

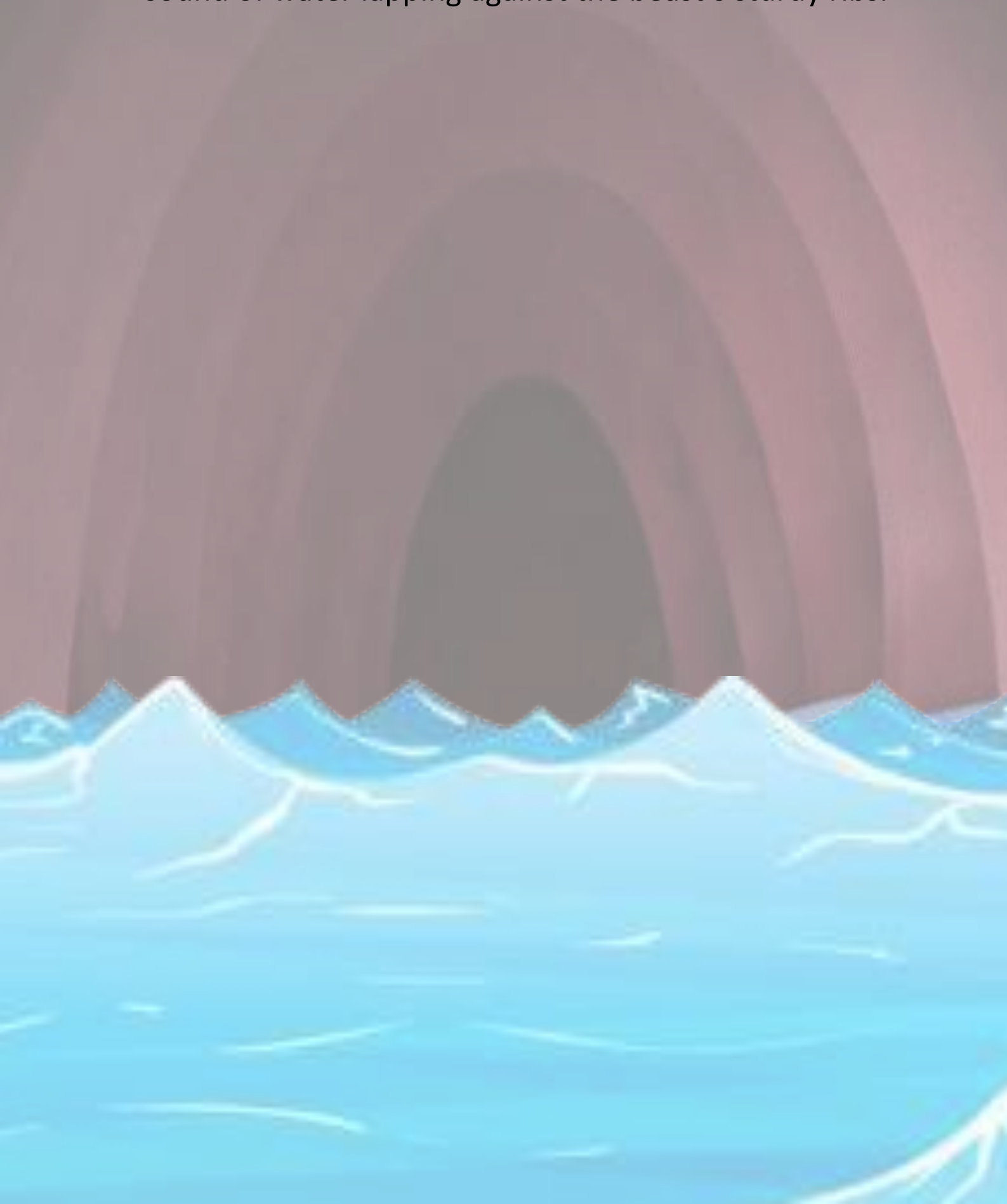


Once Upon
Our Planet
By Vitta Murrow

Once Upon a
Salt Lake



It was dark inside the Monster's body. And very quiet. All that could be heard was a gentle swish, swish, swish. The sound of water lapping against the beast's sturdy ribs.



Some called the monster Rahab, others called it Leviathan, some knew it was as Tiamat. The beast went by many names, to many different people. All believed the creature to be of the salty water, of the abyss and dangerous.



