

MINUS

Minus was the most deranged, the most undisciplined of the leaders of the militia. Pathologically carefree and obtuse, he'd sometimes perform real feats of courage, then suddenly show overt cowardice, backing out at the most inopportune moment. Sometimes it'd seem impossible to drive the fighters of his small noisy squadron into an ordinary, unimportant, not particularly deadly battle, even under threat of execution. Then a few hours later, they'd suddenly, without any order, rush off and get involved in some dashing and seemingly hopeless affair.

Minus lived like a gypsy, played the guitar, wandered, arbitrarily changing locations, robbing and fooling the people. His crew consisted of three BTRs, three Lexuses, one BMP, a tank without a turret, and a pair of covered trucks carrying girls: dancers, journalists, and cooks.

Fraiser could not stand him. Even Stern and Tref gradually resigned themselves to the need to obey and serve more or less according to the regulations. And they were people much more merited and professional than Minus. But there seemed to be no way to keep Minus in check, not for the foreseeable future. The commander actually wanted to put him before the tribunal, not doubting that the verdict would be execution by firing squad, as there were plenty of good reasons for it. But the Chief of the Special Department with the verbose callsign Sickle-and-Hammer (abbreviated as Sam) dissuaded:

"You can't put Minus before the tribunal, comrade commander. He's a popular creature. The people will not understand us. He must be removed comradely, delicately, with all, so to speak, due honors. For example, order a sniper, maybe Ginger from the reconnaissance battalion, on the, say, other side of the front. And from that side, God forgive us, execute him. With the tribunal there'd only be losses for us, but this way there's benefits all around. There is no Minus anymore, and we get one more fallen hero: here's, like, a glorious death from an enemy bullet, during service, an eternal memory, an example to all fighters and so on, all such crap that's good for educational purposes. Huh?"

Fraiser did not like Sam's idea, but he decided not to rush with the tribunal either.

REFUSAL

"So what about him?" - asked Fraiser.

"Who 'him'?" asked Stern.

"Minus?"

"But you know already..."

"Answer the question."

"He's cornered. He went in too far, delved into enemy territory. They spotted him, started surrounding him ..."

"They likely have him surrounded by now, one hundred percent, an hour has passed already since he messaged me that they hit him in the rear..." Tref interjected.

"That's right, most likely. Moreover, we're unable to establish communications with him," agreed Stern.

"If he doesn't get in touch, then maybe he's not even alive anymore. Maybe they got them all.", suggested Fraiser.

"Who are you going to rescue then?"

"And if he is still alive, just that the radio is broken, huh? Say, they went into a gully or behind a slag heap, so there's no connection, but he's alive? Huh?"

"Stop with the hysteria, Tref." - The commander looked at the ridge of heaps. They, like the great mountains, had names. Here is the Merry High-rise, covered with a few rare shreds of forest, there, beyond the front line, the Devil's Embankment, followed by the black-gray Matveevsky, then the Yuzov Pikes with a bifurcated always snowy peak and, finally, the highest in the Donbass, solemn, similar to Mount Elbrus, the Kara-Kurgan.

Somewhere at its foot, mad Minus was about to vanish. "Stop with the hysteria, better tell me, who ordered Minus' squadron to secretly cross the front line, delve into enemy territory for fifty-four kilometers and intercept the railway train? Who ordered Minus to do all this? You? Me? Authorities from the Center?"

"No, sir!"

"Then who? Who?! Why the silence?"

"No one" Stern replied for Tref.

"That's it! No one! No one gave any order. He did it without permission, risking to provoke the enemy to inadequate retaliatory actions on the entire front. That's at most. And at least - without any operational necessity, condemning hundreds of my soldiers to death."

"They're his guys, they knew what they were getting into..."

"They're not his fucking guys! They're fucking soldiers of the Second People's Army. And while I command this army, while I fucking command it, they are my soldiers. With whom this moron does not have any right to do as he pleases!"\

In midst of a plain sky, a huge gray cloud suddenly swelled and expanded like an explosion, from which thick snow started scattering in all directions. Serrated snowflakes, flying past the sun, were colored by its flames and covered the steppe. In the office, a snowbank appeared in a minute.

