shorthaired Mouse didn't care to escape, though, and the Nervous Night Mouse of Grin-Grin also faltered in its attempt for freedom, but it was all too clear that most of the occupants of the mousery were scuttling maniacally across the floor. There were big mice, fat mice, six-legged mice, mice with enormous ears, singing mice,

skipping mice, rolling mice. The floor had become a swarming carpet of fluffy rodents, and Emiline was in real trouble.

Eventually the mousery door opened behind her and Spires the butler charged into the melee. He took one look at the chaos before him and darted off to collect cages, boxes and tools. He began to help Emiline gather up all the escapees.

‘I’m sure Mr Lovelock will have a few things to say about this, Emiline,’ said the butler breathlessly, sweeping up a Lumpy-backed Rock Mouse.

‘Well, I’ll say a few things to him too, Mr Spires,’ she replied. ‘Who’d have put such a dangerous animal in a rubbish cage?’

Emiline was so annoyed by the butler’s tone that she stamped around to the top of the room, picking up a Bangarian Monk Mouse on the way. It was sitting with its head in its hands: an easier catch couldn’t be had. Mouse after mouse was seized and returned to its cage; the room became calm, Emiline counted them all. Three were missing, one of them the Sharpclaw. After all that searching she still hadn’t found the little

monster, and she didn't dare think of the trouble it would cause let loose in the mansion.



The mouse collection that Emiline looked after belonged to Isiah Lovelock, author of *The Mousehunter's Almanac* and one of the richest collectors in the world. His book had been an overnight success and was now published in every corner of the globe. No other encyclopedia of mice was so well informed about its subject, and every child with dreams of becoming a mousehunter would save their money all year just to buy the latest update. The almanac was a phenomenon, and its wily author knew exactly how to make the most of its worth: toys, puzzles, badges, books – if there was a way to make money out of mice, Isiah Lovelock knew how. He also knew the power money brought to its owner and how to spend it.

Lovelock's mansion was situated on Grandview, the leafy hill that rose high out of Old Town's ancient centre. It towered over every other building around and dominated the skyline just as much as Lovelock's wealth gave him power over Old Town's inhabitants.

The mansion widened greatly as it rose up into the sky, with many crooked chimney stacks tilting out of its roof at unhappy angles. It leant heavily to one side, and if the rumours were to be believed, this was due to the huge and ever-growing pile of gold in the attic. Massive wooden props were needed to stop the building toppling over, and were regularly replaced because of the sheer weight they carried.

As an attempt to balance the building, a crude box room was built onto the side of the seventh floor. Unsurprisingly it had little effect, and Isiah Lovelock, seeing no other use for it, deemed it to become the bedroom for his lowliest servant, the mousekeeper.

It was a dowdy room, painted in a light shade of grey, and the only hints of colour were made by the damp patches seeping through the walls. With its small arched windows to let in as little light as possible and an awkward, uneven floor, you could be forgiven for thinking that it was purposely built to be horrible. But it was closer to the mousery than the other servants' quarters, so for Emiline it wasn't all bad news.

Apart from a rusty iron bed and a few bookshelves,

which carried nothing more than *The Mousehunter's Almanac* and several guides to good mousekeeping, Emiline kept the room fairly empty. There was her cupboard full of protective clothes and, of course, her light mouse armour; then there was her chest of mousetraps and mousecatching implements. There were a lot of things mouse-oriented and little else: for someone so dedicated to the task of becoming a mousehunter as Emiline, the normal things in life tended to pass her by.

One thing Emiline did have, however, was her Grey Mouse called Portly. Greys were ordinary mice, of a kind that every child might start their collection with. You could generally teach them a few tricks, nothing too amazing, but Portly was so well trained he could jump through hoops, turn cartwheels, and even bite his name into a lump of cheese. Portly could usually be found perched on Emiline's shoulder – the place where he was most comfortable – but in the ruckus that followed the Sharpclaw's escape, he'd been left behind.

When Emiline trudged into her room, Portly quite rightly took it upon himself to ignore her.

‘Portly!’ she cajoled for the third time, slumping down onto her bed. The little mouse squeaked grumpily from the top of his wooden mousebox and resolutely faced the wall. Emiline often spent time sitting in her room alone, mainly to stay out of the butler’s path, but Portly would always be there to talk to. He could always be counted on as a friend, even though he was just a mouse. When the Whitewater Mouse of Inglenook had careered into the toilet system, it was Emiline who climbed down into the sewers to await its swift deposit from the outlet pipes. When she’d had to wash herself four times so that she could no longer smell the sewage, Portly had been the one she’d complained to. When the Rook-winged Mouse of Scarlet Island made a break from its cage at cleaning time, it was Emiline who had to shimmy up the chimney to stop it escaping. Once again, it was Portly who listened attentively to her story. Portly had always seemed to understand the lot of a daring young mousekeeper, but not this time.

