

*Inspired by true historical events, **The Great Game** is a gripping narrative of personal ambitions and geopolitical interests in the very first fight for oil that played out on the shores of the Caspian Sea. The struggle to control Baku's oil pitted the richest families of the time against each other, offering a glimpse into the life of that period.*

THE GREAT GAME

Story of the First Oil War

By Togrul Bagirov

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THE GREAT GAME

THE STORY OF
THE FIRST OIL WAR

TOGRUL BAGIROV

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Chapter One

Baku, 1876

Emanuel Nobel had never meant to fall in love. In fact, as their ship oozed through the thick haze of oily black smoke from Baku's oil fields, love was the farthest thing from his mind. His mind was still in Stockholm, his heart also. The idea of drilling for oil had worked its way into his father's mind, and because of that Emanuel had been ripped from his friends and his home. Baku, his father had said, was the land of plenty, a wondrous world with endless potential. At this point, Emanuel was finding it very difficult to share his father's enthusiasm. Squinting through burning eyes, he longed for the green grass and snowy forests of home.

Ludvig stood beside his son, a gentle smile of anticipation lifting his beard as their ship travelled the Caspian Sea, coasting toward the crescent-shaped harbor of Baku. Emanuel did not recall having seen that smile back in Stockholm, where the air was clean and the trees were in full flower. His father's inexplicable happiness was both intriguing and infuriating. Crossing his arms over his chest, he lifted his chin and stubbornly refused to enjoy himself. This had not been his choice. For months he had argued about coming here, but Ludvig had only shaken his head.

“Since I am Grandfather's namesake, I deserve to know the details of his failures in Russia. What makes you think we can be successful here when he could not?”

Back in 1837, Emanuel's grandfather, Immanuel, traveled from Sweden to the promising empire of Russia. He had brought with him his wife, Andriette, and their four young sons, Robert, Ludvig, Alfred and Emil (who died when he was

only twenty-one, experimenting with nitroglycerin at his father's laboratory in Stockholm). The boys attended both the St. Petersburg Gymnasium and the University, learning that land's languages and customs as well as mathematics and chemistry. After graduation, they went back to Sweden, but eventually returned to St. Petersburg and worked at Nobel's Machine Factory as well as at the rifle factory in Izhevsk.

Ludvig squinted disapprovingly at him. "Your grandfather did not fail."

Cupping his hands around his eyes, Emanuel surveyed the horizon. "How can that be?" He was aware his tone hovered on the edge of belligerence, but it had been a long voyage. His temper was short. "He was bankrupt! You had to pay for him."

"I may have paid your grandfather's debts," Ludvig said levelly, "but he did not fail. You will learn in time. Your grandfather was a hard-working man. Czar Nicholas I believed wholeheartedly in his work. When Nicholas died, Czar Alexander II was determined to start fresh and make his own decisions." He shrugged. "No one is perfect. The fortunate thing, Emanuel, is that you will be wiser as a result of your grandfather's miscalculations."

"When he came home, he was poor."

One bushy black eyebrow lifted in censure. "He was never poor. Besides, that is not what I am talking about. Success is not always about money. The main thing is the work you put into it." He shook his head, forgiving Emanuel's brash comments. "But you are young. It is impossible for you to understand right now. As you mature, you will begin to understand the pleasure one can gain in the victory of enterprise and perseverance of duty, no matter the size of the bank account. Do you remember when you went to work as an apprentice in that factory two years ago? You were only one year older than I was when my father put me to work."

Emanuel barely refrained from rolling his eyes. "Of course I remember it. I worked like a slave there, every day from six in the morning until midnight."

“And you managed to do it for an entire year. Shall I tell you, son, that I was very impressed by your work ethic? And because of that difficult job, you learned early on about the satisfaction that can be derived from hard work.”

Emanuel was about to argue, but the ship was swallowed up by a thicker cloud of smoke, and father and son temporarily lost sight of each other. When they eventually emerged into the sunlight, Emanuel was bent over, coughing, his hands over his face.

“So hot!” he choked, laughing at himself.

Ludvig patted his long grey beard. “Good thing this did not light on fire. Ah, but look,” he said, holding his hands toward the harbor “Now *that* is a sight to behold!”

