

OFF WITH HER HEAD

by Paul Watson

For and starring Sophie

Sophie leans back at the table, sipping her wine, and generally trying to fight off her bad mood as the lights darken around the stage. Steve had ditched her...actually, had he even given a reason this time? She began to wonder why she put up with him at all. Maybe it's time for a new start. She sets down the glass, applauding with the others as the magician appears on stage in an extravagant puff of smoke and a crescendo of music. "Thank you, thank you, you're all very kind. Fortunately for your entertainment tonight...I am not. Tonight, I shall be performing my magics without assistants, which will make for a terribly boring show, unless some of the beautiful ladies in the audience can be persuaded on stage to let me do the impossible to them before your very eyes."

Sophie shakes her head, reaching for the glass. *No. Way.* She thinks, returning to her wine, waiting to see which exhibitionist is going to be first to raise their hands, and what they'd be subjected to. He asks the first volunteer to help with a card trick, continually embarrassing the redhead as the queen of hearts is never where she thinks, only to finally reveal the three cards as the queens of spades, clubs and diamonds. The actual queen of hearts is found tucked into her bra strap. Sophie applauds with the others but it only reinforces her lack of desire to be on stage at the moment.

Other feats of sleight of hand and legerdemain follow. Silks, along with a lacy bra and panties set, pulled from the magician's sleeve; coins from behind the ear and other unlikely and inappropriate places; mind-reading; other card tricks, each with a different volunteer to help, far more than could be reasonably planted in the audience.

"I would like to thank all the lovely ladies who've assisted me, but for my next trick, it requires someone as brave as they are beautiful, able to cope with unimaginable danger and terror, so can all the ladies who think that applies, please, raise your hands."

Sophie scoffs. *Unimaginable danger and terror? Like anyone's going to...* she blinks as the spotlight dazzles her.

"Yes, you, in the dark blue blouse."

Sophie looks around for someone else, only then noticing her hand in the air, practically waving to be included.

"Could you join me on stage, my dear?"

She feels every eye in the audience on her. She swallows, seeing no escape short of just running for the door, and rises, putting on her best smile, walking to the stage in her blue heels.

The magician takes her hand. "And what is the name of our courageous volunteer?"

"Sophie." she squeaks, butterflies fluttering, looking around the empty stage for some clue just what she's volunteered for. "But I..."

"And we haven't met before?"

She shakes her head, "No, but I..."

"And you're not a professional magician's assistant?"

Another shake, "I'm a teaching assistant. I'm ok if that disqualifies me. Really."

The audience laugh as if it was just a joke.

"I'm afraid not. You did put your hand up to volunteer after all."

She gulps, still not understanding why she'd do that.

"Could you put your hands behind your back for me, Sophie?"

She does so before she's had time to think about it, giving a little gasp of surprise as he flourishes a pair of handcuffs and clicks them closed around her wrists before she can object. "Hey!"

"My apologies, but we do need our lovely audience to really believe you can't escape. And it's not the first time you've been handcuffed, is it?"

How does he? No way am I... "My soon-to-be-ex was into it, but it wasn't as much fun as I thought it would be." she tries to clamp a hand on her treacherous mouth, the handcuffs rattling as they stop her.

"How disappointing for you. We'll see if I can treat you better." he reaches into his pocket, pulling

out a spool of white rope that just keeps coming and coming as he wraps it around her shoulders and arms, binding her tightly before she can object. Not that she does for reasons that don't quite come to her mind. "Comfortable?"

"For being tied up, I guess, sure."

"And you can't get out of those bond?"

She tries, struggling futilely, and finally shakes her head. "No. I appear to be stuck."

"Good. So you definitely can't get out?"

She shakes her head, her pale blonde pony tail whipping from side to side.

He holds up a dark cloth, letting it fall to cover her from shoulders to knees. "Do you think you could change costumes like this?"

Sophie tries struggling again. "I don't think I could scratch my nose like this!"

"I agree. So how did this happen?" he pulls the cloth away, revealing Sophie in her underwear, the ropes still tied tight, but no sign of her blouse or skirt.

