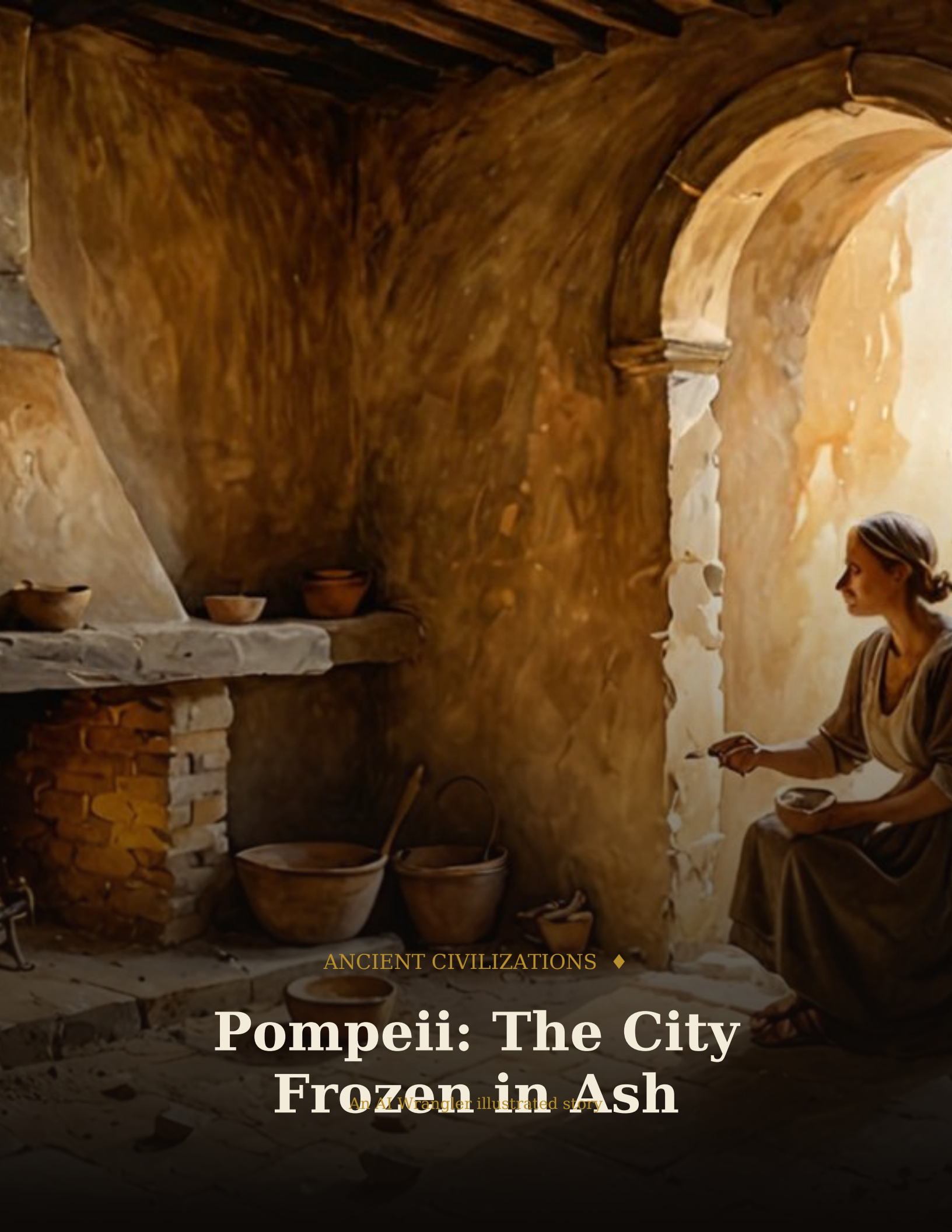




ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS ♦

Pompeii: The City Frozen in Ash

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Draw close to the fire, friends, for tonight we visit a city where, unlike our drowned Atlantis, we know exactly what happened, almost to the hour, because a mountain buried it so suddenly and so completely that it froze an entire world in place, and we can walk its streets to this very day. This is Pompeii, Carol, the Roman town that died in an afternoon, and became, by that very death, the most perfectly preserved window into the ancient world we possess.



CAROL

A whole city frozen in a single afternoon. Marty, that is a haunting thought, that a disaster could be so complete it becomes a kind of gift to the future. Set the scene for me. What was Pompeii before the end?



MARTY

It was an ordinary, thriving, prosperous Roman town, Carol, near the bay of Naples in what is now Italy, nearly two thousand years ago, in the year seventy-nine. Some twenty thousand people lived there, going about lives that would be strangely familiar to us. There were bakeries with the bread still rising, taverns and fine houses with beautiful painted walls, a bustling forum, public baths, an arena for the games, shops, brothels, and graffiti scratched everywhere on the walls, Carol, lovers' names, election slogans, rude jokes, the ordinary chatter of ordinary people. And above it all rose a great green mountain called Vesuvius, which the people thought was simply a mountain, for it had not stirred in living memory. They did not even have a word for volcano as we mean it.



