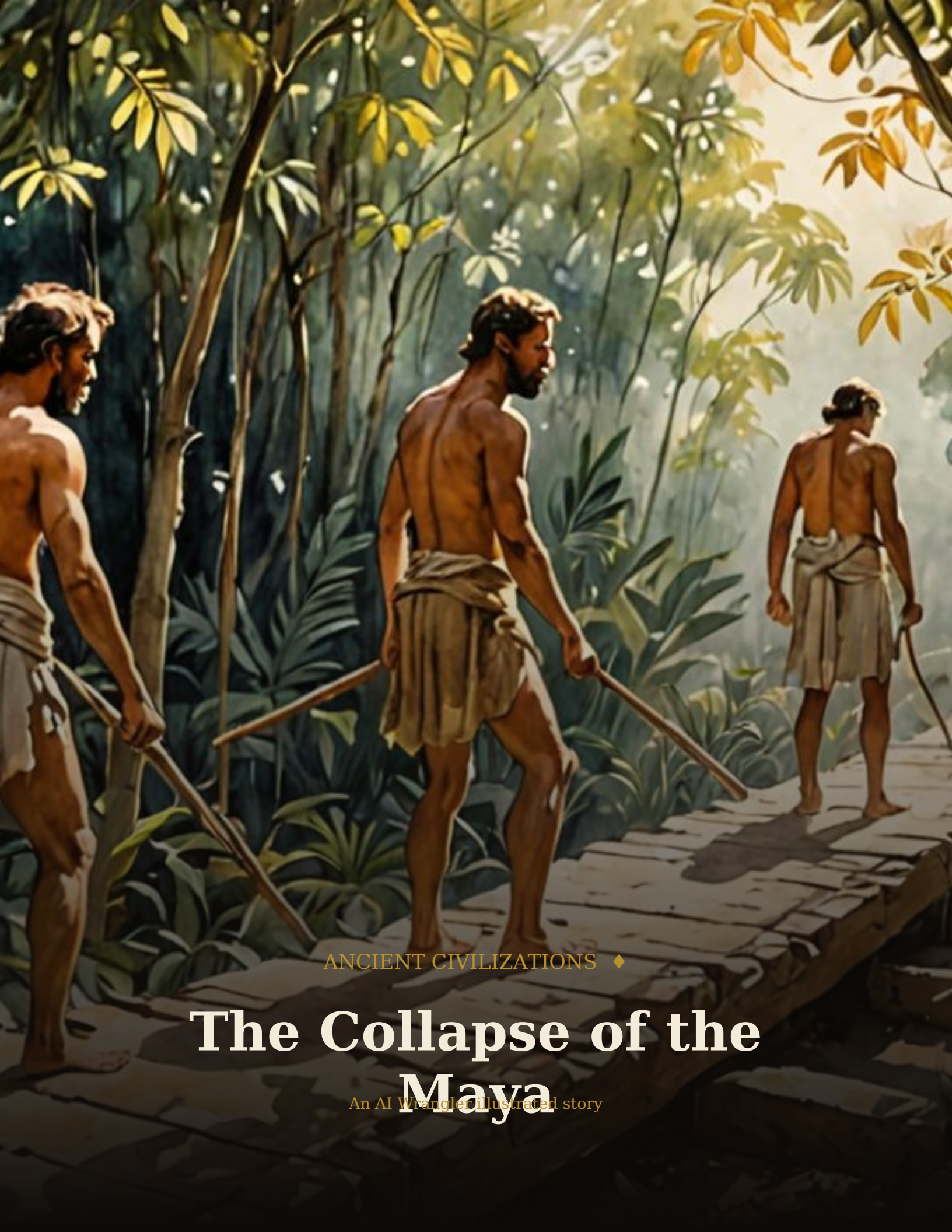




ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS ♦

The Collapse of the Maya

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Gather close, friends, for tonight we go into the green heat of the Central American jungle, where travelers once stumbled upon something that stopped their hearts, great stone cities, towering pyramids and palaces and plazas, strangled by the forest and utterly empty, abandoned so long ago the jungle had swallowed them whole. Who built them, and where did the builders go? This is the collapse of the Maya, Carol, and it is one of the great mysteries of the ancient world.



CAROL

Whole cities lost in the jungle, and the builders simply gone. Marty, I have seen the photographs of those pyramids wrapped in vines, and they give me chills. But

first, let me ask, who were the Maya? I fear I know only the mystery and not the people.