*

Emanuel stepped onto the docks of Baku, dumbfounded by the scene. Despite its oil-covered surface and the skunky odor that monopolized the air, the city was mesmerizing. Even the surface of the water was amazing, since every now and then it flared up, burning with actual fires. The air he breathed was both choked with smoke and alive with magic, filled with exotic spices and garbled conversations, blending Azerbaijani, Russian, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, French, English, German and various exotic dialects into a stew that bubbled over with clashing clothes and customs. And just as the variety of people mixed together without hesitation, so too did the mosques, synagogues, churches, and pagan temples. On Emanuel's right the market hummed; weathered, ancient faces sold equally to both rosy cheeked Russians and Mountain Jews while Azerbaijani and Turkish street peddlers strolled through the crowd. On his left, men were loading and unloading ships, moving food, animals, and clothing he had never seen before.

The chaos was invigorating, and as they passed through the ancient walls of Baku, moving further into the city, he felt the exhaustion—and the frustration—from the journey fall off his shoulders. He stepped quickly alongside his father, careful with his footing. The serpentine cobblestone streets were slick

with oil, and the stuff became increasingly thick with every step closer to the oil fields. It seemed a feat of great prowess to be able to walk so simply, but he was determined he would master it eventually.

Once he had gotten past his initial bewilderment and the subsequent rush of excitement, he began to notice something else. Hidden behind the colors, quiet beneath the noise, a separate reality sat hunched in the corners while others begged in the street. Desperate eyes blinked in grimy faces, and on some the desperation had melted into an even darker shade of hopelessness. The suffering here was greater than the commerce.

A distant rumble trembled under their feet, distracting Emanuel. No one else seemed to have noticed the noise. Emanuel glanced at his father, wondering if he could have imagined it.

“Just a geyser,” Ludvig informed him.

“And that? What is *that*?”

Three hundred yards away, a tower of flames shot into the sky, untamed.

“The Eternal Fires of Zoroaster. Beautiful, is it not?”

“Is it...man-made?”

“No, no. The Fire Temple has burned for three thousand years, maybe longer. That's why they called this land, Azerbaijan, as the Land of Eternal Fire. Look over there. You can see the temple past Balakhani, which is an oil-rich suburb of Baku.”

Intrigued, Emanuel followed his father through the gate. The simple, yet impressive architecture of the altar in the center of the courtyard caught his eye, and they wandered closer to watch the Eternal Fires burning within. The ancient walls were broken up by small cells created for pilgrims and monks, and their stone faces were decorated by timeworn inscriptions in Sanskrit and Gurmukhi.

“This temple,” his father explained, “was where many people practiced Zoroastrianism, one of the first religions to worship only one god. The mysteries of their god were

represented in what they saw as sacred fires, and people from all over the world came to this land to bow before the flames. They believed the fire purified the soul.”

“No wonder they came here,” Emanuel said, staring at the flames. “It only makes sense that something this magical would be deemed mystical as well.”

His father gestured toward the street, and they walked gingerly along the cobblestones, watching the activity. Ludvig squinted ahead at a heavysset, bearded man lumbering in their direction.

“Robert?” Ludvig said.

The man stared at them, confused, then his arms flew apart. “Ludvig! I am so happy to see you! And who is this?”

“Ah, it has been a long time since you’ve seen my son, Emanuel,” Ludvig replied, stepping back. “Emanuel, this is your Uncle Robert.”

Fatigue melted temporarily from the older man’s eyes. “Ah, Emanuel! I do not believe I’ve seen you since you began to walk! Time flies so fast... my best years were spent in this ‘land of fire’... So, are you ready to take on a new world here in Baku with me?”

“Yes, sir. I am excited to be here.”

“Excellent!” Robert put one arm around each man’s shoulder. “Let us go, then. I will introduce you to the people of Baku.” He scowled at a laborer who had collided inadvertently with Ludvig then kept going. “The first lesson is to be cautious. They’re a crafty bunch, and they often regard foreigners as fools rather than friends. We must not allow them to be right!”

Ludvig chuckled. “That is nothing new, is it? Surely that goes for most of the world.”

“Always a contrarian your father, Emanuel. Since we were kids, Ludvig had to express at least some opposition to me.”