CAROL

They did not know it was a volcano at all. Oh, Marty, they were living in the shadow of the thing that would kill them and did not even know what it was. What happened on that day?



MARTY

On an autumn day, Carol, Vesuvius woke, and it woke with unimaginable violence. It blew a colossal column of ash and rock and burning gas miles into the sky, a churning black pillar that spread out at the top like a monstrous pine tree, and this is not a guess, Carol, for we have an actual eyewitness account. A young Roman named Pliny watched it from across the bay and wrote it all down in letters that survive to this day, the cloud, the darkness, the panic, the earthquakes, the sea drawing back. His own uncle, a famous scholar and admiral, sailed toward the disaster to help and to see, and was killed by the fumes on the shore. We are reading, Carol, the words of a terrified young man watching a city die.



CAROL

An actual letter from someone who watched it happen, across all those centuries. Marty, that collapses the distance, doesn't it, it makes it real and now. What was it like for the people in the city itself?



MARTY

It was a slow horror and then a sudden one, Carol. For hours the ash and pumice rained down upon Pompeii, piling up in the streets, collapsing roofs, and many people fled in that time and escaped, thank heaven. But many stayed, sheltering in their homes, hoping to wait it out, or unable to leave the sick and the old. And then, in the darkest hours, the great column collapsed, and down the mountain came the thing that truly killed them, what we now call a pyroclastic surge, an avalanche of superheated gas and ash moving faster than a person can run and hot enough to kill in an instant. It swept over Herculaneum first, the town nearest the mountain, and then over Pompeii, and everyone who remained died where they stood, in a moment.



CAROL

Everyone left, gone in a single moment, and then buried. Marty, and there they stayed, all those centuries, under the ash?



MARTY

There they stayed, Carol, sealed under many feet of ash, forgotten so utterly that in time people scarcely remembered a city had ever been there at all. And that seal is what made the miracle. When it was rediscovered and slowly dug out, they found not a ruin but a moment, preserved. Loaves of bread still in the ovens. Wine jars on the counters. Frescoes bright on the walls. Political posters on the buildings. The whole ordinary business of a Roman day, stopped mid-sentence and kept for us. But the most haunting discovery of all, Carol, came from an ingenious idea of one of the excavators.



CAROL

I am almost afraid to ask, Marty. What did he find?

MARTY

He noticed, Carol, that here and there in the hardened ash there were empty hollows, and he understood what they were. The bodies of the dead had long ago decayed away, but the ash had set hard around them first, holding the exact shape of each person in their final moment, like a mold. So he had liquid plaster poured carefully into these hollows, and let it harden, and then dug away the ash, and out came the people of Pompeii themselves, at the very instant of their deaths. A man lying down with his face covered. A family huddled together. A person shielding another. A dog, Carol, still chained, twisted in its last struggle. Not skeletons, but shapes, postures, the very gestures of their last living second, caught forever.

CAROL

The shape of their last moment, poured back into the world. Oh, Marty, that undoes me completely, the family holding each other, the poor chained dog. It is unbearably intimate, to see exactly how each of them met the end.

MARTY

It is the most intimate archaeology on earth, Carol, and it is why Pompeii matters as no ruin of kings and battles ever could. We have the tombs and temples of many ancient peoples, but they show us how the great and powerful wished to be remembered. Pompeii shows us the opposite. It shows us the ordinary, the unposed, the true, a whole living town caught exactly as it was on a Tuesday, with the bread in the oven and the crude joke on the wall and the mother reaching for her child. It is the ancient world not as it wanted to be seen, but as it actually, humanly, was.

CAROL

The one place where we see them not as they wished, but as they truly were. Marty, that is a rare and precious thing. What is the meaning you take from the city frozen in ash?

MARTY

This, Carol. We tend to think of the ancient people as figures of stone and legend, distant and unlike us, but Pompeii will not let us. Those were people planning their evenings, arguing about elections, baking bread, loving their dogs, with no idea that the green mountain they had always known was about to end everything in an afternoon. They are us, Carol, exactly us, and the ash froze it so we could not look away. The lesson of Pompeii is not really about volcanoes. It is that the ordinary day, the one you are living right now with the bread in the oven, is the whole of a life, and it is more precious and more fragile than the people living it can ever quite believe. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the family in the ash holding one another, and the loaves still waiting in the oven for a supper that never came. Cherish the ordinary Tuesday, friends, for it is everything. Come back to the fire.