

# across the river

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across the river of roaring lights was home. across the wind that hurt her eyes and nose. it was night, so her eyes were big as the moon to see her way through the trees, but the river of roaring lights was bright, flowing like liquid sun and screaming thunder. home was on the other side; she could not smell it through the wind that burned, but she could feel it through her legs and her toes.

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*what worthless creatures*, she thought. she laughed, turning her ears to the sky and twitching her eyelids. *season of crows again*. they brought the cold with them, those loud foul beasts. they screamed at each other day and night, screaming until the sun returned behind the cloud of inky black wings. they pulled the night along and dropped the cold over the forest.

the more pertinent matter at hand was food. season of crows meant season of early freeze and breaths that hang like lost thoughts in the air. it left the grass moon-coated every morning and blanched the sky. it left the families hungry. some of the families left. there was food on the other side of the river of roaring lights, they told her. she should go across the river with them, they told her. but she didn't have a family to follow. she didn't need them to feed her and push her and show her where the water was; she had a nose and ears and eyes as good as any of theirs and found her own bark crusts and soft leaves. she was old enough to be alone.

the river of roaring lights ate families. at night, when the screaming thunder slowed to a soft rumble, families would try to cross it. she watched them, groups of two or three at a time tentatively stepping onto the hard flat rock, pulling away when a roaring light came too close. sometimes, the light would eat a member of the family. a fountain of skin and bone would shower the grass, and there would be screams. the rest of the family would throw themselves across the river as fast as they could, and while she watched, the river would eat them all.

she wouldn't cross with them because they were not her family to follow. her food was beneath her feet, and as long as there was food where she stood, she would not cross the river.

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the crows grew thick in the skies. they dropped feathers around her, dirtying the snow. she snorted at the trees, but they paid her disgust no mind. they only eyed her ribs as they pressed against her skin, her shaky knees and skull and spine ridges. she kicked a bush; a crowd of them scattered, then settled on other equally bare branches. they watched her.

she climbed the hill to the river of roaring lights. there was food on the other side. she could feel it. she remembered the other families that tried to cross; some of them made it. some of them got eaten. none of them stayed on her side of the river. they left it all to her, and to the crows. she stood at the edge of the river, on the soft flat rock covered in salt dust. there was even salt in the air. it settled on her body and she could taste it when she licked her lips. she inched closer and closer to the river until she could feel the wind sucking her in, tugging at her knees and sweeping her face. a blast of noise almost sent her tumbling back down the hill; it was shrill like a hawk but louder than a bear, and she caught the gleaming of teeth rushing through the river even as the lights blinded her.

hunger, hunger, hunger bit into her flesh. she calmed her feet and moved closer to the river. it had a pulse, a beat, just like the beating of her heart and the blinking of her eyes, though it wasn't very steady. it went like this: first there was a light that would slowly grow brighter and closer, then a rush of wind pulling her into its mouth, then that loud scream roar, then the light faded and was replaced by different lights. everything hurt her to look at and listen to and feel. everything was too big. she turned and walked backed to the crows.

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she dreamt of warm grass and warm families, of clean rivers that only bubbled quietly at her feet and tasted sweet, of birds that were nice and small and chirped gently. she dreamt of standing at the top of a hill, and looked down to see herself lying at the edge of the river of roaring lights, pitiful and hungry and too timid to cross and join the warm families.

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when she woke, she was under the snow. cold powder settled on her, melting when it got too close to her skin. she shook her head; it made piles around her ankles. the crows laughed at her, *ka ka ka*. she kicked at them again; they only scooted enough to get out of the way of her weak legs, then crowded close again. *ka ka ka*.

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across the river of roaring lights was warmth. food. family. friends. a home for her. *just take me home. just take me home*. she stood against one of the bare cold silver trees that lined the river and pressed her face into the roar of lights. *where is home?* she took one step forward. another. roar roar roar. one

more step closer to home. safety. *not safe yet, not here.* the screaming hurt her ears now. she kept pushing, blinded by the flashing lights.  
*home.*