

The Harthman Case

By Evan W. Knierim

Their appearance was... eccentric to say the least. Waiting at the doorstep of the Harthman theater, were none other than the infamous Morozov twins. The twins were awkward and lanky in build, brother and sister of course. The brother sported a black tailcoat suit, his hair was the same color, for the singular exception which was the white streak formed in the front which he often had to clarify he did not have dyed.

His name was Gavriilo Morozov.

The sister, in contrast to her brother, wore a long white blouse coat. Her hair had free and beautiful curls which, like her coat, were also white. Of course, there was an outlier in her hair, the singular curl which was black, contrasting the rest of her full head of white hair. She found that she often had to specify that this black streak *was* dyed, after most people assumed she and her brother both had natural, unnatural colors in their hair.

Her name was Nadia Morozov.

They were the Morozov twins, they were paranormal investigators. The dry fall air drifted around them as they stood directly in front of the theater's double doors, which were fitted with some sort of fake leather, and small circular windows. Patiently the siblings stood outside the theater and waited. The theater itself was old, *classy* some might have called it once upon a time. It was shut down in the late eighties, but never tore down, due to its historic significance.

The theater was, after all, the only theater to ever screen the film *Cards and Glass*, an obscure film made by an anonymous, but most likely local director. It was a very low budget film, and was reportedly so poor that it only ever had the singular screening. It had historic significance, *not* historic value.

“Why do we do this every time?” Nadia asked.

“Do what?” Gavriilo said with a confident smile. His gaze never leaving the doors.

“Wait for someone to let us in? I don’t think they would be too upset if the people they hired to do a job entered the premises with the intent to do their job.” Nadia’s hair blew about rapidly and wildly in the wind.

“True,” Gavriilo responded. “However, we live in an indignant world. People are rude now for rudeness's sake. If we want to keep up this professional persona we’ve worked so hard towards, manners are magic.”

Nadia seemed to think this over. “Efficiency also works wonders.”

“Too true.”

The double doors swung open, and a man adoring a yellow hardhat, and a neon orange vest, opened the door grunting at the siblings.

“You the Morozovs?” The stout, hunched over man grumbled.

“Indubitably!” Nadia responded, her voice emitting the same kind of joy that came from young children laughing at a playground.

The man chuckled, “Dis way.” He motioned for the two to come in, “Boss is in the office.”

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The theater exuded a most unpleasant stench, which was not fit for any patron’s nostrils to endure. There was a clear schism in time, the theater wished to be grandiose, and create an atmosphere which would have left guests feeling like they were truly experiencing something luxurious. Instead the place was... for a lack of better words, a shit hole. The building was in the middle of its renovation. Exposed pipes, poor lighting, and crumbled drywall scattered across the floor made this evident.

Most eerie of all, was the echoing footsteps of the twins and their leader, across the supposedly empty premises, filling what would otherwise be dreary and *dead* air. The construction ready man led the twins through the back area of the theater behind the counters, and into the backrooms, where they stopped at a door. Hanging on the door was a calendar for the year 1988, full of requests for days off which had faded to time. The man grumbled to himself and fumbled around with his key ring, before selecting one and unlocking the door.

“Boss is through there.” The man said, now turning away from the twins.

“Thank you sir.” Gavriilo responded. The man merely muttered something under his breath and walked off. His eyes had evaded the sibling’s own eyes the entire time, his own being obscured by his hat. Nadia’s ever present but artificial smile dropped to a disappointed, but more authentic frown.

“He called us freaks.” Nadia informed her brother.

“So he did,” Gavriilo confirmed. “What difference does it make? We’ve been called worse.” Nadia nodded towards Gavriilo in agreement, though her expression never changed. The two entered the Harthman theater’s office.

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Sitting at the desk was a very handsome man. He sat hunched over at his desk, wearing a jersey for the Pittsburgh Penguins, the jersey was numbered twenty-nine. The man looked very tired, as if he had not slept in days, and he looked just as starved as he did exhausted. Across from him a nameplate indicated that he was none other than Jeremiah Harthman.

“The Morozov twins,” he announced as they entered, nodding his head towards them. “It’s an honor.”