‘Come on, Portly,’ she asked again. ‘There’ll be some biscuit for you!’

Portly's ears shot to attention, and his little tail curled upwards into a roll. At the crunching sound of Emiline breaking a dry oaten biscuit in two, the Grey Mouse charged to the base of the bed, vanished for a few seconds and then appeared at Emiline's chin, his nose twitching brightly.

'I had to leave you here, didn't I?' she said gently. 'You understand, don't you? That Sharpclaw could have had you for breakfast, and he's still on the loose. If Mr Lovelock finds out about this, I'm a lost cause!'

Portly sat nibbling at the biscuit. He looked almost ready to forgive her.

'I may be the best mousekeeper in Old Town, but there are plenty more out there who'd jump at the chance to work for Mr Lovelock. I've got to keep on my toes, Portly. Who knows where that mouse has got to?'

Portly squeaked brightly and ran up and around the back of her neck to hide in her hair. He liked it there, and Emiline stood up and smiled.

From the window, she watched a mist rolling on the road far below, swirling around the orange glow of the oil lamps. As usual, all was quiet. When night fell in

Old Town, people rarely ventured out without protection. Illegal mousetraders walked the streets, selling stolen mice and dealing in banned species. Any innocents who witnessed their activities would often never speak of it again, for illegal traders had the awful habit of setting Red-necked Chomper Mice – who have a particular liking for human tongue – loose on their victims.

During the day these traders would stay out of sight, frequenting the murky mousing taverns and hovels that littered the streets. But once it got dark, the Old Town Guard turned a blind eye to their activities – catching them just wasn't worth their time. Add to these the muggers and rogues who'd rob you faster than you could say Blinking Mouse of Bobo, and it was no wonder decent folk kept indoors.

But as Emiline started to think about going to bed, something caught her eye out on the road. Barely visible through the misty haze, Emiline could just make out the figure of a man. His hunched, shadowy form passed the oil lamp, stopped briefly, and then disappeared from view.

From the hallway, seven floors down, three echoing knocks rang out on the front door. Eventually the butler's footsteps sounded on the stairs and, with a quiet tinkle of a bell, the door creaked open. Emiline's heart began to race. There was only one person who would travel around the city at night by choice; one person even the mousetraders wouldn't touch. It was Mr Droob, Old Town's Dead Collector.



'If you could just wait here,' said the butler.

"Course," replied Mr Droob, clasping the small wooden box in his hands.

He sat down quietly in the ground-floor reception room, his plain brown jacket touching the ground. Isiah Lovelock's name was a welcome find upon the sailor's box. A lousy night had instantly become a lucrative one. But there was something about Lovelock's mansion that made him uneasy. Paintings of far-off lands hung on the walls, and flickering lamps cast twitchy shadows across the floor. Mr Droob's beady eyes darted nervously around – he was particularly unsettled by a

glass case of stuffed Aurora Mice. Their bright colours had faded but their teeth were bared menacingly.

‘Mr Lovelock will see you now,’ said the butler, appearing again. His stiff shape made it clear that he didn’t care to converse with someone such as a Dead Collector. He ushered Mr Droob out, then led him to the grand staircase.

The stairs wound up, on and on, until Mr Droob was directed towards a darkened corridor on the sixth floor. A door at the far end was slightly ajar, and an orange glow leaked into the hallway. Mr Droob rubbed his hands nervously.

The butler walked ahead and knocked gently on the door.

‘Mr Droob is here to see you, sir,’ he said, pushing it open and directing the man in.

The room was long and narrow, with one wall covered by a gigantic, brown-edged map. A large window was filled with pitch-black night at the furthest end, and in front of this rested Isiah Lovelock, framed by darkness. He was leaning back calmly in a leather armchair – concealed from the waist down by a wide

oak desk. A tall plume of smoke drifted upwards from the cigarette in his fingers. His emotionless expression – his cold eyes, pale face and sealed bloodless lips – conveyed a complete lack of interest in the world and in Mr Droob in particular.

Anyone who didn't know Lovelock might think by his pallor that he didn't get out much, and they'd be right. He rarely ventured out unless on business, and it was noted in the town that he never went further than the river when he did. This was strange for such a powerful man, but no one in Old Town ever asked questions of Isiah Lovelock.

'I hear you have something of mine,' he said abruptly, resting the cigarette on an ashtray on the table.

'I have a box with your name on it,' came the reply. Mr Droob walked closer, his suddenly jelly legs wanting to resist. He stooped over and placed the box on the desk.

