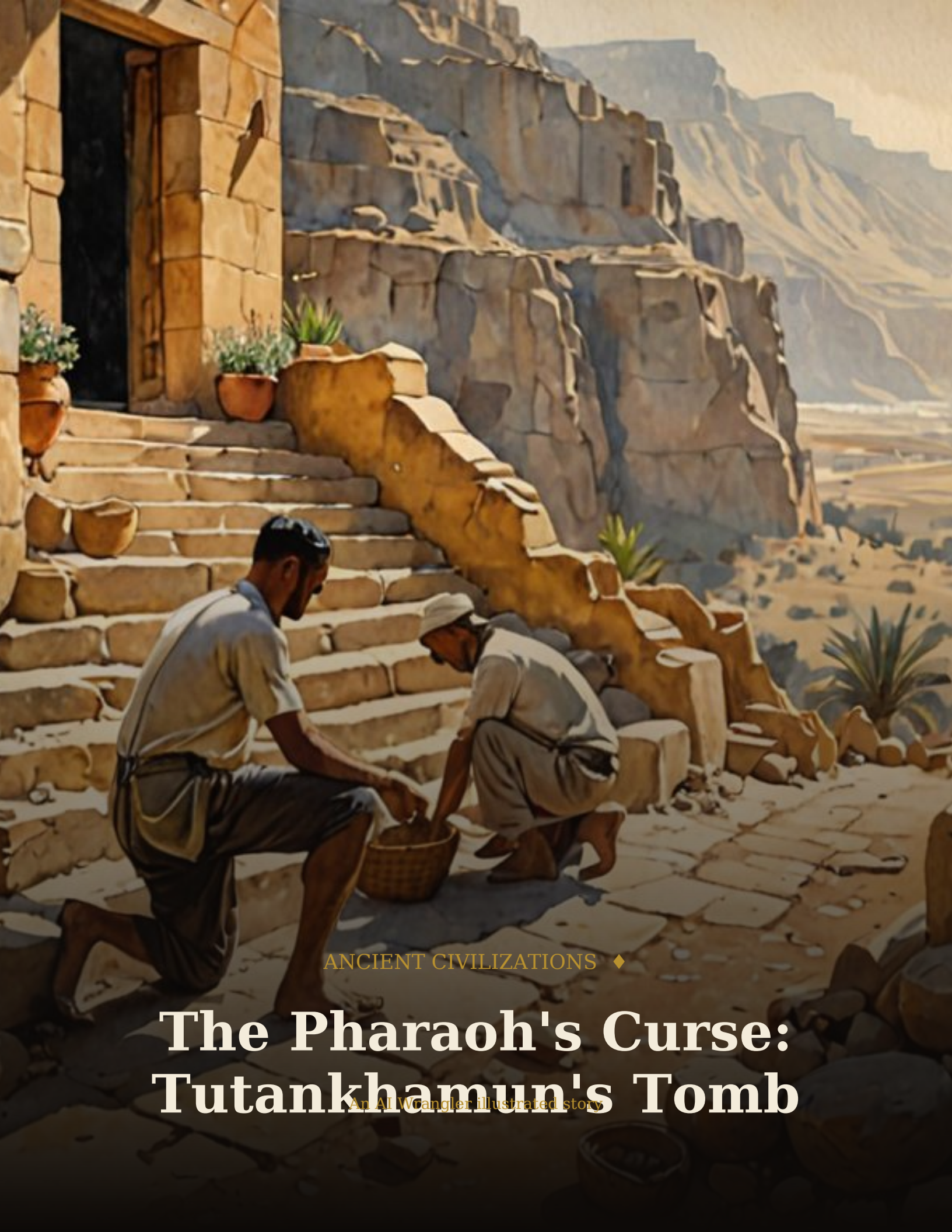




ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS ♦

The Pharaoh's Curse: Tutankhamun's Tomb

An All Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire, friends, for tonight we travel to the burning sands of Egypt and into the most famous tomb ever opened, to a boy who was a king three thousand years ago and lay forgotten in the dark until one November day when a candle flame first flickered into his golden world. And with the opening of that tomb, Carol, came a story of a curse, of mysterious deaths and ancient vengeance, that gripped the whole world. Tonight, Tutankhamun and the curse of the pharaohs.



CAROL

The boy king, and a curse. Oh, Marty, this is the one I have wondered about since I was a girl. Was there truly a curse, or is that just the part we made up? Tell it

properly, from the start.



MARTY

From the start, then, Carol. For many years an Englishman named Howard Carter, a careful and stubborn archaeologist, had been digging in the Valley of the Kings, the great royal burial ground of ancient Egypt, funded by a wealthy nobleman, Lord Carnarvon. Now nearly every tomb in that valley had been found long before, and every one of them robbed empty by grave thieves in ancient times. Carter was chasing a whisper, a nearly forgotten pharaoh named Tutankhamun, a minor king who had died young and left little mark, and whose tomb had never been found. Season after season Carter dug and found nothing, until Lord Carnarvon was ready to give up and cut off the money. Carter begged for one last season. And in November of nineteen twenty-two, his workers uncovered a step cut into the rock.