“Your employees don’t seem to share the same sentiment.” Nadia stated plainly. Gavriilo shot his sister a look, which indicated that he was most displeased with his sister's bluntness. Jeremiah noticed this. It wasn’t exactly subtle.

“It is alright.” Jeremiah held up his hand, in an attempt to reassure Gavriilo. “I’m aware of your work, and the skepticism which follows closely behind it.” Jeremiah’s smile was welcoming. He seemed oddly calm despite the paranormal hell he claimed that engulfed him in their emails with him.

“We understand you believe you have a problem of the paranormal variety?” Gavriilo asked.

“Yes.” Jeremiah replied. “This theater has been in my family for generations, and I’ve found that I was the only one with enough sense to turn it from a burden into something great. My family chose to let the theater rot to time, never selling it because it was the only thing that kept us relevant to the city.” Jeremiah sighed. “Anyway, I always wondered why we just let the theater sit, the public has expressed interest in renovation several times before now. I thought I was going to be the one to get off his ass and do something.”

“But?” Nadia asked.

“But, I fear there was something my ancestors kept to themselves and didn’t tell anyone.” Jeremiah opened a metal drawer which creaked slowly. He pulled out a folder and presented the twins with a picture of an older balding man. “This is my great great grandfather, Aaron Harthman. He was the last Harthman to have any of the records on this place. One unfortunate night, a house fire started and he was engulfed in his sleep. All the records for this place burned to the ground,” Jeremiah’s eyes looked defeated, grey, and dull. “Except for the deed to the property which was found some distance away from the scene.”

“Most peculiar and lucky, that something of that value happened to be the only record remaining.” Gavriilo responded, paused, and then started again. “Your father and mother died recently on a cruise. Correct?”

“How did yo-” Jeremiah stammered.

“Background check.” Gavriilo answered.

“You’d be surprised how often we get calls from people claiming they’ve seen a specter only for them to throw water balloons at us some distance away, obscured by foliage.” Nadia explained. Jeremiah looked apologetic, he started to say something but Gavriilo interrupted him.

“Don’t apologize. It was a slow day at the office anyway.”

“Right. Anyway, you most likely saw the unique circumstances that befell their death, correct?” Jeremiah asked.

“They were burnt alive in their room on a cruise. Surrounded by the ocean, yet trapped in an area which had been ignited by some faulty wiring.” Nadia answered.

“Right. You also should have noticed that investigators were unable to explain why my parents were simply unable to just vacate their room. Or, how the fire hadn’t spread to other rooms.” Jeremiah paused, seemingly trying to read the looks on the twins' blank faces before continuing. “My family has a history of burning to death. It only happens to whoever is in possession of the deed.”

“So... this is a precautionary checkup on the premises?” Gavriilo asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No, I have reason to suspect that there is some sort of force from the dead which wishes me dead as well. I also have reason to believe that this building is the core of my spectral pursuer's being.” Jeremiah leaned back in his chair.

“How do you know this?” The twins asked together. A pause before Jeremiah answered.

“The specter told me.” Jeremiah stated. “One night I was doing paper work. It was late and I’d fallen asleep at my desk. I dreamt that night of an elderly man, he wore classy attire and spoke with an exaggerated southern accent. All he told me was that I would burn, and that he would follow me, follow any heirs of the Harthman name, so long as we could bleed. So long as we were mortal men, who could be punished for our crimes.”

Gavrilo raised an eyebrow, “Your ‘crimes’?” He asked. “Do you have any idea what it could be referring to?”

“Not a clue.” Jeremiah answered.

“Cliche tells us that this must be some sort of vengeful spirit.” Nadia said. Jeremiah looked confused. “When you’ve seen a few hundred hauntings you start to see patterns. You, my friend and your family agitated the wrong person at some point in time I suppose.” Nadia elaborated. “Vengeful spirits wishing to exact revenge, depressed souls wandering aimlessly, spirits of the young attached to artifacts which emitted powerful emotions in life. This is nothing we haven’t dealt with before.”

“So you think you can help?” Jeremiah perked up.

