

Death, Too, is a Journey

By Stephen D. Rogers

Samson stood in the circle of light, listening to his heaving breath echo off the dark alley walls.

If getting there was half the fun, he hoped that he never arrived since the only people having fun was THEM. There was glee in the way they leaped out at him from doorways, lunged at him from behind leafless trees, laughed him from all sides.

Only in the cones of light was he safe, but he couldn't simply stand here indefinitely. As soon as Samson caught his breath, he needed to race for the cone of light mid-block, and then the cone of light at the next corner.

He needed to get from this end of the alley to the that one, and he needed to do it quickly, needed to get there before they grew comfortable within the cones of light.

Samson's breath had nearly returned to normal.

Stepping back to the far edge of the light, he sprinted forward, hearing them rush at him as he raced to that mid-alley light. He felt hands on his clothes, breath on the back of his neck, giggles that left spit in his ears.

Reaching the cone of light, Samson put on the brakes before he ran out the other side into the waiting darkness.

He pulled in great lungfuls of air, again and again. Never had so many of them touched him before. Either they were getting faster or he was getting slower.

Samson studied the pale faces that danced within the far reaches of his night vision. If only they were all someone specific—like his father—he could try to write this off as a dream, but they weren't, and this wasn't.

He wiped sweat from his forehead.

Time was short. The next cone of light was waiting. They were waiting for him to trip before he gained sanctuary there.

Taking one last deep breath, Samson took a step back and dropped to a runner's pose. He could do this.

Driving his toes into the pavement, Samson sprinted towards the cone of light.

Someone touched an elbow.

A hand waved in front of his face. Don't stop, keep running towards the light.

There was a tug at his heel.

Samson reached the cone of light and came to a halt, turning to face left as he gasped for air. There was another alley with a light halfway and at the opposite end.

How many alleys had he run now, cone of light to cone of light, emerging only to turn left and see another alley filled to overflowing with a long stretch of darkness, bracketed by lights with one in the middle.

He must have run dozens of these stretches now, just ahead of those who would bring him down. And then he would turn left and find another alley awaiting.

Samson shook his head. He couldn't keep doing this. He was slowing, he knew it, and it was only a matter of time until he slipped or tripped and flipped through the darkness.

Then they'd be on him.

Much better to stand here in the cone of light, wait until dawn. They couldn't touch him here.

The light died.

Plunged into darkness, Samson froze until he felt a hand on this shoulder. Then he was off towards that light mid-alley, then he was off and running his lungs out.

The hand stayed on his shoulder most of the way but then finally disappeared as he reached the cone of light.

He huffed and he puffed and he touched the spot where he had been touched. The area was hot. He sniffed his fingertips and was reminded of egg salad gone bad.

There was a giggle just behind him and he spun. He had staggered close to the edge. They couldn't penetrate the cone of light, but Samson couldn't stay here. He had to keep moving.

Focus, he was halfway there. The mouth of the alley was safe, bathed in cold, white light. He had made this run a dozen times, a hundred. He could do it again.

Feinting movement the way he had come, he quickly reversed direction and ran towards the cone of light.

The ploy must have worked because he reached the light without feeling them once. He had heard them, yes, and saw movement out of the corner of his eye, but he had gained the light without being touched.

Samson turned left and there were the next two lights, the next two stretches of darkness, the next too mad dashes.

And what if, at the end of the alley, he turned left to see one exactly identical?

Crouching, Samson massaged his right ankle.

There was no point thinking ahead. He needed to concentrate on his goal. Reach the first light, and then reach the second light. Worry about what was around the corner when he got there.

Samson shuddered, feeling them gather around his place of safety. He had to break out before they formed an impenetrable wall.

Taking a series of deep breaths, Samson shot forward, racing for that light.

Again he felt them grab at him, pull at his clothes, caress a leg lifted behind.

Run like the wind, he was almost there, almost safe.

The light died.

Samson felt his step falter and then forced himself on, the ragged gasps of air burning his lungs. A muscle jumped and still he ran, ran because he had no choice.

There was a whisper in his left ear, hot breath that tickled and then he was in the light.

Dropping to the ground, Samson heaved, his pulse pounding across his temples. He did it. He made it. He was here. He was safe.

They hadn't stopped him. They had tried, but they had failed. He had won.

Slowly standing, Samson turned to the left, saw the alley with the two light calling him on, the two long wells of darkness hiding the creatures that hadn't tired of this game.

He wiped an arm across his eyes, licked lips long dry.

Samson had beat them, run an entire alley. He could beat them again, and again. Any maybe again. Or maybe that time they'd win.

He looked up at the light that was protecting him, squinting but still wanting to soak in as much of the light as was possible. There was salvation in the light and he hoped a bit might shine through him if he was able to store enough.

The light died.

As Samson dove forward towards the mid-alley light, that cone of light died too, and then the one at the end of the alley.

This time he had to run the full alley, turn left, and hope that there was a light waiting for him.

Around him in the rushing darkness, he heard the hum of them. As he raced through the blackness, they poked and they prodded and they bided their time.

Samson lost his footing but regained his balance before he fell. He knew if he hit the ground that they'd be on him and he'd never rise again.

Samson closed his eyes and he ran, ran his heart out as if he could hope to win, knowing full well that this night was only beginning.