CAROL

One last season, and then a step in the rock. Marty, my heart is pounding for him already. A step leading where?



MARTY

Down, Carol, to a sealed doorway, its ancient plaster still bearing the seals of the royal burial three thousand years untouched. Carter sent for Lord Carnarvon to hurry from England, and together they cleared the passage to a second sealed door, and Carter made a small hole in the corner and held a candle to it, and peered through into the darkness beyond. And Carnarvon, behind him, unable to bear the suspense, asked, can you see anything? And Howard Carter, staring into the flickering gold, could only whisper back the words that echoed around the world. Yes, he said. Wonderful things.



CAROL

Wonderful things. Marty, what a thing to say, and what a thing to see. What was in there, after all those centuries?



MARTY

A treasure beyond imagining, Carol, and this is why it stunned the world. Because unlike every other royal tomb, this one had never been emptied by thieves. It lay essentially as it had been sealed at the boy king's funeral, crammed with thousands of dazzling objects, golden couches and chariots and statues, jewelry and thrones, and at the heart of it, nested in a series of golden shrines and coffins, the mummy of the young pharaoh himself, his face covered by that magnificent mask of solid gold that has become the very symbol of ancient Egypt. It was the archaeological find of the century, perhaps of all time, and it made Tutankhamun, this obscure boy who had ruled so briefly, the most famous pharaoh who ever lived.



CAROL

The one tomb the robbers missed, waiting three thousand years in the dark. Marty, that is glorious. But now the shadow falls, doesn't it. Where does the curse come in?



MARTY

A few short months later, Carol, in the spring of nineteen twenty-three, Lord Carnarvon, the man who had funded it all, died. He had cut a mosquito bite while shaving, it grew infected, and in that age before the great medicines, the infection took him. He died in Cairo, and the story goes that at the very moment of his death the lights of the whole city flickered out, and back home in England his favorite dog is said to have howled once and fallen dead. And the newspapers of the world, hungry for sensation, seized upon it and asked a thrilling question. Had the disturbed pharaoh reached out from three thousand years of sleep to strike down the man who opened his tomb?



CAROL

The lights of Cairo going dark and the dog dying at the same hour. Marty, even knowing better, that gives me a genuine chill. Were there other deaths, or just poor Lord Carnarvon?

MARTY

There were others, Carol, and each one the newspapers gleefully added to the tally. Over the following years several people connected, however loosely, to the tomb died, and the press wove them all into the curse of the pharaohs, the vengeance of Tutankhamun upon those who violated his rest. It was said an inscription in the tomb had warned that death would come on swift wings to any who disturbed the king. The legend grew and grew, in books and films and headlines, until the curse became almost more famous than the treasure itself, and to this day, Carol, when people hear the boy king's name, half of them think first of the curse.

CAROL

So the story took on a life of its own, feeding on every death. Marty, I have to ask the hard question, then. Was any of it real? Was there truly a curse?

MARTY

No, Carol, and the plain facts dismantle it rather thoroughly, though they never quite kill the legend, for we do not want it killed. Consider the man who should have been first to fall, Howard Carter himself, the one who actually broke the seals, held the candle, opened the coffins, and touched the king. If there were a curse, it should have struck him down before anyone. And Carter lived on for another sixteen years and died an old man in his bed of ordinary causes. The famous warning inscription that promised death on swift wings, Carol, was never actually found in the tomb at all. And when scholars later studied the lifespans of the many people present at the opening, they found that, curse or no curse, those people lived just about as long as anyone else.

CAROL

The one man who did everything lived to a ripe old age, and the deadly inscription never even existed. Marty, so it was the newspapers all along, wasn't it, the same hunger for a sensation we have seen before.

MARTY

Precisely the same, Carol, and that is the meaning I take from the curse. Lord Carnarvon died of an infected mosquito bite, an ordinary tragedy of his age. But an ordinary tragedy does not sell newspapers, and the vengeance of a golden boy king reaching across three thousand years, that sells papers all around the world. So a mundane death was dressed in ancient magic, and a legend was manufactured that has outlived every fact sent to correct it. And here is the tender irony, Carol. Tutankhamun was a forgotten, unimportant king in life, barely a footnote. It was the treasure that made him famous, yes, but it was the curse, the story we invented, that made him immortal. We did not fear the boy king. We fell in love with the story, and we have kept him alive ever since by telling it. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of Carter at the little hole with his candle, whispering wonderful things, and a forgotten boy made immortal by a curse that never was. The story we tell can outlast every fact, friends, so choose your stories with care. Come back to the fire.