“That depends,” Gavrilo interjected. “How late can you stay awake?”

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Gavrilo and Nadia did a sweep of the area, and after about thirty minutes returned to Jeremiah. They told him that they would return at two A.M. and from there, they planned to attempt to banish the demon back to the afterlife.

Two A.M. came, and Gavrilo led Jeremiah to one of the theaters, while Nadia fetched something from their car. Rain and thunder pounded violently against the theater. Gavrilo set up

several devices in the theater, a spirit box, a camera recording the event, and a wooden chair placed right in the center of the room.

“What is your sister retrieving?” Jeremiah asked. Gavriilo looked up from the chair to which he’d just attached some handcuffs to one of the arm rests, closing them with a metal clink.

“She is grabbing the holy handgun.” Gavriilo said with all of the seriousness of someone giving a eulogy. Jeremiah just stared dumbly, and Gavriilo expecting a response, stared back. When Jeremiah didn’t say anything, and just continued staring, Gavriilo went back to work and applied another pair of handcuffs to the opposite arm rest.

“So... uh, I take it you and your sister are believers then?” Jeremiah said, twiddling his thumbs. Gavriilo merely looked up at Jeremiah and cocked his head. Jeremiah stuttered, “I just figured... you know... *holy handgun*... it sort of ju-”

“If you’re asking if my sister is Catholic, the answer is yes.” Gavriilo interrupted.

“And you’re not?” Jeremiah asked. Gavriilo seemed to think this over, opened his mouth to speak, stopped, and started again.

“I believe I don’t have the time to ponder the question.” Gavriilo answered.

“Does anyone?” Jeremiah said, snorting. The doors to the theater swung open, and Nadia entered. She carried a metal brief case which had lettering engraved on it that read: **PROPERTY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**. Nadia set the case down and opened it, and inside was a green plastic translucent water gun, as well as several small vials of clear liquid.

“Oh... you weren’t kidding about the handgun thing...” Jeremiah muttered. “I just took you guys as big Monty Python fans.” It was Nadia’s turn to stare at Jeremiah as if he were the dumbest person to ever walk the planet.

“It’s a water gun... not an... actual pistol... you do know what an actual pistol looks like right?” Nadia asked.

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The handcuffs on the chair clicked, entrapping Jeremiah in the chair.

“Explain to me how cuffing me to a wooden chair is supposed to help us exercise demons.” Jeremiah asked, he sounded uncomfortable.

“Spirits are meant to stay in the afterlife.” Gavriilo replied. “The ones that don’t, and do the specter ghost things you would call a haunting, are what we actually call ‘limbos’. They see the world as we see it, with a bit of a lot of distortion. When they want to spook someone they have to leave the veil that keeps them separate, and invisible to us. In the process it makes them... sort of material, so they can interact with the mortal plane.”

“Fighting a ghost is tricky because you have to play on their terms. You can only harm them if they leave the veil and try to harm you. So, to give us an advantage we’re preparing several things that may provoke them to leave that veil.” Nadia said, placing several candles around the theater. “These candles, the witching hour that we will arrive upon soon,” Nadia nodded to the restrained Jeremiah. “Your exposed state.”

“Woah woah,” Jeremiah roared. “You guys are using me as *bait*?”

“We assure you,” Gavriilo spoke. “Our methods are entirely productive, and we will be able to guarantee your safety assuming that there are no unforeseen factors.” Jeremiah seemed to think this over.

“Not like I can leave.” Jeremiah said, shaking his arms against the cuffs.

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Gavrilo sat up in the projection booth, looking downward towards his sibling and patron. The spirit would be more likely to come after Jeremiah, the less people that were in the room. Nadia wrapped a blindfold around Jeremiah, and gave Gavrilo a thumbs up. Gavrilo flipped the breaker box and the lights to the theater died out. Immediately the EMF that was set to the side by Nadia, and the EMF in Gavrilo's pocket went off. They buzzed out loud in the air.

“What's that buzzing?” Jeremiah inquired. The EMF read a level five spike, the highest spike possible. The highest activity possible. Something was there.

