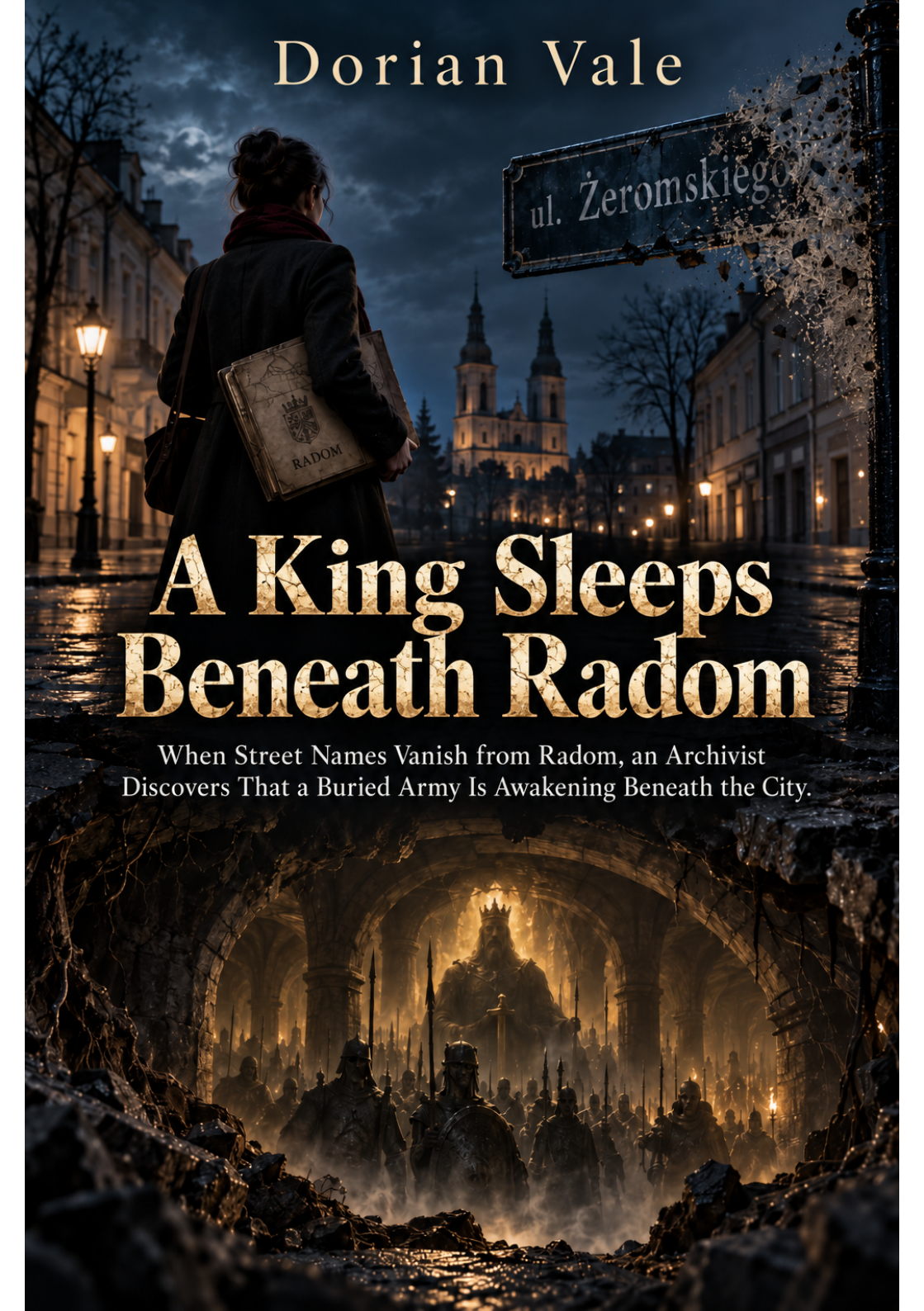




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ul. Żeromskiego

A King Sleeps Beneath Radom

When Street Names Vanish from Radom, an Archivist
Discovers That a Buried Army Is Awakening Beneath the City.

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FANTASY

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INTRO

The first name disappeared on Tuesday, a few minutes after three in the morning.

Marta Wolska knew because, at that exact moment, she had her finger resting on it.

She was alone in the reading room of the municipal archives, bent over a volume bound in cracked dark-brown leather. Normally, she did not work at this hour. Normally, people did not sit at three in the morning comparing a 1934 street register with a map drawn before the war. But then again, renovations in a storage room did not normally uncover a bricked-up cabinet containing documents that appeared in no inventory.

The book lying in front of Marta bore an ordinary title: Register of Changes to Street Names in the City of Radom.

The title was the only ordinary thing she had found in it.

The paper varied in thickness. Some pages had been written in ink, others in pencil, and several in something brown that Marta preferred not to identify before laboratory testing. The oldest entries did not match the binding. Someone had stitched together documents from different periods and added new pages over the course of decades.

The same sentence kept appearing in the margins.

Do not take the roads' names away.

At first Marta assumed it was a note left by one of the old clerks. Then she noticed that the handwriting changed. The sentence had been copied again every few dozen pages, sometimes in careful calligraphy, sometimes in a nervous hand, sometimes in capital letters.

Do not take the roads' names away.