Isiah Lovelock craned forward and picked it up. The little box fitted neatly into the palm of his hand, and he shook it gently, feeling a light weight roll inside. A smile crept along his mouth.

‘Thank you, Mr Droob, all seems to be in order. You can leave now.’

‘But sir, there was a sailor . . .’ stammered Mr Droob, turning the hat in his hands.

‘The sailor was a nobody, a pirate at best. If he had been any better he’d still be alive.’

‘But for my efforts, sir . . .’ pleaded Mr Droob.

‘Of course. My butler will reimburse you for your time.’

Mr Droob walked reluctantly out of the room and Spires, who was waiting outside, passed a brown envelope into his hands.

‘I think this should be sufficient for your efforts,’ said the butler, showing Mr Droob down the stairs.

‘I hope I shall find some more things for your master,’ he replied, flicking greedily through the pile of notes that filled the envelope.

The butler smiled. ‘I very much hope that you won’t,’ he said.



Squeezed into a secret passageway behind Lovelock’s office, Emiline had watched events unfurl through a

small, slatted air vent. It wasn't the most comfortable of places, but had proved a worthwhile venture, as she'd also found one of the escaped mice asleep on a beam. It was a Long-legged River Mouse, a common species, and one of the most pleasing to collectors because of its exceptionally long and elegant legs. Their cages have to be made especially tall to allow for them.

Emiline placed the mouse safely in a mousebox – she always carried one, like any good mouser should – and hung it on her belt. It didn't make any fuss, nestling softly down into the fluffy lining.

Her vision was slightly obscured, but she had a good view of Lovelock's desk. She could see the wooden box clearly. It was a mousebox, just like the one hanging from her waist.

Once the butler and Mr Droob had left, Lovelock withdrew a small silver knife from his velvet jacket, and skewered it carefully into the lid of the box. He twisted it sharply and the lid split open.

His face paled even further. Then he banged the desk violently and slumped into his chair. After a few more moments, Emiline saw his grey spidery fingers re-

emerge on the desk and rummage in the box. Lovelock withdrew a small cloth mouse stitched from tatters of old material, and Emiline gasped and covered her mouth. She'd heard of this object many times but never thought she'd ever see one: it was the calling card of the most famous pirate of all. Lovelock pulled a cord to his right and a bell rang out downstairs.

After a minute of waiting, Lovelock's patience withered.

'Spires, damn you, where are you?' he shouted, his words thick with outrage.

Almost immediately, the butler burst through the door, out of breath.

'The pirate's gone one step too far this time,' said Lovelock, the cloth mouse swinging ominously from between his fingers. 'Who does he think he is?'

'Sir?' said the butler quizzically, breathing heavily.

Lovelock stood up and turned to the window. He tugged sharply at the head of the mouse, and the glass steamed up with the warmth of his breath.

'Head to the harbour and find a vessel under the charge of Captain Devlin Drewshank. Tell him that I wish to speak to him as a matter of urgency.'

‘But, sir,’ protested the butler, ‘the port is the last place I should be visiting at this hour. It’s a place for pirates and brigands, not butlers . . .’

Safe in her hiding place, Emiline jumped with excitement. Captain Drewshank was a celebrity among the mousing community ever since he stumbled upon a colony of mice on Moon Island. What business would he have coming to Grandview? Lovelock turned and slammed the desk.

‘I have no care for them, and neither should you,’ he said. ‘Look at you worrying about such a thing as pirates. You’re the butler of Isiah Lovelock! You wear my crest, man. Who would touch you?’

‘But, sir . . .’

‘Plans are already in motion, Spires, and we must act fast to take advantage. Take my carriage and pay the driver whatever is required. I’m sure you’ll make it in one piece.’

Spires swallowed. ‘Yes, sir.’

Lovelock raised the tatty cloth mouse and flicked its head sharply, over and over in his hand. It bounced back up time and time again until, in one quick

movement, Lovelock grasped the mouse's head and tore it fully from its body. He turned and cast both pieces to the floor, looking at Spires with an intensity the butler had never seen in him before.

'Be sure of it,' said Lovelock, 'This is the last time Mousebeard gets the better of me.'

Emiline shrank back into the passageway, the word Mousebeard circling endlessly through her thoughts. He was the pirate of pirates: bigger, nastier and hairier than any other. Ever since she was tiny she'd heard horrible tales of him and the infamous mice that lived in his beard.

With her heart beating heavily, Emiline checked the mouse in her care. It was snoring sweetly, and making occasional sleepy squeaks. Something exciting was happening – something bigger and greater than anything that normally happened to a mousekeeper. She wanted to be part of it, and from the look on Portly's face as his nose twitched through the vent, he wanted it too.