The brothers were similar, of course, but Robert seemed more animated while mildly resentful of constant encroachments and attempts of domination from his brothers. His eyes were forever moving, scanning the crowds.

In the back of his mind, Emanuel heard the echo of his grandfather's words, passed down by his father when he had been in a nostalgic mood: *Robert is predisposed to adventures. Ludvig is a genius. Alfred is a workaholic.*

Robert led them through the crowd and into streets which increasingly blackened both in air quality and on the ground. Despite the grime, Emanuel was already relishing this new city. For him, the colors of the people shone through all the filth.

"There is much for you here, Emanuel," Robert said. "And not all will be foreign to you. A lot is influenced by local aristocrats and Europeans."

An Azerbaijani woman strolled by with a couple of friends, their skirts a rainbow of color. She smiled shyly at Emanuel, observing him through a pair of dazzling green eyes, and he was captivated by her exotic beauty.

"I can hardly wait to learn about the customs here," he replied.

"When the work is done," Ludvig said, noting his son's gaze. "When the work is done. Robert will walk us through our oil claim before we settle in at home. We must always remember that no matter how exciting everything else might appear, the oil claim is why we are here."

Emanuel's jaw clenched. He was tired of being treated like a child. After all, he was seventeen, old enough to experience the world like any other young person, and that included laughing, dating, going to parties. One of these days, he promised himself, he would live life the way he wanted.

"This part of Baku is called Black City," Robert informed them. "Oil is so prevalent that everyone has decided to drill wherever there's space, including in their yards. Some of the houses have become refineries of sorts, and the oil turns everything black."

"So we've noticed."

"You'll need separate clothes that you can wear outside," his uncle continued, "and those have to stay outside of the house. It doesn't matter where you go out here, your clothes—"

especially your shoes and trousers—will be soaked in the stuff.”

The earth rumbled again, closer this time, shifting Emanuel's mind back to the world around him. He tried to keep his expression neutral, as if the sensation did not send a thrill through him. So much was happening all around, but the real story was beneath their feet.

Robert rubbed his hands together. “You must see this.”

He led them to the right, down another street, and Emanuel stopped dead at the sight of his first geyser. A velvet black fountain of oil spewed twenty feet above the top of the derrick, and men scurried at its base.

“That one started yesterday,” Robert told them.

Emanuel took another step forward, wanting to be closer, but he scampered back when a sturdy, multi-colored cart rattled into the street towards them. Its panicking horse galloped in an arc, following the path of a lost wheel, and its ridiculously tall load of barrels wobbled precariously. When the horse lurched forward again, the barrels tipped onto the street, soaking onlookers from the ankles down. Ludvig scowled, but Emanuel laughed, delighted by the novelty of the moment.

The tense lines of his father's expression eventually relaxed, but he was not amused. “Soon we'll harness our own geyser. Then your energy will be put to better use.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

He was in Taghiyev's dining room the following week, enjoying a light meal with his friend by the roaring fireplace. It was a welcome oasis from the biting chill of January 1905. For this moment in time he allowed himself to feel safe and content.

Julie's warning had not fallen on deaf ears. Despite Emanuel's dislike of both Alfonso Rothschild and Jules Aron, he set up a meeting. He had proposed a deal, suggesting they form a kind of partnership, giving them power against Rockefeller. Rothschild was eager to join him, and he immediately began using his own expertise to advance their oil business and create its own international exploration and production company.

As far as the continuing violence in Baku, Emanuel still felt relatively safe in comparison to those oil barons whose workers had been underpaid, overworked, and treated as nothing less than slave labor over the years. They had survived a few attacks, but on the whole they were faring rather well. Taghiyev, too, had lost some of his derricks, but his workers had done what they could to protect the fields. The BraNobel employees—the number had grown to over 12,000 by this point—did not suffer at all. Still, Emanuel went to the derricks more often, checking for vandalism, ensuring his men were happy.

Leyla burst into the room, her face streaked with tears, and both men jumped to their feet.

“My darling daughter! What is the matter? What has happened?”

Her eyes were red, swollen from too many tears. Emanuel had never witnessed Leyla in such a state of distress, and the

impact of seeing her in pain roused a physical ache in Emanuel's chest.

