

Petrified

Stuck!

I twisted my leg to the left and felt the muscle relax slightly as they changed shape between the knuckle of limestone and the wall of rock. I snorted in satisfaction, confident I would soon be free, but my smile quickly faltered as my leg settled further into the embrace of rock beneath. The rough stone scraped at my skin and gripped my calf like a cold hand.

Feeling for the slightest change I wriggled, but remained held against my will. My left leg was trapped above and behind me while I hung face down, resting on my forearms against the floor of the cave. My right arm complained at the pressure exerted on it and a dull ache began to build in my shoulder. I wouldn't be able to remain this way for long, that I knew, but I couldn't move either. I had to see the situation behind me, had to have some idea of what I was up against if I was to have any chance of escape, but I was trapped.

Rising up on my right hand, I twisted my upper body but could see nothing. The light from my helmet pierced the darkness and played across the cave ceiling, illuminating the toffee-like flowstone that covered its surface and turning the pin-head sized droplets of water on the roof to bright stars. On any other day their sparkle would have been beautiful, the pinpoints diamond-bright, but not today; not right now. What I needed right now was the beam to reach into the darkness.

I twisted myself further and the tendons in my neck screamed in protest as I attempted to sweep the torchlight over my leg. Sweat ran from under my helmet and stung my eyes, blinding me, and I blinked at them angrily as I struggled to see into the darkness once more.

Damn it, I still can't see! I relaxed against the hard ground and massaged my neck, kneading the knots which had taken up residence there. *Come on, there must be another way out of this. Think!*

The solution, the simplicity, caused me to laugh out loud, and I unclipped the lamp from my helmet. Holding it above, I manoeuvred my upper body but my shoulder protested, promising to remind me of my demands at a later date. I didn't care. I *had* to see what was holding me in its grasp!

The rock I'd slid into formed a narrow V that widened towards the ceiling, and my leg was wedged firmly within it. It had seemed free of snags as I slipped over it - I'd slipped through more challenging gaps many times before - but now, in the darkness, something about it seemed different; changed. Flowstone covered it, as it did most of the surfaces in the tunnel around me, the result of water dripping through from the surface so far above to form stalactites and stalagmites. *Nothing new there*, I thought, but it took a few seconds for the realisation to sink in as the torch beam revealed the flowstone now coated my lower body to the knees, and it was moving!

It crept over my leg as I watched. I could feel it on my skin, its coldness slipping beneath the fabric, and I extended a tentative finger to touch my leg. The fabric was hard like dried plaster, the coating rough yet smooth at the same time.

Oh, my God! What's happening?

The words left my mouth as I struggled frantically, pulling at my legs as my upper body thrashed within the close confines of the tunnel. The flowstone advanced to my waist, hardening so I could not move, fabric and skin bonded together like concrete, and I wrestled my upper body one way and the other in a desperate struggle to free myself.

With a final wrench my knee popped, the sound loud in the stillness of the tunnel and I screamed. I screamed until my lungs were exhausted and my throat was roar, and still the flowstone crept higher. It touched my waist, my ribcage, and slithered higher onto my chest and neck. Its coldness touched my face and set my jaw to stone, and then the lamp slipped from my fingers. It struck the cold hard floor, flickered and went out.

595 words