“Uhhh... it's uhh...” Nadia stammered trying to think of something that would reassure Jeremiah. A slow gasp could be heard throughout the theater. The sound was a painful, old, and dreadful sound. The projector in front of Gavrilo roared to life, the sounds of choir children began to play from the speakers. Nadia readied her holy handgun.

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Gavrilo began to sprint for the exit to the projection booth, but found that it quickly slammed shut, colliding with his nose and launching him backwards. “Dammit! Nadia!” He screamed out as he quickly scrambled to his feet. He tried pounding against the metal door, but the door did not budge, it found his efforts pitiful.

Meanwhile, Nadia looked around the premises, her only form of illumination coming from the candles at her feet. “Reveal yourself, foul monstrosity! Affront to mankind! Make your presence known!” She reached underneath her coat and clutched a small wooden cross she wore around her neck. Glancing into the darkness she saw moving in the shadows, a figure watching her, waiting to pounce.

Nadia acted quickly, raising her water gun, she shot out a few pathetic squirts of holy water, officially blessed by the pope himself. The figure disappeared, and the water instead

extinguished some nearby candles that it had fallen upon. “Dammit!” She grumbled. Nadia heard some shuffling from behind her.

She turned, and saw that the blindfold that had been placed over Jeremiah’s eyes was now, by an invisible force, slid downward and wrapping around his neck, tightening with murderous intent. Jeremiah gasped and jerked. Nadia was able to once more look into Jeremiah’s wincing eyes, and see that he was suffering an unimaginable pain. She ran to help him, but with ferocious speed, he was lifted by the invisible pursuer, suspended in the air only by the blindfold around his neck. He dangled in the air, as the color from his face began to leave.

Nadia closed her eyes, and channeled any sort of mental fortitude she could find within herself despite the chaos around her. She clasped her hands and began muttering a prayer she’d learned, meant to abjure evil spirits. Slowly her mutters turned into furious belts, drawing sound from the upper region of her chest rather than her throat. The facilities lights, and projector began to flicker on and off, an intense howling noise drifted around the theater, whispering thoughts of doom and nihilism into Nadia’s ears. Then, and without warning, all sound and chaos quieted.

Slowly, Nadia’s eyes pried open. She found that despite the silence, Jeremiah was still suspended, the room was dark again, and the projector could still be heard whirring through the air. The only difference now, was that a massive clump of all of the candles were now floating in the air, not a single one could be seen resting on the ground as they had been before. Nadia looked up at Jeremiah, she saw a look that could only be taken as pure fear on Jeremiah’s face. Before she could react, she watched as all of the ignited candles were flung in Jeremiah’s direction, inflaming the makeshift noose around his neck, and his jersey secured around his torso. Jeremiah was a burning man, losing air.

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Gavrilo's shoulder turned a purple hue as he continued to ram the force of his entire body against the red metal door, to no avail. The lights all around began to flicker on and off. Gavrilo checked his surroundings, he found that there was nearly nothing present that could aid him. Except of course for the conveniently placed crowbar, resting on a table of various other construction related tools and trinkets.

He quickly rushed towards the table of tools, his sister's distant screams began to motivate him. Suddenly, and without warning, from the table a small container of screws and bolts floated between Gavrilo and the crowbar. It began to open and spin violently. The steel trinkets scattered across the floor. Gavrilo shielded his face from the flying metal. He found this did nothing to stop the injuries incurred by most small flying metal objects, but his face was protected nonetheless. He slowly lowered his guard and noticed that the spinning had stopped.

He jolted forward, still mindful to watch his footing so as to avoid tripping on any of the metal waste. His hand shot down as he arrived at the table, and just when it seemed he might have grabbed the crowbar, it too quickly flew above him, out of reach. He slammed down and was hunched over the table. He looked up, to see the crowbar descending. He was not fast enough to stop it from dealing a violent blow against his skull.

Instinctively, Gavrilo yelped, and began to lurch backwards, completely forgetting to be mindful of the screws beneath him. He tripped, falling on his back against the array of metal which made uncomfortable contact against his skin. Gavrilo groaned, he couldn't decide which was worse, the painful headache he now had pounding relentlessly, or the assortment of metal penetrating his back. He slowly opened his eyes, and found that another crowbar strike was to be soon and imminent. Quickly, and with finesse, Gavrilo grabbed the crowbar with both hands, catching it.

