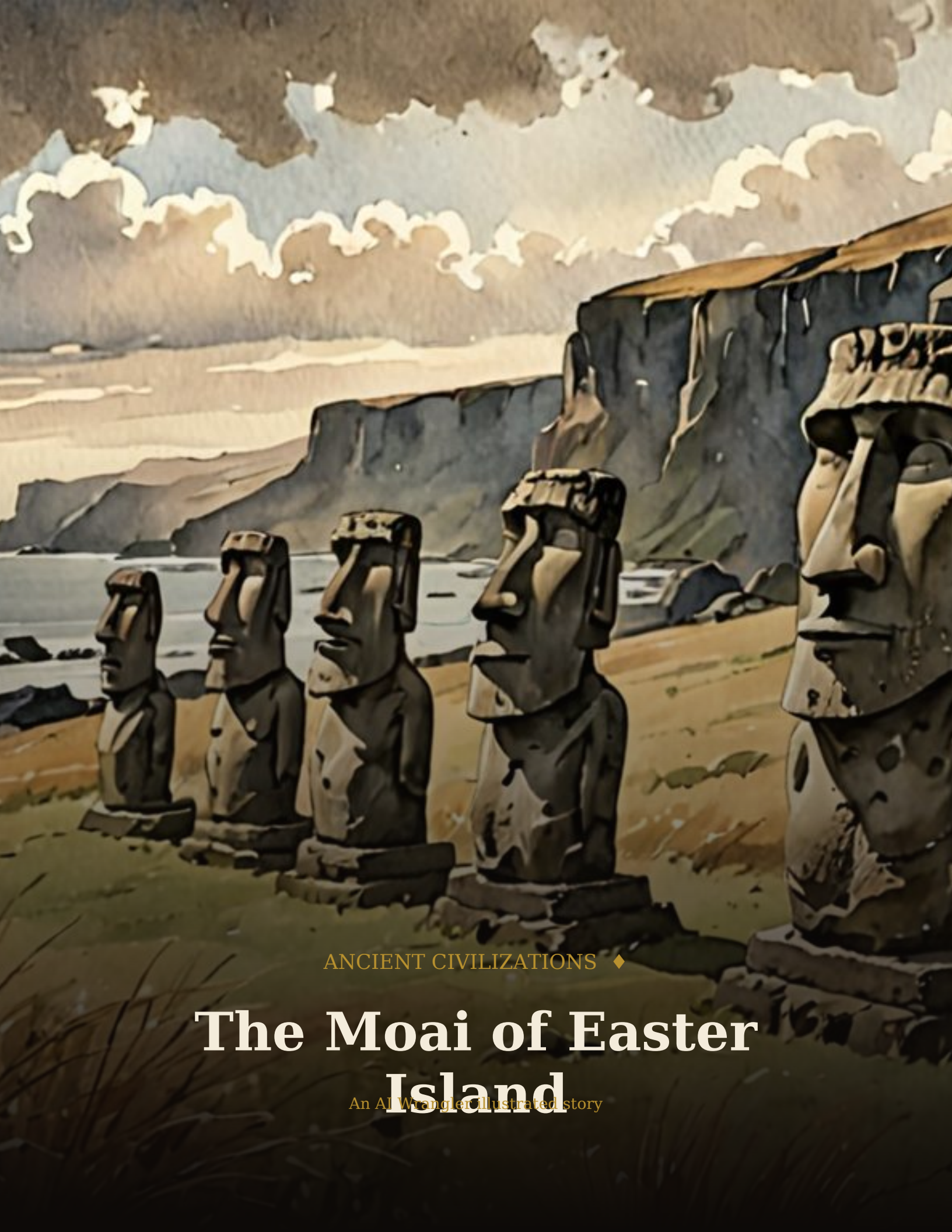




ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS ♦

The Moai of Easter Island

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Gather in close, friends, for tonight we sail to the most remote inhabited place on the whole face of the earth, a tiny speck of land alone in the vast Pacific, a thousand miles from the nearest neighbor, and there, staring out from its grassy slopes, we find nearly a thousand enormous stone giants with solemn faces, gazing inland. Who carved them, on that lonely rock at the end of the world, and how, and why did they stop? This is the riddle of the moai of Easter Island, Carol.



