Wolf:

The ghostly puffs of air seep from our muzzles, the only thing indicating our position to the herd. The two Betas were crouched inside the tree line, a low growl leaking into the crisp air. The Omegas were high on the ridge awaiting my mark; slow steps lead us cautiously toward the deer. I glower at the Betas, their instincts of hunger masking my orders. If we lose this herd we’ll be famished by twilight.

Accalia’s silvery coat flashes vibrantly in the dying afternoon, she looks into the field, watching the oblivious herd. Her refusal to meet my eyes is angering; I gnaw the insides of my mouth and swallow the bile that creeps up my throat in a searing trail. To lose control would be to lose the herd, risking more than our night’s feast. I hear Lykaios whimpering softly followed by his cautious nudges to Accalia’s side, she reluctantly swivels her muzzle towards me, slowly lowering her head in regretful submission but not nearly making up for the lack of respect she showed me moments before. Lifting my head towards the ridge; the Omegas stand ready, flanks braced in the cool soil, all the while Ayame trembling with adrenalin beside me. We are the alpha pair of our pack, born and bread separately but always destined to be the mated pair.

I give a short bark and as a unit we move. The Omegas leap from the ridge, slicing through the herd, isolating three deer and running them toward the riverbank. Accalia and Lykaios snap at the slowest fawn’s legs, bordering the ever-slowing doe. Her cries aching as she calls to her herd, her fear crackling in the afternoon sun. Brilliant stripes of gold tint the blades of grass, wavering and precious, met by a distant rumble of thunder with its promise of an evening storm.

Accalia races along the bank on the doe’s right with Lykaios on the left, the sickening click of their fangs rend the air as they snap at the mass of russet limbs and flailing tails. “Stop! Stop now!” My orders go unheard. In the instant that I called to them both to pull back Accalia falls. Slipping unevenly on the downward rocks, her claws scrape in a desperate attempt to find placement on solid ground but the rocks shift violently beneath her weight. I let out a high whining howl and everyone seizes to a waiting position; my eyes trained on Accalia braced in her unsteady position. Trotting to the top of the overhang and peering down I feel my anger boiling up within my throat for a second time, showing its presence through an involuntary growl. Ayame cowers beside me, as does the rest of the pack, all watching Accalia still fumbling over loose rocks on the bank. “Why should we help you this time, you’ve lost our meal for the evening and you have been distracted for the past week. All our hunts and chases have ended with us barley scraping together a deer carcass we’ve had to scavenge!” My tone is fierce, echoing in a cold, low growl. She whimpers lowering her head in submission. I’m not hard on my pack but if we are to survive the Sierra Nevada and the Ahwahneechee people, we can’t be going hungry.

The Omega’s wait for my permission to assist Accalia and once my boiling rage has reduced to a mere simmer I lower my head and turn. With Ayame flanking my right side and Lykaios my left, we leave the distant herd and retreat to our territory in the
higher reaches of the valley. We follow the worn paths up the rock face, leading to flatter terrain which works it’s way further up the basin shelves. Only Ayame and I lead now, everyone has dropped back in slow groups, two Omegas trail behind us a short way, the other and Lykaios stay with Accalia who hisses in short breaths. I understand her pain, recalling when I was in alpha training with my father I had slipped down an uneven bank and tumbled into the rapids. It took all my power to drag myself to the closest shore where my pack dragged my exhausted body onto the cool pebbles.

I fell near to where the people were, the event led to my father telling me of the conflict between our pack and the Jackrabbit people, the first tribe of Ahwahneechee people. They were malicious men with deer bone weapons, obsidian tipped spears and arrows. They broke the unspoken agreement between the wolves, their tribe and the other Ahwahneechee people. They hunted some of our Omegas, crippling our pack elders, leaving some wolves to die with gaping wounds, staining the valley crimson.

My father told of a swinging lament; concocted of haunted howls which sounded through the opaque days that followed. He spoke softly, being burdened with the story, burdened with the violence of the Jackrabbit people. I slip carelessly into the memory of his warnings. Not only did the Jackrabbit people turn on us, they also turned on the Miwok people. My father and his grandfather saw the Miwok people as the peacekeepers of the Ahwahneechee as they refused to join the Jackrabbit way.

Father spoke in cryptic phrases as though the underlying truth of loss and death was too much to handle for the pup he felt I still was. Neighbouring packs that scouted the coast admired him based on the way he lead his pack. Only mother and a few elder members spoke of father in depth, with hushed voices recalling father’s solemn ways; disappearing to sit on the highest peak, a sad silhouette engraved into the divine gloom.