"Papa! It is all so terrible," she managed through her sobs. "I hardly know how to tell you what I've just learned."

"Where is your mother? Is she all right? Your brothers and sisters?"

"All of us are fine, Papa, but—"

"Then what is it?"

She was shaking badly, from her trembling fingers to the dark hair which had fallen from its restraints and now fluttered down her back like a fallen flag. Her hands went to her face, and she curled her nails against her brow in an effort to control her emotions. When she was ready, she dropped her hands and faced the men.

"It happened in St. Petersburg." Her brow creased with renewed grief; she held her breath, fighting back sobs. "At the Winter Palace early this morning. There was a ... a demonstration—a *peaceful* demonstration of workers and their families. Thousands and thousands of people went. They ... they had a petition for the Czar, asking him to help with their pleas for better working conditions, but he was not there. He had gone away the day before."

"Sit," Emanuel insisted, taking her arm and guiding her to a couch. "You are trembling."

"No, I—"

"We can listen better if we know you are comfortable. Please, Leyla. Sit."

She relented, sinking onto the soft cushion then seeming to shrink into herself. Taghiyev and Emanuel sat on either side of her, two pillars of strength on which she needed to rely.

Taghiyev called to his house servant, waiting expectantly in the hallway. "Tea!" He turned back to his daughter, his hand on hers. "Tell us now. We are listening."

Her eyes were liquid black and pleading for him to make some kind of sense out of what she had learned. "Papa, they came to the Czar for his help, singing and praying and hoping

he would put an end to their suffering. They did not know he was not at home. I am not sure he would have seen them even had he been there, but he ...”

She seemed to lose focus for a moment, then she looked at Emanuel and a tear trickled down the side of her face, breaking his heart all over again. If only he could wipe it from her cheek, draw her close, comfort her... With reluctance he glanced over her shoulder at her father, his best friend in the world, and reminded himself that could never happen.

“They said that at first the demonstrators put all the women and children in the front,” she told him, “wanting everyone to see that these were more than unhappy workers. These were *families*. But then the men came to the front. I do not know why. Maybe the children were too slow.” She swallowed hard. “None of them knew that ten thousand of the military had already assembled at the Winter Palace, concerned there might be a protest in the Czar's absence.”

Emanuel's stomach rolled, thinking ahead.

“They ... they started to shoot because the people just kept coming. Innocent men were being shot! Then—” Her expression twisted, and blood roared to her cheeks as she imagined the tragedy again. “The guards used their sabers! It did not matter who they ran into, they kept marching. Oh, Papa!” she sobbed. “They t-trampled children!”

The men stared at her, unable to speak. She swallowed then took a deep breath and started up again. “There is more. Later, in the afternoon, families were walking on the Nevsky Prospekt, unaware of what was going on. It is Sunday, after all. Families go for walks. There is no law against going for a walk with your family! I do not know why, but the guards came after them as well!” She looked at Emanuel through bloodshot eyes. “So many people are dead! How can this have happened, Mr Nobel? How can it be real?”

He shook his head slowly, unable to think. Maybe she saw the agony in his eyes, or maybe she saw the longing to hold her, to comfort her. For whatever reason, she flung herself into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably. His nose brushed her

hair, and he breathed in. Despite her fear, her scent was balm to his soul.

He had dreamed of this moment, when she finally turned to him and sought his protection, but he could never have imagined it would be prompted by such terrible circumstances. He glanced helplessly at her father, but Taghiyev's expression showed nothing but heartbreak for his daughter, and for the victims of this nightmare. He frowned at Emanuel as if to ask if he would mind holding Leyla for a moment, then he strode quietly from the room. Emanuel imagined he was looking for a telephone to confirm the story.

"Shh, Leyla," he whispered, daring himself to run his hand over the tangles of her hair. He told himself it was an attempt to soothe her, but all the while adrenaline pumped through his veins. "You are safe."

She pulled back, blinking at him. "But they are not! Oh Emanuel! Thousands of people are dead!"

Emanuel. How could he think clearly when she spoke his Christian name out loud with such passion, looked in his eyes with so much trust? His hand went to her cheek, his thumb brushed away a tear that was already getting lost on her wet skin.