She moved her finger lower.

Wałowa.

Reja.

Grodzka.

Żeromskiego.

Beside each name were dates, former designations, references to municipal resolutions, and short comments. Some were factual. Others became increasingly peculiar.

Beside one entry, someone had written: preserve three copies.

Beside another: say the name aloud before changing the signs.

And beside a third, written in faded ink: if it disappears on its own, do not restore it without a witness.

Marta sighed and reached for her phone. She took a photograph of the page.

The screen flashed.

In the photograph, where the last street name should have been, there was only a blank line.

She frowned.

She looked back at the book.

The name was still there.

Ulica Bernardyńska.

She took another photograph.

A blank line.

- Great - she muttered. - The archives are haunted by autofocus problems.

She enlarged the image. The dates on either side of the entry were sharp. So was the item number. Only the name was missing.

Then the letters beneath her finger began to fade.

Marta froze.

They did not vanish all at once. First the black outline of the B grew thin. Then the ink yellowed, as though it had aged a century in a matter of seconds. One letter after another dissolved into the paper. Marta jerked her hand back so sharply that she knocked over her mug of cold coffee.

A moment later, nothing remained but a clean line.

The entry number beside it was still there.

Marta stared at the empty space for several long seconds. Her heart was beating too fast, but one part of her mind - the most stubborn, professional part - was already searching for an explanation. A chemical reaction. Moisture. Disappearing ink. The lamp. Some kind of damage to the paper that she had failed to notice before.

Her phone vibrated on the table.

A notification from the map app informed her that her route home had been updated.

Marta opened the map automatically.

Ulica Bernardyńska had no name.

The road itself still existed. The buildings were where they belonged. The church, intersections, side streets - everything looked normal. Only a gray strip of roadway ran across the screen without a label.

She typed the name into the search box.

No results.

She tried again.

Bernardyńska Radom.

No results.

Marta stood up.

The chair scraped across the floor. The sound seemed unnaturally loud, and immediately afterward she heard something else.

Clack.

She froze.

Clack.

It was not coming from the corridor or the storage rooms.

It came from beneath the floor.

The archives occupied the ground floor and basement of an old building, but the reading room stood above the technical rooms. Marta knew the noises the building made. Pipes cracked. Radiators hissed. The old freight elevator groaned as though every day it regretted still being operational.

This sound was different.

Clack.

A pause.

Clack.

A pause.

Like a hard sole striking stone.

Marta walked to the door and looked into the corridor. Emergency lights cast a greenish glow over the walls. Everything was empty.

Behind her, a page turned.

She spun around.

The book was open to a different page.

She had not seen the pages move. The window was closed. The ventilation system had not worked in years.

In the center of the right-hand page was a map.

Not the Radom she knew.

She recognized the arrangement of several streets and the outline of the Market Square, but beneath them, drawn in much finer lines, stretched a second network of roads. They ran beneath buildings, crossed modern city blocks, and descended toward a place marked by a black circle.

Around it, someone had drawn hundreds of tiny rectangles arranged in even rows.

Marta leaned closer.

Beside each rectangle was a name.

Not a surname. Not a number.

A first name.

Dobrogost.

Mścibor.

Pakoław.

Witosz.

Hundreds of names written so small that they almost merged into a gray blur.

At the top of the map, a single line ran directly toward the place where Bernardyńska should have been.

The first surname - or perhaps first name - written along that line had been crossed out.

Clack.

This time the sound was louder.

Then came a second.

A third.

A fourth.

Not one pair of feet.

Many.

Marta backed away from the table.

Coffee dripped from the overturned mug onto the floor.
One drop landed on the edge of the map.

The ink spread.

Beneath the black circle, words appeared that had not
been there a moment before.

THE KING SLEEPS AS LONG AS THE CITY REMEMBERS.

A chill crept across the back of Marta's neck.

Below it, more words began to appear. Slowly, letter by
letter, as though an invisible pen were writing across the
page.

THE FIRST ROAD HAS LOST ITS NAME.

The clacking beneath the floor stopped all at once.

Silence fell.

Marta stared at the book.

After several seconds, one final sentence appeared.

THE FIRST SOLDIER HAS RISEN.

Somewhere deep beneath Radom, metal ground against stone.

And then someone knocked upward against the stone floor.

Three times.

Chapter 1 - The Nameless Street

At seven fourteen, Marta sat on the steps outside the archives with a plastic cup of coffee she had no intention of drinking and watched people heading to work as though the night that had just ended belonged to a different city.

Radom was waking normally. A bus stopped at the intersection. A man in a navy jacket walked a dog that stubbornly sniffed the base of a lamppost. A bread delivery driver parked with his hazard lights on. Two schoolgirls walked with phones in their hands, never looking up even when one of them nearly stepped in front of a bicycle.

Nothing was marching underground.

No paving slabs were lifting under the pressure of hundreds of feet. No hands were reaching out of drains. No tombs had opened, tombs which, according to every reasonable source of knowledge, had never existed here in the first place.

Marta almost managed to believe she had fallen asleep over the book.

Almost.

The photograph of the page was still on her phone, showing a blank line where Ulica Bernardyńska had been.

She opened the map app for the twelfth time.

The road existed.

The name did not.

She tried searching for the address of one of the buildings she knew. She typed the street name manually. For a