Ayame’s voice tugs me from my reverie and finally I drag myself back to the bruising twilight. The thrumming counterpart of the lurking tempest meets our airy breaths to mix with the forest animal’s cooing in the daunting evening. We pile into the den, a cavern neatly sculpted from the side of El Capitan.
We watch the wolves in silence, the Chief stares intently, almost as if there were a hidden message engraved into the sides of the cliff face and that squinting into the changing afternoon would reveal the intricate words. Once the last wolf had disappeared we turned retreating to our own shelter, u-ma-chas were scattered in organised groups that somehow made a sort of rough path leading to the chiefs hut. The smell of dry earth and pine needles was intoxicating and in the brooding night combined with the swelling colours above, a chilling sense of calmness swept over me. I was next in line for the role of chief and when it had been announced, protest erupted from some members of the tribe. Some were hoping to re-unite our tribe with the Jackrabbit people who were vicious and wished to slaughter the wolves. We were the opposite; we believed it was our place to protect the mysterious beasts. It is said amongst the Jackrabbit men that many generations back a pack of wolves attacked their chief and mauled him until he was taking his last dying gasps. Some say he was left, a beaten man with arms and torso in thinly cut ribbons of flesh, lying by the thick pebble banked river, which cuts savagely through the valley. Our chief however preaches the good and spiritual value of the wolves and speaks of their honourable nature, which is why the tale can only be a story to provide a motive to go after the lupine. We were angry yet not hungry for violence as the others were. The feud left the two tribes in a lingering indifference; between the three vying parties of the land we kept the unspoken agreement, that the Miwok people had no part in confrontation with the Jackrabbit people and never will.

With the night came those who usually stay concealed in the long shadows of the day, creatures inspecting what the sun had left them and what the half moon would provide. My restlessness was unbearable and the oak board where I lay creaked in the darkness edging on the rain and heavy clouds. My Aunt and Uncle slept soundly as did the rest of my tribe. The moon had moved nine steps from when we set down to rest and I hadn’t been able to feel the weight of the day’s exhaustion enough to slip into the silvery sleep. I carefully rolled off my bark and crawled effortlessly out of our hut. The back of the u-ma-chas seemed most appropriate, otherwise the crunching autumn leaves would give my position to the entire tribe and that would ruin my efforts of remaining unseen. In fact, it’s not the crushed leaves underfoot I’m worried about now, the thud of my heart against my tight chest might take the role of the dry leaves in divulging my escape. I clear past the last of the unconscious men and slip mutely into the darkness. I wander for a long time, deftly stepping over leaves and the few fallen branches that mark our paths. My feet continue automatically on the familiar trails turning and winding me deeper into the night, taking me as far from the burdens of being the next in line. I’m not of direct lineage to the Chief but for some reason he decided to change the ancient tradition and chose me. The image of his frail finger wavering in front of my head still burns in the back of mind met by the slow background clapping, those who were related wore expressions of shock and anger. I pause, the gloom has stilled and the ominous clouds of earlier deliver on their promise of a storm. Rain rushes down my face and saturates my dear skin which slides slightly down my hips. I don’t rush, instead I let the cool drops soothe the scars across my torso, weaving delicate routes of the shiny, scar tissue dappling my biceps. They are all that remain of my time before the tribe.
A time that I have worked so far into the back of mind that no one could make me remember; forgotten and at peace. The rain slows and the clouds abandon the valley, revealing the half moon and luminous stars. Slow strenuous howls fill the silence and the night resumes what it was. I make the long walk back; sleep finely gripping my eyes ferociously.

The sun blares through the cracks in our hut, bringing with it the sharp scents of the nearby forest of ponderosa pine and oak. The men had set out to hunt, most likely deer, given winter is nearly upon us they would have stretched the nets across worn deer trails. Neither my Aunt nor my Uncle were in the shelter. We all had roles in keeping the tribe in order and mine wasn’t nearly as tiresome as others, I did my part and was rewarded with time of my own. That’s what I spent my morning doing, ending when the sun was just below its peak height. Running the familiar tracks with the leaves and berries I’d collected so that my Aunt and the other women could make wild rose for the men who had trouble with their arms and legs when they moved. My hands fumbled as I poured their contents into a small basket out front of the hut, turning long strides lead me pass the boys of my age. They practised for future hunts with their fathers and brothers. I paced by them catching their glares of anger and animosity. Several of them would make better leaders than myself and they knew it, as did the others in the tribe. My pace quickened, I couldn’t take their disapproval any longer, I was too fragile for their eyes to send daggers further into my already broken anima. The paths of last night don’t seem nearly as intriguing by sun as they did by moon, instead I pick a new path through the tree line, furthest from camp. The mission was painstakingly slow, though eventually I came to the rock face of El Capitan, leaping up the inclining boulders and reaching the levelling faces I managed the new path. I stopped, I didn’t want to climb too high and not be back home before evening fell.

