



Samantha SoRelle

LORD ALFIE OF  
THE MUD

*A His Lordship's Mysteries* Short Story

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To all my readers. Thank you.

## Glasshouse Yard, London

1795

Dominick shivered as another crack of thunder tore through the night. The stone of the workhouse walls did little to keep back the damp from the pounding rain outside. As a trickle of water ran down from the corner of the rattling window over his bed, he wrapped his thin blanket more tightly around himself. Matron guessed he was around seven years old, but he was tall for his age, and the scraps that passed for blankets in the boys' dormitory weren't long enough to cover his feet. He pulled his knees closer to his chest, curling up tightly to prevent what little heat he had from escaping.

"Bollocks," he cursed softly, whispering so his voice didn't carry in the echoing room. He wasn't supposed to know that word, and boys caught talking after lights out were caned even if they weren't swearing. He was still too sore from his fight with Baz earlier that night to stand another beating. Rolling onto his stomach took some of the pressure off the bruises on his side, but it didn't help much.

He wiped his nose on the greying pillow before burying his head under it with a groan. His ears were numb, but keeping them a little warmer almost wasn't worth the smell of old sweat--and worse--that filled his lungs. He should have just let Baz have the free bed. If he had, he could now be crammed in with two or three other boys instead and sharing their warmth even if he had to share his pillow and blanket too. But Baz *always* got what he wanted and Dominick had had enough of it.

Though he wasn't enjoying his first victory as much as he thought he would.

Dominick groaned and tried to shift as little as possible while reaching down to wrap his hands around the ice blocks of his feet. He'd almost gotten feeling back in his left foot when he heard the noise.

He lay still and listened.

There! Between the claps of thunder he heard it again. A high, hiccuping cry like a kitten being pulled by the tail, interrupted by little sobs that broke Dominick's heart. He was used to the sound of other boys crying in their beds at night. Everyone knew to just pretend they couldn't hear anything and ignore it, or if you were a bully like Baz, to wait until the next day to tease the boy mercilessly, but this was different. This wasn't the muffled sniffles masked by blankets he was used to. This sound seemed to be coming from outside.

Curious, Dominick kneeled up and pressed his hands against the panes of the window. Immediately his teeth started to chatter.

The window overlooked the main yard of the workhouse where he and the other boys and girls were sent to play when there were important guests and visitors coming by. The boys' and men's wing faced the girls' and women's across the way with the main building connecting the two. Now the yard between them was just an expanse of empty mud. The crying came again, and Dominick cupped his hands around his eyes and peered carefully into the night, his forehead growing damp from the chilled glass.

His little window was on the far end of the wing and near the front gate, but in the darkness he almost missed it.

Crouched just on the other side of the gate, almost hidden by the darkness and the rain, there was a tiny... *something*. It was too small for him to tell exactly what it was, but to be making noises like that, it had to be some kind of animal that had been caught out in the storm. Perhaps a small dog or even a large cat. The ceiling above him lit up as lightning tore through the sky and the thing wailed again, ducking even lower into the mud before breaking off into nearly inaudible whimpers.

Mystery solved, Dominick lay back down. He felt bad for the animal, but he had enough to worry about inside the workhouse. Anything outside its gates would have to look out for itself.

Poor thing.

Whatever it was.

With its strange sounds.

Surely nothing very interesting at all.

He sighed and sat up, reaching under his bed for his shoes and battered jacket. His curiosity was going to get him killed one of these days.

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Dominick hesitated as he propped open the front door and stared out across the yard. His lockpicking skills weren't as good as they could be despite trading a hard-won handful of boiled sweets to one of the older boys to teach him, and it had taken him longer to unlock the dormitory door than he thought it would. But he'd made it out of the dormitory and down the halls without being spotted. Fortunately, there wasn't much reason for the front door to be locked.

The thing was still curled against the front gate, but it didn't seem to be crying anymore. Looking up at the dark sky, Dominick hesitated. He'd be soaked in seconds if he ran out to see what it was, assuming lightning didn't strike him dead halfway there. But he'd already come this far...

A blast of wind blew rain directly into his face.

"Christ," he chattered, his high voice lost in another roll of thunder. "I'm here now."

He pulled his jacket over his head for whatever protection it could provide and tore off across the yard. He would just see what it was and run back. It would only take a few seconds.

His feet slid in the mud as he skidded to a stop, not even noticing when his bruised side banged into the iron gate. He leaned down to take a quick look at the creature, but when he saw what it was he stopped, his mouth hanging open in shock.

Slumped against the gate, half-buried in the mud, was a small boy.