"I'll go fucking crazy from this weather someday," Stern hissed through a suddenly frozen beard. "You, Fraiser, of course, are right. And so on. But still. You can't leave your own. Minus needs to be rescued. The men are gathered at the plaza, they want to go."

"What men?"

"My squadron in full force. And two platoons from, uh, Tref's company."

"Firstly," said Fraiser, "there's no such thing as your squadron, there's the Special Reconnaissance Group of the First Infantry Battalion. Secondly, there's no such thing as Tref's company, there's the Second Company of the First Infantry Battalion. Thirdly, Minus' squadron is actually called 'Separate Assault Company of the Fourth Infantry Battalion.' Fourth, the members of the Special Reconnaissance Group and the Second Company of the First Infantry Battalion are among the most experienced and capable. And I will not allow them to be put under fire because of the gross violation of army regulations of the Separate Assault Company of the Fourth Infantry Battalion, who not only don't deserve to be rescued, but should rather be put before the tribunal. No one is going anywhere. That's all."

"What's wrong with you, commander?!" - Tref threw his cigarette butt into the snow. - "Are out of your mind? This is Minus we're talking about, our brother!.. Remember the siege, how we rejoiced when he entered the city. We were already thinking the Ukrs would finish us - no grub, nor ammunition, nor fuel. And there he is, fresh, cheerful, triumphant, with a mountain of ammunition, with tanks ... We all, all, and you too, owe him our lives! Remember and let us go. We'll just quickly get in and back out, we won't let you down."

"That's how it is, Fraiser, let me go. For our brother. And so on..." - said Stern. "That's how it is? Remember the siege of Donetsk? How we rejoiced when he entered the city? Maybe we did rejoice. But not for long. Afterwards, remember, remember, we had to evict him out of the city with force, after his punks made such a... mess. Robbery, boozing ... All the Jews raped, the women robbed ... That is, the other way around. Well, fuck's sake, it doesn't matter... In short, you remember all this. Barely moved them out of there. Had to point guns at their base, and that didn't even help. Bought him off in the end; looked for something to give him, him especially, something most profitable, most seductive and, most importantly, far away from the city. And still he complained: I don't want this, I don't want that, this won't be enough ... Ended up giving him the meat processing plant, the largest in the region, and in addition he solicited three sacks of money, plus a carriage of weapons. Only then he bowed out... this Danish fucking prince, this Hamburg rooster¹..."

"Come on, commander. Back then everybody used to rob, our people, and the Ukrs as well..."

"Not only that, but a week later he declared the territory of the meat processing plant the Novoukrainian Democratic Republic, and himself, it's fucking president. And he refused to fight the Ukrainians until we recognized his fucking sausage state and concluded a collective security agreement with him! And while we were dying at the frontline, he toured at the rear with his gang, appropriating mines²... Well, that's all, the evening of reminiscence is over... He got in there by himself, let him get out of there by himself, too. I tolerated his antics for a long time, hoped he'd take the easy way and wise up. But he doesn't want to. Well, in that case I don't want to, either. If he returns alive - he'll go before the tribunal. And if he's killed - it's his own fault, to hell with him!"

The blizzard subsided. The sun that seemed to have cooled down quickly flared up again. The snow on the floor began to melt. The three comrades stood in a pool of meltwater, not looking at each other; in silence.

"And so on," - unable to stand the silence, but also not knowing what to say, Stern repeated his senseless saying. "Comrades officers!" - quietly but clearly said Fraiser. - "I order: cease all non-statutory chatter. Personnel to return to location. Weapons to be handed over to the weapons room. Proceed with exercises in physical and ideological preparation."

1. One of those enigmatic Russian swear words with no discernible consensus about it's meaning, possibly just an embellished version of "rooster". It was popularized by a scene from the 1971 Soviet comedy movie Gentlemen of Fortune: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9Nd7x5c0gw>
2. RU/UKR копанка: referring to illegal mining operations, mostly coal, common in the Donbass region: <http://miningwiki.ru/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%B0>