"This is a grave, unforgivable thing, Leyla," he said softly. "The world will rise up against the Czar for this."

"He was not even there," she whimpered.

"And that is terrible also. For he will be blamed."

He wanted to hold her there forever, look into those eyes and give her anything she could ever desire, but everything about it was wrong. *This is Zeynalabdin Taghiyev's cherished daughter!* He moved his hand away, prepared to relinquish this precious closeness, but she moved with him again, sheltering her face in his chest, sobbing within the safety of his arms. He closed his eyes, breathed in the awful beauty of the moment, loving her and hating himself at the same time.

*

Two days later Elbek announced that Julie Gold was at his door. She met with him in one of the sitting rooms, wearing a black gown which lacked her customary flair. She was as beautiful as ever, but her eyes looked weary.

“What an unexpected surprise,” he said, wondering at the tension in her shoulders.

“I am sorry I did not call first. I ... I needed to speak with you.”

“Of course. Please. Have a seat. What can I get you to drink? I am aware of your particular fondness for champagne ...” he suggested, raising an eyebrow.

“If only I could, Emanuel.” She sighed heavily. “Coffee, please.”

Elbek turned toward the corridor then shut the door quietly behind him, giving them privacy as Emanuel seated himself across from her.

“What is it?” Icicles of concern crawled through his gut. “How can I help?”

“Last Sunday,” she said, then she stopped and looked down at her hands.

“A terrible, terrible day for Russia.”

Her gaze went to him, and he saw the grief in her eyes. “For the world,” she agreed. “And for everyone in it, including you and me. The Czar's official reports declared ninety-six had died, with three hundred and thirty-three injured. Those in opposition claim more than four thousand died. The city has been taken over by looting and violence.”

He had read all the reports, every one of them worse than the last. “The newspaper quoted Nicholas as calling the day 'painful and sad'.” He shook his head. “Not enough. Not nearly enough.”

“The Czar will fall as a result of this tragedy,” she agreed, “for the people will revolt. How can they not? These people were not even involved in the recent uprisings. They were simply bringing a petition to the Czar, who should have represented them as he always claimed to do. Nicholas was their hope, and—whether or not it was his fault—his own

guards slaughtered them. Even the peasants have turned against him now.”

“I agree. The violence is only getting worse. This unimaginable flame has lit the tinder of a true revolution. He is just another part of the uncaring government to them.”

“So what will you do, Emanuel? The oil fields of Baku are burning, Lenin's revolutionaries are demanding the end of capitalism ...”

“I will do what I have always done. I will support my workers, do whatever I can to help them.”

Looking exasperated, she shook her head. “Emanuel, when will you listen to me? The workers will be fine. No one wants to run *them* out. It is you and people like you who are in danger.”

He knew that, and yet his mind refused to consider his own personal safety. The most important thing was that BraNobel survive this dark period. He and his father had laid down a strong foundation, and while there would undoubtedly be some damage done, he needed to know it would all eventually work out.

“I will stay until I can stay no longer. I will not leave my people without a leader. I am responsible for them.”

Her gaze went to the dancing flames in the fireplace. “I am afraid for you,” she said softly.

“Do not be.” She sat far enough away that he could not reach her, and he was sorry for that. He wanted to be able to offer comfort and reassurance, though it would be for both of them. “I am a tricky fellow. Difficult to catch.”

When she looked back, the sadness had hardened to something resembling regret. “That is very true. You know, I once thought I had caught you,” she mused, then her body seemed to sag, as she dropped her defenses “It ended up that I was caught instead. I have grown surprisingly fond of you, Emanuel.”

He said nothing, only nodded with acknowledgement. What they had between them was not love, yet they cared deeply for one another on another level.

“But you never felt as I did,” she said.

He frowned, startled by the implication. “How can you say that?”

“I only wish ...”

Emanuel could not pull his gaze from the pain in her eyes. “Tell me, Julie.”

“I wish you loved me as you love her,” she whispered.

He stared at her, mute. How could she know?

“A woman knows,” she replied, reading his expression. “I do not know who she is, but I know she exists.” She looked back toward the fireplace, sitting straight again. “Emanuel, the British ambassador has suggested His Majesty's subjects return to Great Britain. I am considering his advice. I have seen too much here, and I have put myself in the middle of too many dangerous situations of late. I no longer feel safe.”