Dominick stared in disbelief. The boy couldn't be more than three or four years old, but here he was, out alone in the freezing rain like a pile of forgotten trash. He was wearing little more than a shirt and breeches, both too covered in mud and the filth of the street for Dominick to tell their original color, but his tiny hands were stark white where they clutched against his chest.

Dominick's breath caught; the boy's face was as deathly pale as his hands, and his eyes were closed, evidence of his tears already washed away by the rain. He reached between the bars of the gate and shook the boy, carefully at first, then harder when he didn't respond.

"Oy. Wake up," Dominick said, panic starting to beat in his chest as the boy just sunk further down into the dross. "Come on, wakey wakey now. You can't sleep in the mud."

Just when Dominick was about to lose all hope, the boy stirred. He lifted one hand to wipe his cheek with a filthy sleeve and blinked up at Dominick with luminous blue eyes still red from crying.

"There you are," Dominick breathed in a sigh of relief. He let go of the boy's bony shoulder and spoke up so he could be heard over the rain. "Let's get you out of this bashy, eh? Can you stand up while I get this open?"

The boy said nothing, but after a moment he nodded. Dominick waited, watching as the boy slowly pulled himself up using the iron bars of the gate for support, shaking all the while. Dominick carefully unrolled the waistband of his trousers where he'd tucked his prize lockpicks, pulling them out and getting to work.

He huffed an impatient breath, trying to blow the rain and wet hair out of his face. Unlocking the gate was even harder than the dormitory door had been. He could barely see the lock at all and the tips of his fingers were already numb. Each moment he wasted, the boy shook even harder and his eyelids drooped lower.

"Hey now! Stay with me. I've almost got this!"

Dominick dropped one of the picks into the mud with a curse. He felt around, but in the darkness and rain, there was no way he was getting it back.

He looked up just as the boy slumped against the gate.

"S'all right," the boy chattered, his voice barely a squeak. A last few tears trickled down his face.

His head thumped softly against the iron bars, so small it almost fit between them.

"Hold on now," Dominick said. "I've an idea."

He turned the boy's head just so, and it popped through between the bars. Cheered, Dominick went to twisting and pulling the rest of him. The boy wasn't much help, but it was the work of little more than a minute before two bare feet were flopping into the yard.

Dominick scooped him up as best he could and ran back to the shelter of the workhouse, half-carrying, half-dragging the boy with him. He stumbled, struggling to carry him and find his footing in the treacherous mud. It felt like the boy grew heavier and heavier with each step.

Finally, he made it through the still-open front door, dropping to his knees on the wet stone of the hall. He leaned back against the door, feeling it slowly creak shut under his weight. He looked down at the boy in his arms. The boy stared back up at Dominick, eyes wide, hands tucked into the collar of Dominick's shirt, his fingers colder than ice.

Dominick ducked his head down, trapping the boy's hands under his chin and shook his head, twisting his face into a silent monster snarl. The boy was still a moment, then giggled--the first sound Dominick heard him make that wasn't accompanied by tears. Dominick smiled back and raised a finger to his lips. He carefully set the boy down then rose to his feet. He helped the boy to also stand and leaned in. The boy's wet hair tickled Dominick's lips as he whispered in his ear.

"We have to be very, very quiet so we don't get caught, all right? You can meet the matron and have your name put in the book tomorrow, but we'd just get in trouble for being up now, so you have to be quiet. Understand?"

At the boy's nod, Dominick took his hand and led him silently back upstairs, checking around each corner before they finally made it back to the dormitory. Dominick breathed a sigh of relief to see that no one had tried to take over his bed while he was gone.

He rummaged under his mattress, finally pulling out his spare set of clothes with only slight reluctance. If he gave them to the boy, he'd have to re-wear his own wet clothes in the morning, but there was nothing else to be done.

"Here," he said, passing over his patched shirt, keeping the dry trousers for himself. "Use a corner of the blanket to dry yourself off then put this on. But only a corner, mind. We've only got the one. There'll be washing water and hot porridge in the morning."

The boy nodded and took the shirt, but struggled to get out of his own clothes.

Dominick huffed out an impatient breath. He was tired and cold and just wanted to be back in bed. "Let me help."

The boy nodded and Dominick quickly and efficiently got him stripped and towelled off as best he could with the rough fabric, taking special care to work faster when rubbing the mud off the boy's feet revealed a bluish tint to his toes. His shirt went well past the boy's knees when they finally got him into it, but his shivering seemed even worse.

"Hop to it," said Dominick, spreading the blanket back on the bed and fluffing the limp pillow as best he could. "I'll just be a minute."

The boy clambered in, and Dominick made quick work of drying himself off as well. He hung their wet clothing on the end of the bed, cursing softly to himself when he realised the rest of his lockpicks weren't tucked into his trousers anymore. By morning they would be as hopelessly buried in the mud as the other one.