Sharp clicks sounded on the rocks behind me, spinning on my heel and almost reeling to far left to keep my balance, I landed awkwardly, lifting my abnormal mop of blonde hair from my face I saw a hazel coat and raised hackles. Kasa stood his ground firmly ready to sink his dripping teeth into any part of my body that he could, any other day we would have acknowledged each other’s presence from a great distance. No not today, I’d strayed far and wondered right into the wolves’ territory. “Easy Kasa, it’s only me, I’m not going to touch you, I’m no threat.” I sang, though he kept his hackles raised, he eventually shifted his stance to something of less aggression and more observation. Relieved, I let my arms fall to my sides, mirroring his posture. “That’s right Kasa it’s me, Enola, you know me.” I step back slowly, and lower myself on the cold stone watching his ears flick at my movement but all other limbs stay planted.
Wolf:

His words are syrupy and his earthy yet unmistakably human scent seeps into my muzzle, the name catches me. Enola. Mai was our given name for him, we named the most important people of each tribe both Miwok people and Jackrabbit. I don’t take my eyes off his crouched body, he’s significantly smaller curled up than standing and whilst he nor his tribe have ever been a threat that’s no excuse for his newly found wandering habits. Edging back, I feel safe enough to lower my lips, which curl tirelessly around my fangs. My gaze stays trained on the boy and I try to think of what else he meant when he spoke, Kasa, he called me by Kasa. Maybe we both have our names a stray because never have I been summoned by that title. To my pack and our cousins on the coast, I am Eyota.

The silence grows until a gorging chasm of unsaid things hangs in the bleak air between us. I let a short whimper escape me. Short enough to not mean any surrender but sincere in understanding I’ve let my immediate guard down. Finally he gets up, both of us stunned by the sudden throbbing of ritual animal skin drums. Rhythms colliding in the brisk afternoon, both tribes beat hard and fast on their instruments calling to their elders and figures of worship. Enola pauses and gives a side ways very impish look at me, he looks younger more innocent, as he did many years ago. Those empty years of separation that we have had have sliced between us, two young boys tearing through pines and crushing anything underfoot. But that was a very long time ago, we’ve both moved onto different lives, he soon to be leader, and I already am.