He wrestled with a great, invisible strength pushing down on him. His teeth began to grind, as both the weight of a murderous specter, as well as his own, and his sister's life pressed against him. He found a new resolve in that realization, and with it he found new strength. He maneuvered in a way that required he stop exerting force upward, while still maintaining his grip on the crowbar. As the crowbar descended, he rolled with the weight rather than against it, and found that he was now laying against the side of the crowbar.

More pain shot through his body as he rolled onto the various screws, but he could whine later. Once the crowbar was pinned to the ground by Gavriilo's grip again, he quickly rolled over once more and placed his entire weight upon the crowbar. He had done it, if there were some sort of specter holding onto the crowbar, he had successfully disarmed it, he knew because he no longer felt the strain of another being against the weapon. He had effectively cut off whatever strength the specter was using through the veil forcing it to let go.

Gavriilo looked through the rather large glass window which allowed the projector's light to reach the screen. He saw now the chaos that had transpired as he had been on the ground. He saw Jeremiah working on his last breaths, suspended in the air and bound to his chair. He saw on the ground his sister who had been shoved by some invisible force into a leather folding chair. It appeared that whatever put her there was trying to crush her in between the folding seat. The process did not appear successful, yet it looked very uncomfortable and perhaps painful.

Gavriilo knew that he didn't have time to work on the door anymore, hell the crowbar was more of a hail marry than anything. Gavriilo looked at the projector, then at Jeremiah. He looked back and forth between the two, he had an idea.

A very stupid idea. An idea so stupid only a complete and total, utter buffoon would follow through with it. An idea so stupid, that only history's jesters, stand up comedians, and door salesmen, would've stood up to applaud the plan.

And yet, it was an idea nonetheless.

Gavrilo used his entire weight to throw the theater's projector to the floor. The projector hit the floor with all the subtlety of a giant tap dancing in the mountains. Then again, the rubble fit in with the scrap that lay on the floor. The only thing in his way now was the very heavy stand that the projector had sat on. Normally this wouldn't have been a problem if it weren't for the fact that the stand was on the carpet, which really did not agree with what Gavrilo was trying to pull off.

Still, he leaned down, and with his nonbruised shoulder, Gavrilo attempted to push against the carpet in hopes of moving the stand. He noticed that slowly the metal bits on the ground still were not done causing him problems. They began to fly towards Gavrilo with the intent to harm. This annoyed Gavrilo more than anything.

"CAN I NOT CATCH A BLOODY BREAK!" He screamed, very clearly cracking under pressure. His face turned a bright red from a mixture of his yelling, and exhaustion. Finally he had moved the stand, but the metal still continued to pelt him which was more annoying than anything. He felt his hand trembling as he looked out to the theater.

He had never done something this bold, this *stupid* before in his life. Well, the truth of that last part depended on who you asked. He remembered his fiance back home, who hated what he did for a living. He remembered his dog Ollie, and his stupid smile, and the way he would slobber like a moron. And then he remembered his sister, who in this moment *needed* him more than ever.

“Now or never.” He muttered under his breath. A bit of metal pelted his jaw, and his anger rose. “Enough already!” He turned to look at the annoying specter as if he could see anything there. He shook his hands, hoping it would settle his nerves and stop the shaking. With all of the courage, might, and stupidity he’d ever had in his life, he screamed out a vengeful belt as he charged at the large window with the full force of his entire weight.

The glass shattered, and looked like a gentle snowfall as it descended upon the theater's grounds. Gavriilo, suspended in the air, hanging on the balance between his own life and death. He was rapidly approaching the suspended Jeremiah who had been lit ablaze. He was also rapidly approaching the floor, which did not look particularly comforting at the moment. Gavriilo launched his hand forward, aiming to grab Jeremiah.

He missed.