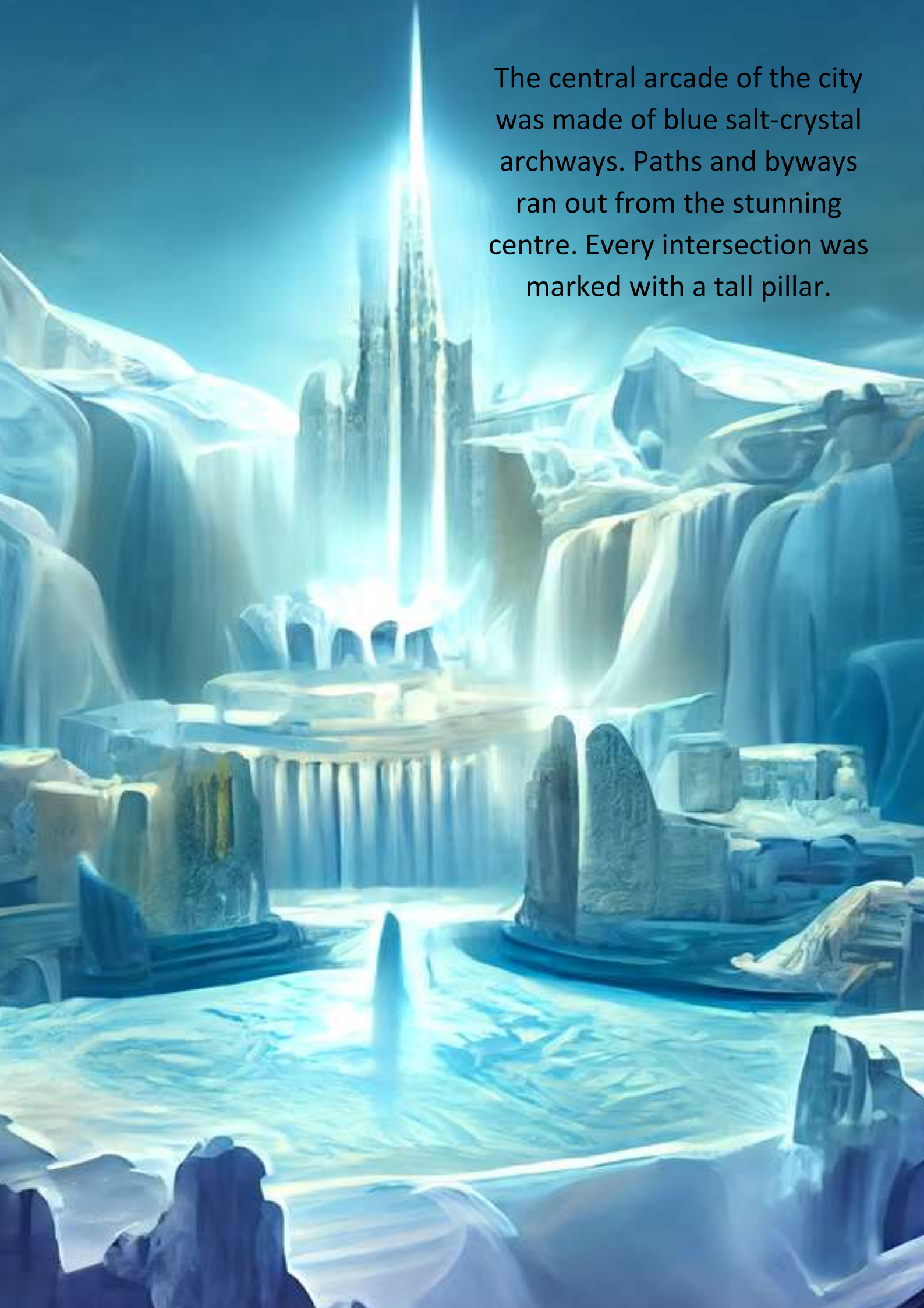
Some said the Monster feasted on a whale a day. Others said it had a tail that led straight into its own mouth. One thing everyone agreed on was that to cross the Monster spelled doom.



The Monster jealously guarded a breath-taking city on magnitude and mystery. A city that lay secretly beneath the waves, made of glistening salt – the Crystal City. The tide rustled the crystals against one another, and the city made the sound of a million tiny bells.



The central arcade of the city was made of blue salt-crystal archways. Paths and byways ran out from the stunning centre. Every intersection was marked with a tall pillar.



The Monster patrolled the boundaries of the city. Its presence kept all the residents in and frightened guests away. So, the underwater city remained an obscure and unchanged place ...



