



# Synopsis of the War Novel "The Last Frontier" by Sergey Konyashin

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## Annotation

The events of the military novel *The Last Frontier* take place between August 1942 and April 1943 in Novorossiysk and Gelendzhik. At the heart of the story are the fates of two soldiers from the 305th Separate Marine Battalion: Andrey Novitsky from Novorossiysk and Endel Märi from Estonia.

Novitsky's entire family (his parents, younger sister, and brother) remained in the city occupied by the Germans, as well as his beloved, Polina Shcherbakova, along with her mother and brother.

Märi, the son of Baltic settlers, is fluent in German. He had intended to enroll in military interpreter courses but was unable to do so due to the outbreak of war, so he volunteered for the marines.

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## Prologue (September 1965)

Andrey Prozorov, a graduate of the Leningrad Nakhimov Naval School from Arkhangelsk, is assigned to the Black Sea Fleet. He arrives at Malaya Zemlya near Novorossiysk, where his father, Yaroslav, fought in 1943. A local girl offers

to "sell" him an old ring, which her friend found in the ground, in exchange for four chestnut leaves. The ring bears the engraving: *"To Polina from Andrey."*

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## **Chapter 1 (September 1942)**

The Germans enter Novorossiysk. Andrey Novitsky's younger brother barricades himself on the second floor of their house, engaging in combat with the Nazis to allow his mother and sister time to reach one of the last ships evacuating the remnants of weapons, food supplies, wounded soldiers, and civilians to Gelendzhik. He holds off an entire German company with a machine gun and grenades for two hours before being captured and burned alive by the Germans.

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## **Chapter 2**

At the overcrowded port, Novitsky's mother and sister encounter the Shcherbakov family—Polina, her mother, and younger brother. The chaos of the evacuation separates them, and the girls, along with the boy, manage to board the last departing ship. Meanwhile, the mothers are pushed back toward the market square, where German tanks arrive. Novitsky's mother is crushed under a tank. The Germans disperse the crowd at the port and fire at the escaping ship, eventually sinking it. Novitsky's sister is killed by a fascist bullet in the sea, but Polina and her brother manage to swim to their suburban village, Stanichka, where their mother finds them.

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## **Chapter 3**

Major General G. P. Kotov, commander of the Novorossiysk Defensive District, orders the commander of the Novorossiysk Naval Base, G. N. Kholostyakov, to repel the Germans on the eastern outskirts of the city. Lacking reserves, Kholostyakov personally leads a small detachment of officers from his base's headquarters but loses more than half his men in the first battle against a vastly superior enemy force and barely escapes death himself. While retreating, Kholostyakov and the surviving officers encounter the 305th Separate Marine Battalion, which includes Novitsky and Märi. Kholostyakov cancels the battalion's previous orders and instructs them to hold the cement plants—the last defensible line.

Back in Gelendzhik, at an operational meeting with Kotov, Kholostyakov is confronted by an NKVD officer he does not recognize, who sharply criticizes

his decision to countermand higher commanders' orders. Kotov cuts the officer short and explains that if Novorossiysk falls, Soviet forces will be forced to retreat further into the Caucasus, which could lead to the USSR's defeat in the war.

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## Chapter 4

The 305th Battalion engages in an unequal battle with the German forces advancing eastward near Novorossiysk's cement plants. The geographical features of Adamovich Ravine, where the plants are located, allow the battalion to hold off several German divisions for five days. Despite their numerical advantage, the enemy is forced into a bottleneck between the mountains and the sea. In a critical moment, reinforcements arrive—Kholostyakov manages to transfer two regiments of the 318th Rifle Division from Georgian ports.

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## Chapter 5

Severely wounded, Novitsky and Märi are among the 42 surviving soldiers out of the 619 who entered the battle. While waiting for a medical evacuation, Andrey reminisces about a hike with the Novitsky and Shcherbakov families in May 1941. Wanting to tease Polina, he had leaped from the edge of a cliff onto a rocky ledge, laughing at her frightened reaction. Offended, Polina stopped speaking to him. On the first day of the war, immediately after his school graduation, Novitsky was drafted. Before his deployment to Odessa in August 1941, Polina invited him to say goodbye. During their farewell walk on the pier, a German air raid began. Bomb explosions threw them into the sea. Polina was wounded by shrapnel, but Andrey saved her, carrying her home to Stanichka. Her mother, a surgeon, managed to save her daughter. The next morning, before returning to his unit, Andrey visited Polina and gave her a handmade ring engraved with *"To Polina from Andrey."*

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## Chapter 6 (October 1942)

The NKVD officer who had criticized Kholostyakov at the meeting introduces himself as Colonel Burov. He claims to be investigating German spies and asks Kholostyakov to report any suspicious activities among his subordinates. Kholostyakov, in turn, requests Burov's help in translating documents taken from a dead German soldier, which he plans to use in an upcoming reconnaissance mission into enemy-occupied Novorossiysk. Burov, despite having worked at the Soviet embassy in Berlin for years, claims he never

learned German. Kholostyakov then visits Märi, who is recovering in a hospital, and offers him the mission. During their conversation, Andrey asks if he can send a letter to Polina through Märi. Kholostyakov strictly forbids it.

