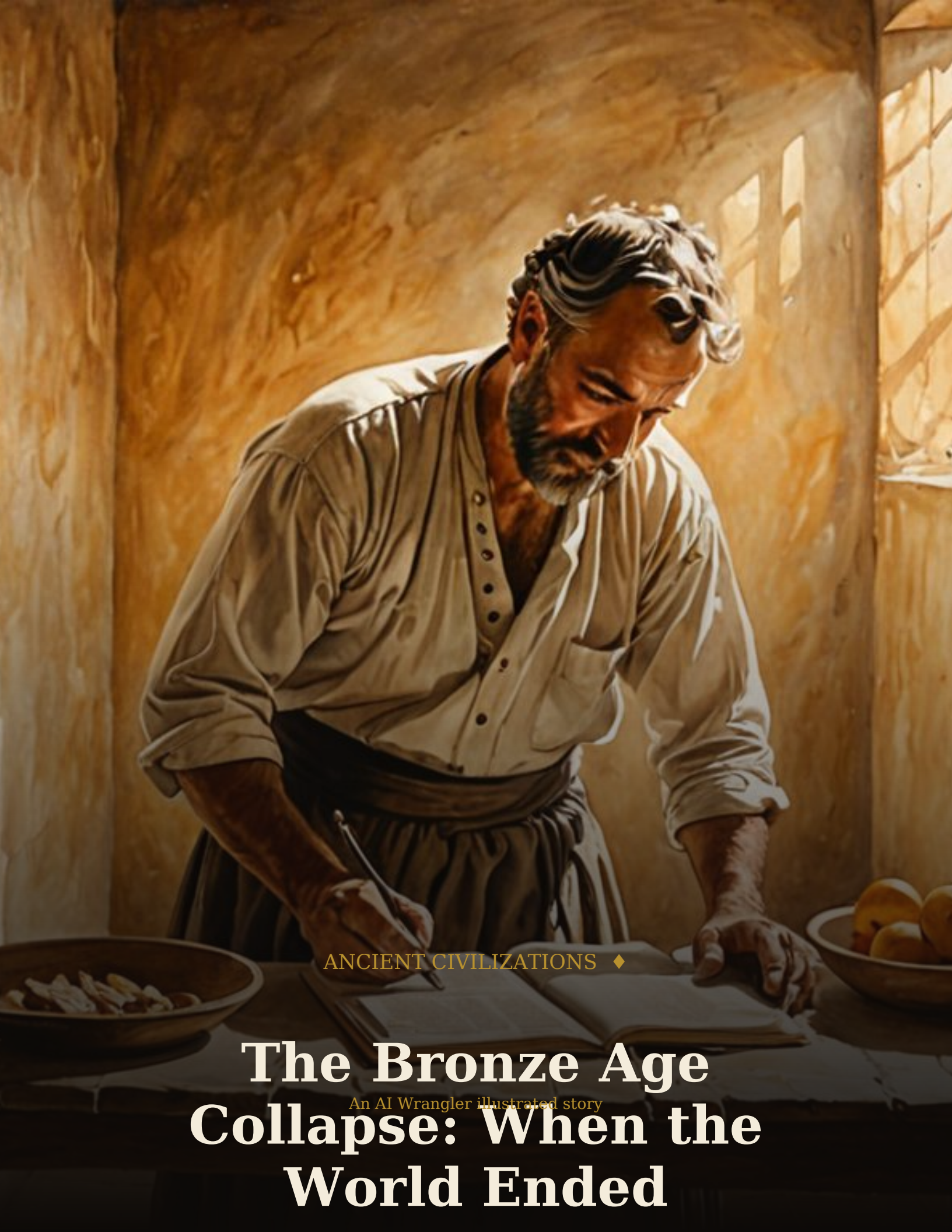




ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS ♦

The Bronze Age Collapse: When the World Ended

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Draw in close for the last tale of our season, friends, and it may be the most staggering of them all, because tonight we do not tell of one civilization falling, but of nearly all of them falling at once, a whole interconnected world of great kingdoms wiped away within a single generation, more than three thousand years ago, in a catastrophe so complete that the survivors forgot how to read and write for centuries. This is the Bronze Age Collapse, Carol, the time the world ended, and no one is entirely sure why.



CAROL

All of them at once. Marty, we have spent the whole season on civilizations falling one by one, and now you tell me a whole world went down together? I did not

know such a thing was even possible. Paint me the world before it fell.



MARTY

Picture it, Carol, around thirty-two hundred years ago, in the lands around the eastern Mediterranean, and it will surprise you how modern it feels. This was not a scatter of isolated tribes. It was a brilliant, connected, cosmopolitan world of great powers all trading and writing letters and marrying and warring with one another. There was mighty Egypt of the pharaohs. There was the powerful Hittite empire in what is now Turkey. There were the Mycenaean Greeks, the world of golden masks and the heroes who would one day be remembered as the warriors of Troy. There were rich trading cities on the coast, like Ugarit. They exchanged goods and gifts and ambassadors across the whole region, Carol, an international age, humming with commerce and diplomacy, seemingly stable and permanent.