Until one day, when new visitors arrived outside the
Crystal City.

The visitors had heard tell of the terrible monster that
guarded the Crystal City, but they were not deterred as it
hissed at their approach.



The visitors ventured closer still and touched the salty walls. The Monster circled behind them, looking for a way to scare them off. Under their touch, doors- which hadn't been opened for hundreds of years – yielded their entry.



A powerful swell of water caused the visitors to surge forward and tumble into the city. The Monster's control had faltered. The inhabitants of Crystal City hurried to see what had happened.



The residents assembled to inspect the visitors, having never had any before them. They did not share language, but the visitors presented pieces of rock and minerals.



They pressed these instruments into the salty walls and created drawings to tell their story.

The Crystal City dwellers were in awe. Some surprised, some curious, others frightened. Everyone watched spellbound.



They story the visitors imparted was of a life on land, in a city not unlike the Crystal one. But the manner of life by the land dwellers had taken its toll and their land had become tired and vulnerable.



One day, a punishing wave levelled their city. Their land, weakened by their way of life, gave way and plunged them into the water. It dealt the visitors a lesson they would never forget, and a drifting way of life they longed to put behind them.



The visitors bowed deeply to the inhabitants of the Crystal City, in a gesture that appealed for them to be taken in.

The Crystal City dwellers were sympathetic and agreed that the visitors could remain in the city under one condition: they had to promise to live by taking only what they needed, and in turn sharing what they had to spare.



The Crystal City residents explained that one could borrow salt from the common areas if they needed it, so long as they returned it as soon as they felt they could. For this is how Crystal City had survived, cut off from the worlds above and below.



It was agreed and the visitors joined Crystal City. They learned the ways of the city and were careful to honour their promise. They even added their own flair, decorating the city walls.



Contentment resigned within Crystal City for everyone – everyone, but for the jealous Monster.

The Monster circled in the waters above and grew restless. As the citizens embraced their new life with the visitors, the Monster disapproved. The Monster was possessive and didn't like sharing. So, the Monster set in motion a sabotage plan.



Day after day, under the cover of night, the Monster scraped away salt from the great pillar at the city centre. At first, small holes took shape in the main pillar. Later the holes grew into great cavities.



One day, the central pillar was so weakened, it broke in half and crumbled right there in the main crossroads. The collapse sent up a puff of salt which sent alarm through the city.



The watchful Monster grinned. Its plan was afoot.



All the inhabitants of the city, including the newest additions, gathered to inspect the damage.



The Monster whirled above, a glowering cloud. It peered down on the them, imploring somebody to step forward to offer an explanation. But nobody moved. The Monster growled.



All in attendance agreed that the salt pillar was in ruin. This meant a direct betrayal of the spirit of the community. Had one among them broken the promise to their way of life? Mystery swirled. Who was responsible? Questions were raised. Was someone taking more than their share? Most importantly, fear was sewn. The inhabitants were frenzied.



Above them, the Monster was giddy. It watched the Crystal City face disquiet with glee. Only the Monster knew who the real culprit was. For it was its own claws that had stolen salt from the pillar.



To the Monster's surprise, the inhabitants of Crystal City did not turn on one another. They did not take the bait or hate.

Instead, they met and decided the city no longer met everyone's needs. But because they were together, they must take what they could and venture out of Crystal City to build a new home as one.



When the Monster saw their plans laid bare on the salt walls, they were furious. How dare they leave! Thought the Monster.



Wrought with failure, fury and force, the Monster unhinged its jaws as wide as a cave and plunged towards the Crystal City. In one swooping gulp, it engulfed the inhabitants.



The Monster zoomed at 100 knots, faster than the fastest marlin, its dizzying draft pulled the salt from its crystalline embrace and the city toppled into a powder. The finest powder rose to the surface of the lake where they formed ribbons of foam. The heavier powder coated the bottom of the lake and made a thick dark mud.



In the days and years that followed, nothing or nobody returned to the lake. Nothing grew, grazed, drank or settled beneath or beside it. The lake lay desolate, an empty reminder of the fragile agreement between life and land, and the wrath of a jealous Monster.



As time passed the water met with warm air and the lake shrunk. As it did, its buried secrets were revealed. Tall, misshapen salt pillars rose on the perimeter, and not far beneath the lapping waves echoes of the archways, byways and crystal walls tie and ancient place to the present.



But still deeper, lurks the Monster, ever waiting to stir up
trouble in the lake.





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