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## **Chapter 7**

Novitsky, an experienced factory worker, is assigned to a torpedo assembly workshop, where he encounters an old rival, Kapustin, a morally weak former classmate who had once unsuccessfully pursued Polina. Kapustin instructs Andrey on assembling torpedoes for combat boats. Meanwhile, Kholostyakov arranges for partisans to deliver Märi, feigning injuries, to a path used by a German reconnaissance unit. However, at the last moment, they discover he has an unsanctioned envelope. Märi claims it is a fabricated farewell letter to his parents in Berlin to strengthen his cover story. With no time for verification, Kholostyakov lets him keep it.

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## **Chapter 8**

Arriving in Novorossiysk, Märi witnesses the Nazis' brutal atrocities. Unintentionally, he finds himself present as a group of fascist soldiers assault and murder Russian women. He is overcome with the urge to sacrifice himself to protect them, but he remembers Kholostyakov's last instructions—to return with critical intelligence at all costs.

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## **Chapter 9**

Meanwhile, in Stanichka, German soldiers assault Polina, wound her mother, and kill her younger brother when he tries to protect them. The next morning, driven by vengeance, Polina sneaks up to the German barracks near the village, seduces and kills a sentry, blocks the door with a log, and sets fire to the wooden building. As German reinforcements arrive, she fights them off with weapons taken from fallen soldiers but is fatally wounded.

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## **Chapter 10**

Märi kills two German officers, seizes a secret military map, and escapes from the hospital. Evading pursuers multiple times, he disguises himself in the uniform of a Nazi soldier who had just executed two Russian children who had wandered into the hospital courtyard. Dressed as a German, Märi successfully slips out of the city.

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## Chapter 11

After spending the night in a wooded area, Märi arrives in an abandoned Stanichka. In one of the houses, he finds Polina's mother praying before an icon. She tells him that Polina vowed to avenge her brother's death and has been missing since early morning. Searching for Polina, Märi gets caught in a battle near the burning barracks. He helps her fight off the Germans but realizes she is mortally wounded.

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## Chapter 12

Handing Polina Andrey's letter, Märi places her on a German motorcycle and rushes toward her mother. However, she dies along the way. After burying her next to her brother's grave in their yard, Märi sees a German patrol entering the village. Polina's mother gives him the ring Andrey had given her and urges him to escape, ensuring that he delivers the German map to his commander. She then attempts to delay the Nazis with gunfire but is quickly killed. Märi dives into the sea to escape. Furious over the loss of an entire defensive company in Stanichka, the commander of the Wehrmacht's 17th Army, General-Colonel Richard Ruoff, reprimands his subordinate, the commander of the 73rd Division, Alfred Schäffer. Seeking to conceal the negligence within his division while hoping for a prestigious reward for the Caucasus campaign, Ruoff orders all records of the defeat in Stanichka and the stolen secret map to be destroyed.

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## Chapter 13

Andrey is arrested on charges of sabotage. Due to the faulty torpedoes he assembled—based on intentionally incorrect instructions from Kapustin—two officers were killed during training exercises. NKVD officer Burov, learning from Kapustin's report that Märi received an unknown letter from Novitsky before heading into German-occupied Novorossiysk, suspects them both of treason and initiates an investigation. He also informs Kholostyakov of Märi's capture after swimming across Tsemess Bay.

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## Chapter 14

Märi regains consciousness in a military hospital but is soon taken for interrogation by Burov. The NKVD officer uses beatings and psychological pressure to force a confession, but Märi refuses to comply. Frustrated, Burov orders him thrown into a prison cell. That night, a screaming Märi, haunted by

nightmares, is awakened by Novitsky, who has been placed in the same cell. During their difficult conversation, Märi refrains from revealing Polina's fate and keeps the ring hidden.