CAROL

A connected world of superpowers, trading and writing to one another, humming along. Marty, that sounds almost like our own age in miniature. And it all came apart? How fast?



MARTY

Terrifyingly fast, Carol, within the span of a lifetime or two. Around the year we might mark as eleven hundred and seventy-seven before our era, and a little after, this whole glittering system came crashing down. The great cities were destroyed, many of them burned to the ground, one after another across the region. The mighty Hittite empire simply vanished from history. The Mycenaean Greek palaces were sacked and abandoned. The rich trading city of Ugarit was burned and never rebuilt, and we have found, Carol, the last desperate letters of its king, baked hard in the fire that destroyed the city, letters crying out that enemy ships had appeared and the land was in panic. We are reading, Carol, the final messages of a kingdom in the very hours of its death.



CAROL

The last letters of a dying kingdom, baked in the flames that killed it. Marty, that is chilling beyond words. Who were the enemies in the ships? Do we know who did this?



MARTY

Here is the great famous mystery, Carol, and the most tantalizing clue. The Egyptian records, from the one great power that barely survived, speak of a terrifying wave of invaders coming out of the sea and the coastlands, a coalition of displaced and desperate peoples the Egyptians lumped together under a name that has echoed ever since. They called them the Sea Peoples. The Egyptians recorded fighting them off in tremendous battles, boasting of victory even as their own power was fatally weakened. And for a long time the Sea Peoples were cast as the villains of the whole collapse, mysterious raiders who swept in from nowhere and toppled the civilized world. But that, Carol, is almost certainly too simple.



CAROL

Too simple how, Marty? Mysterious raiders from the sea makes for a fine and frightening villain.



MARTY

It does, Carol, but it mistakes a symptom for the disease, and this is the heart of what scholars now believe. The Sea Peoples were probably not the cause of the collapse so much as another part of it, refugees as much as raiders, whole populations already uprooted and set desperately in motion by whatever was destroying their own homes, crashing into the next lands like a wave pushed by a storm they were fleeing. The real question, Carol, is what set everyone in motion at once, what struck so many civilizations so nearly together, and the answer that is emerging is not a single enemy at all. It is many blows falling together, exactly as we saw with the Maya, but on a far grander stage.



CAROL

The convergence again, then, many things at once rather than one villain. Marty, tell me the blows.

MARTY

Gather them up, Carol, and feel the weight of them. First, the evidence points to a long and brutal drought settling over the region, crops failing, famine spreading across kingdom after kingdom. Add to that, the ground itself betrayed them, for this was a time of severe earthquakes, a whole series of them along the region's fault lines, toppling the very cities. Add the movements of desperate, hungry peoples, the Sea Peoples among them, set marching by the famine and the ruin. And here is the subtlest and most modern killer of all, Carol. These great powers were so tightly bound together by trade, so dependent on one another for tin and copper and grain and goods, that they had become a single fragile web. And when enough strands of that web tore at once, the whole thing unraveled. Each falling kingdom pulled down its trading partners, until the entire interconnected system collapsed together.

CAROL

Their very connectedness became the thing that killed them, each one dragging down the next. Marty, that is the most unsettling idea yet, that being so bound

together made them not stronger but more fragile. What was left, when it was over?

MARTY

A ruined and darkened world, Carol, and this is how we know how total it was. The survivors fell back into a long, poor, isolated age that historians call a dark age, that lasted for centuries. The great cities were gone. The wide trade networks were broken. Populations shrank. And most hauntingly of all, Carol, in some places the very art of writing was lost. The Mycenaean Greeks had a script, and after the collapse it simply disappears, and the Greeks would not write again for some four hundred years. Imagine that, Carol, a catastrophe so complete that a literate people forgot their letters and fell silent for four centuries, and when Greece finally emerged again into the light, it half remembered the lost glittering world before the fall only as legend, as the age of heroes and gods, the golden time of Troy.

CAROL

The collapse was so total that a whole people forgot how to write for four hundred years, and remembered their own lost world only as myth. Marty, that is almost too vast to hold in the mind. What is the meaning you take from the end of the Bronze Age, and of our whole season?

MARTY

This, Carol, and I have saved it for last on purpose, because it gathers up every lesson we have told by this fire. We began with Atlantis, a fable of a proud civilization drowned in a night, and we thought it only a story. But the Bronze Age Collapse is the true thing the fable was reaching for. Here was a real, brilliant, connected, confident world of great powers who surely believed, as every age does, that their order was permanent, and it came apart within a generation, not from one dramatic villain but from many ordinary pressures striking a fragile, interconnected system all at once, drought and quake and hunger and movement, each making the others worse, until the web tore and the lights went out for centuries. No civilization, Carol, however advanced, however sure of itself, is too great to fall. That is not a comfort, and it is not meant to be. It is the oldest and truest warning the ancient world has left us, whispered from the ashes of a whole vanished age. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight, as our season ends, I am thinking of that whole shining connected world going dark together, and a people who forgot even their own letters, remembering their lost golden age only as a dream of heroes. No age

is permanent, friends, not theirs and not ours, so tend the fragile web with care.
Bank the fire, sleep warm, and come back to us soon.