Gavriilo missed Jeremiah, in fact it wasn't even close. Slowly for Gavriilo, the world moved as his stomach sank. Failure would lead to dire consequences. Consequences set to be true since he'd failed to grab Jeremiah. Gavriilo *did*, however, manage to grab the leg of the chair. Gavriilo was tired, exhausted, injured, and he wanted nothing more than to go home and sleep. Yet, he needed his body to hold on just a little longer. He felt his already very poor grip on the chair begin to slip.

Suddenly, and without warning, the specter released Jeremiah. Both he and Gavriilo began to quickly descend to the theater's floor. They both landed violently, but Gavriilo got arguably the worst of it, as he landed right on top of one of the theater's seats, rather than the smooth floor. Jeremiah landed on the floor which he was barely able to consciously take as a win considering he had lost a lot of the oxygen needed for his brain. He was also still on fire. Nadia was no

longer being crushed by the seat. She quickly rushed towards a nearby fire extinguisher, and snuffed out the flames resting upon Jeremiah.

Gavrilo groaned, and got to his feet. He blinked several blinks, dumbfounded that he was still alive. He rushed over to his sister's side, who was now hunched over Jeremiah.

“Jeremiah? Please please please don’t be dead!” Nadia pleaded. She put her hand against him. She slowly moved her hand up to his neck to check his pulse and-. Jeremiah lurched up, he began to cough and gasp as if he’d just gotten done with a twelve hour shift in the mines. Jeremiah turned to look at Nadia who was crouched and smiling, he then slowly shifted his gaze to Gavrilo.

He fell back again against the floor and let out a slow, yet very much deserved groan of agony onset by his painful experience. Small bits of his hair had been burnt off, but not enough to make a difference, though his jersey had nearly been burned to ash, and his pants weren’t in any better of a condition.

“Thank god he’s alive.” Nadia said standing up now to face her brother. “I didn’t want to go through the same thing as what happened the last time a client died.” Nadia said stretching. Gavrilo looked at his wrist, to check his watch. The time was four in the morning.

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“So you don’t think the specter is gone?” Jeremiah asked. He did not sound pleased to hear this.

“No,” Gavrilo answered. “And we would understand if you did not wish to pay for our services.” He said, bowing his head. “We can most likely assume that the spirit used all of its energy trying to take all of us out, significantly decreasing the amount of time it was able to remain between the veil.”

Nadia spoke now, “Again we would understand if you were not satisfied with our services. But, if I may sir, whatever spirit you’ve incurred the wrath of is not of ordinary strength. It is a force to be reckoned with a-”

Jeremiah held his finger up to silence the twins. He reached into his mostly tethered pants pocket, and withdrew a check with burnt edges. He handed them the check. “You both went through just as much back there as I did. I can’t in good faith, *not* pay you for giving me information and insight I didn’t have before. Not to mention, considering that there’s a ninety percent chance this thing is still out there I may need your help again.” He grinned.

Gavrilo bowed, and his sister stared at Jeremiah blankly. He elbowed her, and she looked to him and realized she should bow as well. “Thank you sir,” Nadia responded. “We will be forever grateful for this generosity.”

“Please,” Jeremiah said. “It’s really not that big of a deal. Drive safe I’ve uh... well I’ve got to make an order for some smoke detectors... and a new projector.”

“Yes well, it is quite unfortunate that the spirit threw the projector at me during our scuffle.” Gavrilo’s voice cracked. “It’s been a pleasure working with you,” Gavrilo extended his hand forward for Jeremiah to shake.

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The twins walked through the cold chill of the night, a wave of accomplishment washing over them as they got into their old mercedes benz. The twins drove off, as the sun began to rise slowly beyond the horizon. Nadia sighed.

“What’s the matter?” Gavrilo asked.

“I skipped dinner. Brother, I’m starving.” Nadia replied.

“I doubt there's anywhere really open other than Dennys.” Gavrilo answered.

“That’s fine with me,” Nadia said. “I’ll eat anything at this point.”

And so, the Morozov twins, beaten and bruised, found there was at least one silver lining in all of the chaos they had just endured. They could enjoy chocolate chip pancakes, together, and alone as the sun rose above them. No matter how much they hurt, they still had the pancakes.

They still had each other.