"Eeeeeeeeeee! What? How did you?! Where are my clothes?!" she shrieks, trying to cover herself, squirming against the ropes crisscrossing her body, her cheeks colouring in embarrassment as her curvy frame is revealed.

"Hmmm. Must be malfunctioning." he gives the cloth a shake and drapes it over her again.

Sophie looks down, feeling the air conditioning over her erect nipples.

"Don't you dare move that! I'm fucking naked under here!"

"Do you do much fucking when not naked?" he asks to laughter that only makes her colour more.

He holds up a dark blue outfit, hiding it behind the cloth. He pulls the cloth away, despite Sophie's screams of protest, revealing her clad in the swimsuit, her bound arms bare, the costume's neckline plunging down to her navel. "Don't worry, Sophie, I wouldn't treat my brave volunteer so cruelly.

Not at this show, anyway."

"Sure you wouldn't. It's a bit low on the terror and horror though."

He smiles down at her, "Oh, that wasn't what you volunteered for."

"It wasn't?"

"Dear me, no, that was just getting you dressed appropriately." he gestures towards the back of the stage where a tall something has appeared, covered by a white sheet. "That is what you volunteered for! Did you come here on your own, Sophie?"

"I had a date. He cancelled. Again." she replies as the magician leads her towards the covered object.

"Oh, that's a shame, still, it does mean you're free to date other people, right?"

"Are you asking me out? Seems a strange way to go about it."

"Oh, no, but I have a friend who'd be perfect for you." he jerks the white cloth away. Two tall struts of dark wood rise eight feet into the air, a thick crossbar connecting them. About two feet up, a pair of lunettes rest, a suspiciously neck-shaped hole in the middle surrounded by a rust-brown splatter. A gleam of metal fills the lunettes, a sharp triangle pointing out the base. In front of the deadly device is a stained woven basket. "Sophie, meet Madame Guillotine. Madame Guillotine, Sophie. You two are going to be spending a little time together."

The blood drains from Sophie's face. "You want to use that..." she tries to point, "...on me?! No way!!"

The grip on her arm tightens. "Way." He walks her up to the guillotine, looking even more ominous up close. The stage lights lower, a red spotlight casting the whole thing into even more macabre detail. He heaves on the red pull rope on the side of the guillotine, raising the heavy stock and blade up to the top and tying the rope off. The blade sinks an inch as he does so, the audience gasping. He gestures at the wooden bench behind the struts.

"Have a seat. I need to show how sharp this lovely thing is to the audience." he lifts up a watermelon from the bench, balancing it on one hand. "Hmmm." he puts the watermelon back, dragging the rope down, the blade sliding up the struts. He gives a grunt before tying it off. He fiddles about, pushing the watermelon through. "Sit back a bit. We don't want you getting watermelon juice all over you, do we?"

Sophie skitters back along the bench until she's barely perched on the far end.

The magician unties the rope and drops it. She feels the bench shaking, not able to take her eyes off the plunging blade as it flashes past. There's a sharp thud, a spray of juice and the watermelon falls in two halves on either side.

"Seems pretty sharp to me." he kicks the waermelon halves away, raising the blade enough to wipe the juice off before raising it all the way to the top. "Come on, Sophie, up you get. We don't want to keep your date waiting."

"It's fine. It's not her, it's me!" she nonetheless clambers awkwardly onto the bench and lies down, pressing the rope into her chest and stomach. The magician raises the lunette for her. For reasons that she can't fathom, Sophie places her neck into the hole, getting a closer look at the disconcerting splatter that, even this close, doesn't look enough like paint for her liking, glistening with some leftover melon juice. The lunette lowers, the click of it locking in place sounding very loud in her ears.

The magician takes hold of the rope, untying it.

"Are you comfortable down there, Sophie?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely wonderful." she sneers.

"Now, for a little more audience participation. Audience, do you want to see the lovely Sophie released from this terrible execution device? Or do you want to see her pretty little head separated from her sexy body?"

"Oh, that's a fair question!"

"So cheer now for release..." a lone cheer comes from the guillotine, "or now for me to release the blade!" a massive cheer practically shakes the theatre. "The people have spoken. Off with her head!" he releases the rope.