His farewells ring in my ears, as if lyrics to the melody below. “Kasa, I have to go, they’re calling me.” The sadness in his face makes me wonder if he would ever be as happy as he was when we were running. He was always sad but the further ran and lost ourselves in the woods, the happier he’d become. “Kasa..” he clicked his tongue, turning over the name on his lips, eventually his mouth twisted into distaste and I could tell the deeply supressed memories were slowly slipping out. “Kasa” he spat the word as if it were some horrifying misconception, “Eyota!” he exclaimed a small and satisfying laugh escaped him, he proceeded with a very soft, very hollow. “Eyota, that was your name wasn’t it?” The questioning in his voice pulled at something in me, a disappointment that he’d have to ask maybe. The sun was sinking lower, casting long, dancing shadows in the twilight, the earnest skin drums met the howls of my pack, a sorrowful ballad that queued the end of our time. Enola lowered himself down the steep turn of the rocks, I watched until his small figure disappeared into the thick trees below. I picked my own way back up the mountain having already sent my pack to rest after the mornings hunt; we had managed three elk and were sufficiently full. Taking quick steps I reached our perch, where I found Ayame. Her howls were the most mournful yet divine sound of the chorus. I nudged her lightly, not wanting to disturb the raw verse. The betas and omegas dropped in and out but Ayame kept the sturdiness of her tone letting enough pained libretto slip into the awaiting night but keeping some secrets locked safely within her. We all had secrets, some more dangerous than others. Some remain memories, stretched across time in throe. I lick her jaw line and slowly the howls fall as if dropping from
the skies in melodic decrescendos. The night passes slowly; bidding its goodbye in thick lingering mist, waking earlier than the others does have its benefits. The fog has a golden tinge that swells around my legs, slipping evenly over my waist but not quite swallowing my body. The morning was cold, and a brumal reminder that winter was closing in. Tilting my chin the rays of the young sun adorning my coppery coat, above me a spider web catches my eye, tangled in a dismal mess cracked by the frosty dawn. Below a high shrill rings through the valley, bouncing from the rock face and returning to it’s owner. Ears pricked I lean a steady glance over the berm; a girl. Not just a girl, she was searching; the cold mist was biting through my own fur, leaving a small trail of tingling chills up my spine, her bare limbs must be frostbitten. She let out another piercing scream; it was blood curdling. I launched forward, racing down the slope. She screamed again and again, every time the sound was more agonizing, every time it was more helpless. I howled, the morning doesn’t usually bring howls, but today it did. I finally reached the place where I had seen her moments before; I paused only long enough to see a small figure crouching a few metres away. Moments hung as if an eternity would slip by before they passed. Her hands were covered in blood, but it wasn’t her own. I could smell her fear; I pull away from the scene as my pack approaches. Ayame was the only one who came forth to where I stood and she too saw the image of the girl. Sympathy swelled in her eyes and she took few cautious steps forward. Ahead of us the Miwok men flooded into the small area. Ayame slunk backward concealed in the few shadows that were cast by the angling of the sun and canopy. The men crowd the human girl, her sobbing now quiet but still filling the muffled field. We press deeper into the thickening shrubs, losing sight of all the men and the girl until we slip out of sight completely, retreating into the mist.
Miwok:

Her hands were coated in liquid scarlet; the elder men crouch at her sides. A few boys push me forward. Heedless of the swift advance, my body stumbled. Landing squarely on my hands, disturbing the cool soil just in front of her, I lifted my head mindful of all the eyes that were observing me. When I reached the girl’s face, her appearance was not what I had expected. A perfect symmetry of all features gave her an exquisite beauty. I felt the tiniest ache in my chest just from watching her for a few seconds, an ache of torment. Her grey eyes were flecked only by the slightest of blue. Infatuated, I moved slightly back to search her face, noticing just how stunning she was; these curious, quizzical eyes set against bronzed skin. She was clearly native but not to this area, it took me a moment until I realised her trembling. Quickly moving around her I called to the other men to help me lift her. Meda and Nata were the two below chief and helped in my encouragement of the members in our group. Some were still reluctant to follow what I ordered, there was even mocking whispers at my attempts to lead, they knew I wasn’t ready.

Waiting, I lay in the now warmed grass watching the clouds travel effortlessly across the sky, the peaked sun weaving between them. “Why do you sit son?” Meda one of the men from earlier stood before me, blocking the sun with his lean figure, “Hmm, she’s foreign, why do you wait for her, of what means is she to you?” His tone was comforting as if he wanted to understand my reasons, but being raised from an early teenage year in a foreign tribe, gave me this fleeting hope that she was something like myself. I was fifteen when Soyal, my “Uncle” found me, wandering lost, just like that girl. I was different too, that’s why some of the boys my age are resentful. I have the same light eyes set on dark skin with a head of tousled blonde waves. I was foreign to this place but the chief, he let me stay, he let me become a member of the Miwok tribe and I was raised under their rules and now after being taken in by the Chief I am entrusted with the role of being next chief.

Her grey and blue eyes, chocolate skin, and her hair, what was her hair like? Meda made a clicking sound with his tongue, a trait I must have picked up from him, he was used to my long contemplative pauses between the questions that needed response. Shrugging I gave my answer “she’s different, like me, I want to know her story and how she came here” I took a moment to pick my words, but I gave up, spilling my unorganised thoughts on the grass before me “I am different Meda, my past” Silence, painful and pitiful “My past is what it is, but I want to know hers” I felt his thin hand press against my shoulder, “I know son, but be careful don’t let down your guard until you know she can be trusted” Sighing he looked away and for a split second I saw emotion flood into his face and as quickly as it had appeared it left, replaced by years of laughing and crying with every other feeling in between etched into his cheeks and forehead in long, thin lines. “Enola, all I mean is your motives must to be pure, unlike others”. With that his hand slipped from my shoulder and with a few graceful strides he was gone. The sun had moved significantly, carrying the day onward, revealing my Aunt’s silhouette filling the small entrance to the hut. She stood there looking at me with the most earnest and searching expression I had
ever seen her jaded face wear. “Enola, you’re still here?” She waited for an
explanation, but I was all out for the day so she continued. “She won’t speak, her
tears aren’t sad, they just fall. She’s not one of us Enola but you can see her, if you
can speak to her, maybe the Chief will let her stay. Would be a shame to see her
involved with the Jackrabbit people”. Her statement was just that, a statement. My
Aunt had never shown any hostility nor had she had a reason. Women never got too
close to the violence, then again we don’t particularly like the Jackrabbit men due to
their own hostile ways. I stand mutely, nodding at my Aunt, taking what she had said
for permission to enter the u-ma-cha.