CAROL

A thousand giant stone faces on the loneliest island on earth. Marty, I have seen the pictures all my life and never stopped to think how impossible it is. Who were the people who made them?



MARTY

They were Polynesians, Carol, and their story begins with one of the most breathtaking feats in human history, which we too easily overlook. Long ago, master seafarers set out across the emptiest ocean on earth in open canoes, navigating by the stars and the swells and the flights of birds, and against all odds they found this tiny island, a dot in millions of square miles of water, and settled it. The island they call Rapa Nui. Think of the courage and the skill of that, Carol, to find and colonize the most isolated scrap of habitable land on the planet. And there, cut off from all the world, they built a whole society, and they began to carve.



CAROL

To find that speck of land at all was a miracle of seamanship. Marty, and then, alone at the end of the earth, they carved giants. Tell me about them, the moai.



MARTY

They are extraordinary, Carol. Nearly a thousand of them, great figures with long solemn faces, heavy brows, and long noses, most of them carved from the soft volcanic stone of a single quarry, a crater on the island. Some stand a dozen feet tall, some far more, the largest ever raised weighing as much as many automobiles together, and there is an unfinished one still lying in the quarry that would have stood as tall as a building. They are not idols of gods, Carol, as most people assume. The best understanding is that each moai represented an honored ancestor, a great chief or forefather, and they were set up on stone platforms with their backs to the sea, gazing inland, watching over and protecting the living villages of their descendants.



CAROL

The ancestors themselves, watching over their families from the hillsides. Marty, that is far more moving than idols. But how on earth did a small island people move stone giants weighing as much as a house, without machines or animals?