Sophie screams. Time seems to slow down, feeling every shudder of the guillotine as the blade hurtles towards her. Her life takes its sweet time flashing before her eyes, each heartbeat thundering as loud as the blade. She swears she can hear it whistling, cutting through the air as it soon will, no, no, bad brain, stop that. Then she feels the shock as the weight impacts the lunette around her. There's a fraction of a second where she can't breathe, choking on the metal filling her throat. *Fuck! He's killed me! He's...* And it passes, a second shockwave crawling up her spine from her hips as she tries to buck in her bonds. *What was that?* Her scream stops as she realises she's not actually dead. Or the afterlife is disappointingly exactly the same as real life.

"And as you can see, Sohpie is completely unharmed. And now..."

Sophie feels her neck peeling away from the blade, her scream starting again, the audience joining in as her head tumbles into the basket.

"As I was saying," he reaches into the basket, lifting up her head by the ponytail, the hair tugging on her scalp, "the lovely Sophie is so excited to be here tonight, she's quite lost her head!"

The audience relax, laughing, it's just part of the show, after all.

"Should I put Sophie back together?"

She stops screaming, "Yes!!"

"What do you think audience?"

A mixture of yeses and nos chorus back.

"Make up your mind!" he carries Sophie back to the guillotine. She stares down at the bound body that certainly looks a lot like her petite figure, but that's impossible. He places her neck against the blade and quickly moves to pull the rope up. Sophie feels the choking sensation again as the blade briefly fills her throat, her neck itching and tingling with pins and needles. He raises the lunettes, helping Sophie to sit up. She swallows as he pulls the cloth out again, draping it over her bound shoulders, whipping it away to reveal her costume and the ropes vanished, replaced by her blue blouse and skirt, the handcuffs in her lap.

"How do you feel, Sophie?"

She blinks, massaging her wrists, "A bit wobbly." she takes his hand, helping her up. She blinks, takes a faltering step forward and screams as her head topples off her neck. Other screams and gasps come from the audience. The magician catches her.

“Does anyone have any duct tape?!” he shouts into the audience, diffusing the audience's concern and terror. He replaces Sophie's head on her shoulders, pulling out a roll of tape from his pocket, swiftly wrapping it around her neck. “There.”

“Is that it?”

“Of course not. We can't have a beautiful woman walking around with duct tape on her neck. What would people think?” He covers the duct tape with the cloth, removing it to reveal a deep blue choker, set with a silver clasp. “That's better. You're free to go back to your seat.”

“Oh. Thanks.” She swallows, patting the choker around her throat as she totters a little to her seat. The rest of the show passes in a blur for Sophie, fiddling with her choker, more interested in trying to make some sense of what happened to her than watching what happens to the other volunteers. Why did she raise her hand? Why did she just go along with...all of that? Eventually, the magician vanishes the same way he came. The lights rise, and it's time to leave.

Sophie arrives home, opening the door to her flat, still confused, fingering the choker, trying to work out how best to dump Steve from a great height. It gets more confusing with the envelope waiting for her on her bedside table. “How did this get here?” She sits on the bed, unclasping the choker as she tears her finger through the envelope. She has a moment of vertigo, of falling, and her head lands on the duvet. “Wait? What?! What just?” She watches her body turn this way and that before finally finding her head. She lifts herself up, getting a strange view of her headless body, the neck covered in a layer of skin, as if a head wasn't supposed to be there. She fumbles for the choker, awkwardly fiddling to get it to clasp while holding her head in place.

Eventually, she's back in what feels like one place, and pulls out the paper from the envelope, a ticket falling out.

'Sophie,

'As you may have discovered by now, there are some aftereffects to your participation. As long as you wear the collar, you can go about your life as normal. But without it, you'll be decapitated again.'

“What?!!”

'I realise this will be a shock. However, please feel free to use the enclosed pass to come visit me so we can discuss your future.'

“My what?”

'Yours,

'The magician.'

She looks at the letter, feeling her choker. She picks up the ticket, noting the date is for a week in the future. “What?!! I've got to wait a week to get back to normal!” and tries to ignore the little part of her mind suggesting that it won't be that bad, and as long as she wears the choker during the day, who knows what fun it might be to be headless in private? After all, didn't the decapitation feel realllllly good?