Pulling on his dry trousers, Dominick glumly crawled into bed beside the boy. Not only had he lost his lockpicks, but he hadn't even gotten a full night of having a bed to himself. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, exhausted from a full day's work as well as his late-night adventuring, but quickly gave it up as a lost cause. His new bedmate's shivering was bad enough to shake the whole bed frame.

"Come here," Dominick said with a sigh, turning on his side and opening his arms. The boy wasted no time in plastering himself against Dominick, starved for any warmth he could get. Dominick hissed when the boy brought his bare feet up and pressed them against his stomach.

"Sorry."

He could barely hear the boy's whisper. His voice was as small as the rest of him, and sounded coarse and painful.

*From all the crying and screaming,* Dominick realised, ashamed at his petty concerns earlier.

"It's fine," he said back, taking the boy's cold hands and tucking them under his chin again. They felt worse against his throat than going out in the middle of February without a scarf, but he did his best to ignore the feeling. The boy was only half his size, and if he could bear it, so could Dominick.

"Why were you out there anyway?" he asked.

"They said I ate too much," replied the boy, sniffing and pressing his cold nose against Dominick's cheek. He tried to stifle a flinch.

"Who did?"

"The people I lived with after Mama died," came the muffled reply. "They weren't very nice."

Dominick hummed. He'd never known his mama at all.

"You're nice though," said the boy.

Dominick laughed softly. "Not really, but all right. What's your name anyway?"

The boy was quiet for a long moment.

"They didn't call me very nice things," was the eventual reply. "Mama called me 'Darling'."

Dominick snorted, "Well, I can't be going around calling you that. You don't know what your proper name is?"

He felt, rather than saw, the boy shake his head.

"Fair enough, there's plenty who don't. That's nothing to be ashamed of. Let me think. Last few babs we got in here needing names were Walter, then Xavier, then Matron got Zachariah last week. So I guess we've finished that and we're back around to A."

Dominick preened a bit; even most of the older boys at the workhouse didn't know their letters as well as he did. "What about... Ambrose? Or Aloysius?"

The boy giggled.

"Too flash, eh? How about Alfred then? That's a good name. Do you feel like an Alfie?"

"I suppose."

"That settles it. I dub thee, 'Lord Alfie of the Mud'. I am Sir Dominick of the Wet Trousers, at your service. You can just call me 'Dominick' though."

Alfie laughed, "Dumb Nick!"

"No, 'Dominick'."

"Dumb Nick! Dumb Nick!" the boy pealed with laughter, causing a few grumbles from the surrounding beds.

After all the boy, *Alfie*, had been through, Dominick didn't have the heart to hush him, but just wrapped his arms around him and pulled him in closer. Alfie's shivers had mostly subsided, and with the two of them under the blanket, it was nearly warm.

"All right, dumb I may be. How about you just call me Nick, then?"

The boy nodded.

"Nick?" Alfie asked a few minutes later, just as Dominick was right on the edge of sleep. "Are you going to leave me like Mama did?"

Dominick's heart almost broke at the sadness in Alfie's voice. He could barely remember his life before the workhouse, but he remembered how he felt when he arrived, alone in a cold and terrifying place. He swore he would never let Alfie feel like that, ever.

"No, Alfie, I'm going to stay with you and look out for you as long as you'll let me. All right?"

Alfie tilted his head up. His eyelashes were still wet with either rain or tears which made his soft blue eyes seem even larger. He pressed his nose to Dominick's cheek again before ducking down to curl up even tighter against him. "All right."

"Good. How about a story until you fall asleep?"

"I like stories," said Alfie sleepily.

"Right, then. I just learned a new one. Once upon a time in a land far, far away lived a man named Ali Baba..."

Dominick told the tale as best he could remember it until Alfie's breaths evened out against his chest. He lay there for a long time before it hit him how close Alfie had really come to dying that night, all alone without anyone to care for him. He brushed the silent tears off Alfie's cheeks and picked a bit of mud out of his fine hair that was curling as it dried. He swore

to himself that he would always be there to protect Alfie and would never let anyone hurt him again, *ever*.

That decided, he drifted off to sleep with the thought, *I'll have to fight Baz for another bed, though. I'll never get used to sharing one with someone with feet this cold.*

## The End

If you enjoyed this short prequel, you can find the rest of Dominick and Alfie's grown up adventures in the His Lordship's Mysteries series [available here](#) and be sure to join the reader's list at [www.SamanthaSoRelle.com](http://www.SamanthaSoRelle.com) to keep up to date on new releases, free reads, contact info, and more!