“I can keep you safe.”

Her gaze was compassionate. “You, of all people, cannot keep me safe.” She hesitated, considering, then let out a breath. “Emanuel, I have lived here long enough to have an attachment to this place and its people, but my job demands that I play more than one card at a time. I have told you about Ezhov,” she said, and he cringed when she shrugged off her coat, revealing even darker, more invasive bruising. “He requires me to turn my back on this country—on you—and I will not do that. That puts me in a dangerous position. He was only playing rough before; now he is serious. He has thrown some pretty serious threats on the table, and soon he will learn that I have double crossed him all along,” she said flatly. “If I am not extremely careful, he will kill me, and he will enjoy doing it. I know that.”

She sighed, and one corner of her mouth drew up wryly. “Mark Twain once said that 'If you tell the truth, you do not have to remember anything.' I have told far too many lies, Emanuel, and the truths have tangled into some very sticky webs.”

He saw the fear in her eyes, the flush that darkened her neck as she mentioned the lies, and it frightened him as well.

He did not like that she put herself in such danger, and yet it was her love for adventure that had first drawn him to her—that and her physical charms, of course.

She swallowed, staring intently at him. “You need to understand something, Emanuel. These people will not stop until they have killed you and ruined everything you have built. Rockefeller envies you to the point that he will do anything, spend anything to destroy you. The revolutionaries despise anyone with money, and their power is growing exponentially. Your time here is running out.”

Elbek arrived with the coffee, and she slipped modestly back into her coat. As the butler left, Emanuel battled to control his emotions. Her bruises had shocked and nauseated him as had the images which had pushed in beside them, suggesting how she had been abused. Her direct declaration that all of their lives were imperiled was chilling.

She got to her feet and Emanuel rose with her, his heart heavy.

“I must go now, and I am not sure when I will see you again.” She hesitated. “But I leave you with a parting gift. Rothschild and Samuel have put away their differences. They plan to merge Royal Dutch with Shell.”

He had known it was only a matter of time before that happened. In fact, the timing could not be better.

“It is only right that I give you a gift in return,” he said. “One you can bring back to England with you.”

The corners of her lips curled up. “Oh?”

“How much would it assuage London's concerns over who shall control Russian oil if I tell you that I will be merging with them as well?”

Her eyes were wide. “That will change the oil markets entirely.”

“It will indeed,” he replied, chuckling. “With that alliance, we will control over seventy percent of the Russian kerosene market—fifty percent of the global market.”

She swallowed. “Emanuel, while I am happy for your success, the wealthier you become, the more danger you are

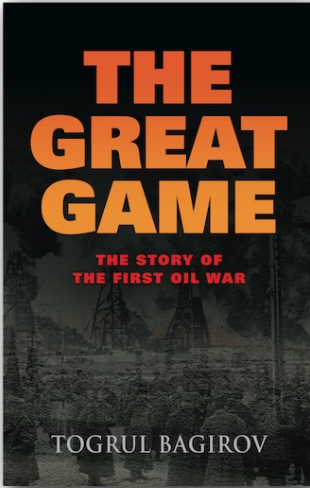
in. James will be furious at me for telling you, but Ezhov has been making demands of him recently, insisting on support for Stalin. He wants him freed from prison. He also wants money and arms for when Stalin is released—even specified that the weapons should be modern and unused, either German or British. Artillery. In addition, he requested information on Polish war zones.”

This was a new concern indeed. “This is far beyond the ongoing violence. He is planning a war.”

“And just so you know, Stalin will soon be walking the streets again.”

He gave her a sharp glance, but she did not flinch. By including Colonel Ray in his demands, he was hoping to get the British involved. Certainly Ezhov was acting on his own, but he was also working for Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin. What was he up to now?

She lifted onto her toes and gave him a kiss. “*Ad Victorum Ire Spolia*,” she whispered into his ear. To the victor go the spoils. As she pulled away, her hand stroked the dark beard on his cheek. “Do not forget, there are always those willing to cheat and lie so they can claim the win. Watch all the players carefully, Emanuel. Even when you think you have your eye on the king, remember it is the pawns who usually run the show.”



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