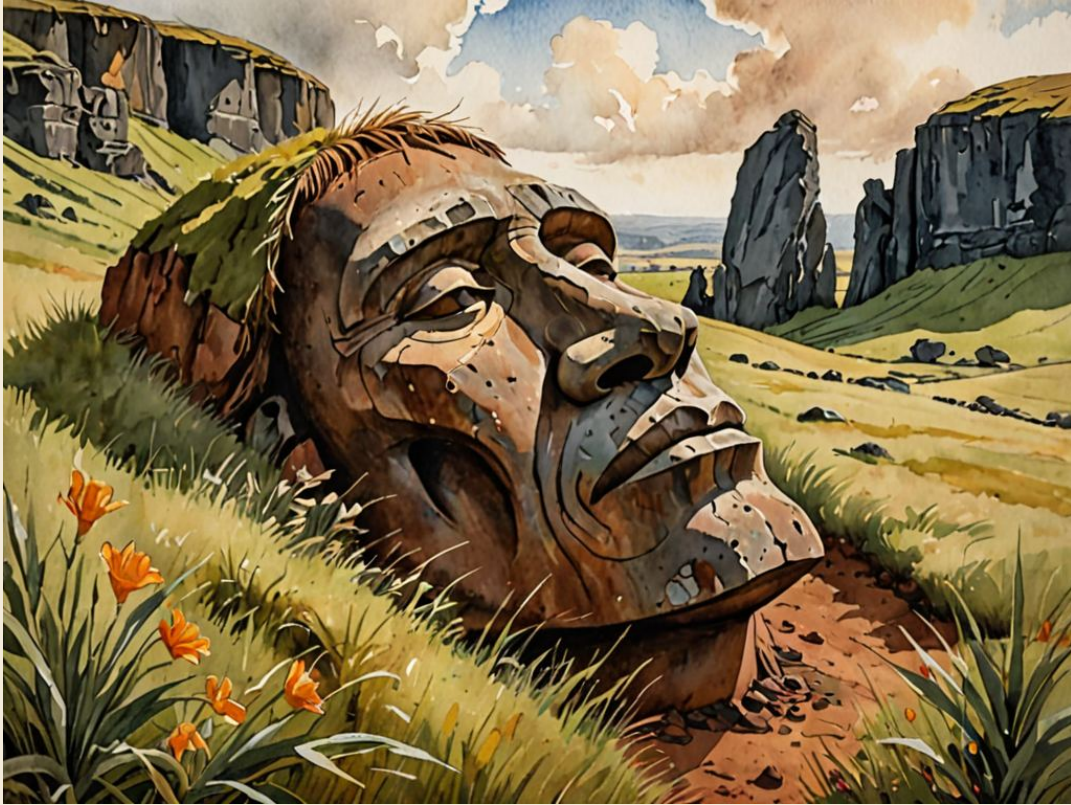
MARTY

That, Carol, is the great practical mystery, and it has produced the most wonderful piece of detective work. For a long time people simply could not imagine how it was done, and assumed vast numbers of laborers dragging them on log rollers, which fed a darker theory we will come to. But the islanders themselves, Carol, always had a curious answer. They said the moai walked. And in recent years, researchers took that seriously, and tried an experiment. They found that by tying ropes to a standing statue and rocking it from side to side, teams of people could make the great figure waddle forward, upright, step by rocking step, quite literally walking it down the road. A handful of people, Carol, could walk a giant across the island. The islanders had told the truth all along, and no one had listened.



CAROL

The statues walked, and the islanders said so for generations, and we thought it was just a legend. Marty, I love that so much, that the answer was in their own words the whole time. But you hinted at a darker theory. What was that?



MARTY

For decades, Carol, the famous story of Easter Island was a grim parable, and you have very likely heard it. It went like this. The islanders, in their obsession with carving and moving ever more moai, cut down all the trees of their island, every last one, to make rollers and ropes and to clear land, until the forest was gone. And with the trees went the soil, the birds, the canoes they needed to fish, until the whole ecosystem collapsed, and the starving people fell into warfare and even, it was whispered, cannibalism, and toppled one another's sacred ancestors in their rage. It was told as the great cautionary tale of a people who destroyed their own world, a warning for our own age. And it is a powerful story, Carol. But newer evidence suggests it is, at the very least, badly overdrawn.



CAROL

Overdrawn how, Marty? That story has always haunted me, the idea of a people knowingly destroying their only home. Was it not true?

MARTY

The picture is far kinder and more complicated than that harsh legend, Carol, and this is important, because a real people's memory is at stake. Yes, the great palms of the island did disappear, but much of that is now blamed not on reckless islanders but on the rats that came with them, which ate the seeds of the trees. And rather than a society that collapsed into starving savagery on its own, the evidence increasingly suggests the Rapa Nui people were clever, resourceful farmers who adapted and endured and sustained themselves for a very long time on their hard little island. The true catastrophe, Carol, the real collapse of their population, came later, and it came from outside. It came with the arrival of Europeans, who brought new diseases the islanders had no defense against, and worse, slave raiders who carried off great numbers of the people into bondage. The island did not so much destroy itself, Carol, as have destruction brought to it.

CAROL

So the famous lesson had it backward, blaming the victims for their own ruin, when the real blow came from the outside. Marty, that is a heavy correction, and

an important one. And the moai themselves, when did they stop, and did they fall?

MARTY

They did stop, Carol, and many were indeed toppled in the island's later troubles, whether in internal strife or grief or the upheavals that followed contact, laid face down in the earth, the watching ancestors brought low. For years travelers found them fallen. But here is the grace note, Carol. In our own time many of the great moai have been carefully raised again, set back upright upon their platforms, their faces turned once more inland to watch over the island. And the Rapa Nui people, Carol, are still there, still on their island, keepers of their ancestors and their story, no longer a vanished mystery but a living people reclaiming their own past from the harsh legends others told about them.

CAROL

The ancestors standing watch again, and the people still there to tend them. Marty, that is a far better ending than the parable of doom. What is the meaning you take from the moai?

MARTY

This, Carol, and it is really two lessons braided together. The first is wonder, plain and simple, the astonishing achievement of it, a people who crossed the emptiest ocean on earth to a lonely rock and then, out of love and reverence for those who came before them, carved and walked a thousand giants to keep watch over their families. That is not the act of fools, Carol. That is the act of a people rich in devotion and ingenuity. And the second lesson is about the stories we tell of the dead. For years the world used Easter Island as a tidy fable to scold itself, and in doing so it slandered a real and resilient people, and got the history backward. The truest respect we can pay the ancient dead, Carol, is to keep looking, keep correcting, and let the ancestors, at last, tell their own story. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of the giants that walked, and the ancestors set upright once more to watch over the children of the people who never truly vanished. Beware the tidy fable, friends, especially about those who cannot speak for themselves. Come back to the fire.