MARTY

Then let us do them justice first, Carol, because they were magnificent, and this is important. The Maya were not some crude lost tribe. They built one of the most brilliant civilizations of the ancient world, right there in the jungles of what is now Mexico and Guatemala and Central America. They raised those soaring pyramids without metal tools or wheels or beasts of burden. They were dazzling astronomers who tracked the stars and the planets with breathtaking accuracy. They created a true written language, one of the few ever invented from scratch, and covered their monuments in it. And they devised a calendar so precise and so vast it reached across thousands of years. At their height, Carol, in what we call the Classic period, they were as advanced as any people on earth.



CAROL

Astronomers and writers and mathematicians, building mountains of stone by hand. Marty, that makes the emptiness so much more haunting. A crude people vanishing is one thing. But a brilliant one? So what happened to them?



MARTY

That is the great question, Carol, and I must first clear away a common mistake, because it matters. People say the Maya vanished, and that is not true. The Maya did not vanish. There are millions of Maya people alive today, in those same lands, speaking Maya languages, keeping Maya traditions. They are very much here. What collapsed, Carol, what truly and mysteriously fell, was the great Classic civilization of the southern cities, the golden age of the pyramids and the god-kings. Over the span of a century or so, more than a thousand years ago, one after another of those splendid southern cities was abandoned, the monuments stopped being built, the kings' line went silent, and the jungle moved in. The people endured. Their grand civilization fell.



CAROL

So it was the golden age that died, not the people. Marty, that is an important difference, and a more painful one, somehow, a civilization losing its own height. Do we know why?



MARTY

We do not know for certain, Carol, but unlike Atlantis, here we have real clues, and the picture that is emerging is a sobering one, because it was likely not one disaster but several, tangled together, each making the others worse. And the thread that runs through the newest evidence, Carol, is drought. Scientists studying the ancient climate, reading it in the mud of lakebeds and the stone of caves, have found signs of a series of severe, prolonged droughts falling upon the Maya lands in exactly the centuries when the cities were failing. And a great civilization packed into a jungle, feeding huge populations from the thin soil, is terribly vulnerable when the rains do not come.



CAROL

Drought, in a crowded land that depended on the rain. Marty, I can feel the walls closing in on them. But surely a clever people would find a way through a dry spell?



MARTY

A dry spell, perhaps, Carol, but not decades of them, and not with all the other pressures piling on at once. For the Maya cities had grown enormous, straining the land, cutting the forests, wearing out the soil to feed all those mouths. And the cities were not one peaceful kingdom but many rival city-states, proud and competitive, and in the later years the evidence shows warfare growing more frequent and more bitter, kings fighting kings for shrinking resources. Now put it together, Carol. Too many people, tired land, the rains failing year after year, and neighbor turning on neighbor over what little was left. Any one of these a people might survive. All of them at once, feeding on each other, could bring down a world.



CAROL

Everything failing together, each thing worsening the next. Marty, that is not a single villain like a volcano, it is a whole system coming apart. What would it have actually looked like, the falling?

MARTY

Slow, and then complete, Carol. Not a single dramatic night but a long unraveling. Faith in the god-kings, whose great promise was to keep the rains coming and the world in order, would have crumbled as the rains kept failing and the order kept breaking, for what good is a divine ruler who cannot feed you? The great building projects stopped. People began to drift away from the failing cities in search of food and water and safety, out into the countryside and toward other regions. And one by one the splendid capitals emptied, their plazas silent, their pyramids beginning their long sleep under the vines, until the jungle took back what the Maya had wrested from it, and the travelers of later centuries found only the green-choked ghosts of a golden age.

CAROL

The people drifting away, city by city, until only the jungle was left. Marty, it is so quiet an ending for so grand a thing. And you said this speaks to us. How so?

MARTY

This is the meaning I take from the Maya, Carol, and it is the one that keeps me up at night, because it is the least like a fairy tale and the most like a mirror. The Maya were not destroyed by a wrathful god or a swallowing sea. They were, by the best evidence, undone by a tangle of very ordinary things, a changing climate, too many people, exhausted land, and their own divisions in the crisis. A brilliant, advanced, literate civilization, as sure of itself as any that ever stood, brought low not by a monster but by the slow convergence of pressures they could not, or would not, solve together. There is no comfort in it, Carol, and no villain to blame, and that is exactly why it is the most modern of all our ancient tales. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the astronomer-kings whose stars could not bring back the rain, and the people walking away from their beautiful dying cities into the trees. Solve it together while you still can, friends, whatever your it may be. Come back to the fire.