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## **Chapter 15 (November 1942)**

Major Caesar Kunikov, former commander of the 305th Battalion, returns to Gelendzhik after recovering from injuries sustained just before the September battles at the cement plants. Learning from Kholostyakov about the near-total destruction of his battalion, Kunikov vows revenge. He lobbies to command a new special marine assault unit. An engineer by training, he also helps Kholostyakov disguise Novitsky's assembly error as part of a classified torpedo experiment, securing his and Märi's release from prison.

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## **Chapter 16 (December 1942)**

Novitsky and Märi volunteer for Kunikov's special operations unit. Andrey hopes to learn more about Polina's fate, while Märi seeks revenge for the atrocities he witnessed in Novorossiysk. During a mountain training exercise, the unit stumbles upon a German reconnaissance group and eliminates them in a brief skirmish. Kunikov and Märi interrogate the only surviving German, whom Märi immediately recognizes as one of the soldiers who had assaulted Russian women. The Nazi reveals that General-Colonel Ruoff, for personal political reasons, has covered up the destruction of his defensive company in Stanichka. As a result, that section of coastline remains poorly defended. After the interrogation, Märi, unable to control his fury, kills the German. Understanding his rage, Kunikov promises to report that all enemy soldiers died in combat.

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## **Chapter 17 (January 1943)**

Kholostyakov receives orders to conduct a diversionary landing operation on the western shore of Tsemess Bay to distract the Germans from the main Soviet landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereyka. This mission is critical, as it represents the Red Army's last chance for a major offensive in the Black Sea region. Its success could determine the outcome of the Caucasus campaign and, possibly, the entire war. At a strategy meeting, Kunikov convinces Kholostyakov to prepare a backup plan for landing in Stanichka and intensifies his unit's training.

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## Chapter 18 (February 1943)

During their final mountain training, Märi realizes that Andrey has only joined the operation in the hope of finding Polina alive in liberated Novorossiysk. Gathering his courage, Märi tries to return the ring and reveal Polina's fate. However, the conversation goes badly, escalating into a fight in which Märi loses the ring in the deep snow. He later sneaks away to retrieve it and, in the process, inadvertently witnesses a clandestine meeting between Burov and Alfred Schäffer, Ruoff's aide. Burov, speaking fluent German, assures the Nazi officer that no changes have been made to the landing operation's plans and that the Germans can safely rely on the intelligence he previously provided.

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## Chapter 19

Rushing back to the final pre-departure assembly, Märi reports Burov's betrayal to Kunikov. The major devises a plan to lure Burov onto the departing boat and confront him at sea. Meanwhile, Novitsky is sent to warn Captain Zubkov, commander of the artillery battery supporting the landing, about an imminent change in plans.

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## Chapter 20

Aboard the ship, Kunikov forces Burov to confess to his treason. Burov attempts to persuade Kunikov to surrender the entire unit to the Germans, promising them safe treatment in captivity. Enraged, Kunikov throws the traitor overboard. Realizing that the main landing force is doomed but determined to seize a beachhead, he orders his unit to head for Stanichka. Novitsky successfully warns Captain Zubkov, allowing Kunikov's detachment to land under covering artillery fire.

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## Chapter 21

A brutal battle unfolds in Stanichka. Outnumbered and isolated, Kunikov's small unit holds out against relentless German attacks. Confused by their unexpected resilience and disoriented by a deceptive radio transmission from Kunikov, Ruoff makes the strategic mistake of withdrawing his forces temporarily.

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## Chapter 22

As Märi lays dying in battle, he presses Polina's ring into Novitsky's hand and, with his last breath, reveals that he had taken it from the girl he buried. The

battle in Stanichka ends with the Germans retreating on Ruoff's orders until the following day.

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## **Chapter 23**

Novitsky wanders through the ruins of Polina's home and finds her grave. In her desk drawer, he discovers an unsent letter revealing that his entire family perished the day the Germans occupied Novorossiysk. The next morning, he returns to his unit, only to find that during the night, fresh Soviet reinforcements landed on Kunikov's beachhead, now called *Malaya Zemlya*. Although devastated, Novitsky demands to continue fighting for revenge. His comrades convince him to seek medical treatment, promising to assign him to an anti-tank unit upon his return.

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## **Chapter 24 (April 1943)**

During a major German counteroffensive on Malaya Zemlya, Novitsky sacrifices himself by throwing grenades under an enemy tank to save the last surviving member of his unit, Yaroslav Prozorov.

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## **Epilogue (July 1965)**

Andrey Prozorov, now a naval officer, visits his father Yaroslav, who works on the Solovetsky Islands. Over dinner, his father asks him to lay a wreath at Malaya Zemlya in Novorossiysk in memory of his fallen comrade, Andrey Novitsky.