Inside beads of light trickled through holes in the roof. She laid in the corner, a small
lump of human crushing into a tiny invisible box. I sat opposite to her, very conscious
of how much space I needed when they first found me. I rocked back on my heels,
humming a soft verse to myself, not one from the Miwok people, a tune that I had in
my memories, one of the few I hadn’t supressed. My voice was sombre in its tone
but the hymn wasn’t sad, it was twisting and winding, tormenting and generous. She
turned slowly, recognising the tune she joined in, shy at first but as the melody
intensified so did her volume until we sang audible and secure. My heart caught in
my throat and I stopped, trying to swallow the bulging lump. Leaning my head back, I
let the tears settle.

When I was sure all suggestive expression had slipped from my face, I looked back at
her. She’d stopped singing but her eyes were still trained on me. Finally she spoke
“how do you know it?” I remembered what Meda had said and suddenly I was
awake, listening. “I don’t know” it was the truth I had made myself forget. “It’s from
a long time ago, anyway, why were your hands…er..” only a moment caught me and
then I realised it might be too soon to ask. “You know what, it can wait, how did you
get here?” It felt less invasive, but really I was just finding another way to put what I
was going to ask moments ago. She looked puzzled, distant even, but her voice was
unmistakable; so full, compelling, it knocked the breath from me for a spilt moment.
“I walked mostly, ran occasionally and rode,” the last note caught me, “Rode? What
do you mean you rode? A horse?” Frustration stuck in my voice, wavering my tone
just enough to make an appearance.

“No, well…” She struggled lips twitching, “I rode
alongside the wolves, deer, bear” There was more, I could tell, but I had already
picked the pattern, they were spirit animals. It was intriguing because my guess as to
what she meant was that she followed
them than normally would be allowed by the animal. Spirit animals were assigned by
the time of your birth; mine was a wolf, that’s why Eyota and I had been compatible
friends for many years. I thought it best to move on. “Why did you come all this
way?” Another long pause, she found it surprisingly hard to find words to answer
me. “I ran away from them, my. -Uh-. People, I ran because they were…” That’s all I
needed, “I understand, I’ll talk to the Chief, see what I can do about you staying with
us, would you want that?” Her jaw moved to adjust her expression and a secret, half
smile, tugged at her lips “Yes, please, yes!”

“Well I’ll see what I can do” My smile was hopeful, because I was.
I walked out of the hut rehearsing what I would say to the chief. She’s just like I was, scared, tormented, running, you took me in and helped me. Facts and a diplomatic tact was how I was going to approach him. If I let any emotion slip into the plead, it could ruin what I was trying to get for, of all the things, I didn’t even know her name. I contemplated running back in and asking for it but that would be beyond rude. A few sharp knocks brought the Chief to the door, I jumped straight into my spiel, “The girl, Chief, she needs to stay with us, she’s like me, or like I was” His eyes flashed his usual warmth and continued. “I know son, I’ve already come to that decision.” His smile was sincere, genuine. Bowing my head slightly, I finished, “Thankyou sir, it means a lot.”

Wolf:

We’d been searching since the men left, noses pressed against the earth, the blood had dried but the scent was still strong, the small stains of red remained on the soil in filthy patches. Ayame was searching, so was Accalia, we all were. Searching for how that scent could have been dripping from her hands; it was wolf blood. The odour was filling my nostrils and suddenly I found it. Ten or so metres from where that girl had been crouching was a small limp body. The blonde streaked fur was covered slightly by dried blood. His breaths sharp, he was alive. I yelped and in the small clearing, my pack joined me. His wound wept crimson and his whimpers slowed. The pain seemed to be subsiding but I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or if he was giving up. Quickly assessing his body, I saw the small white arrow jutting awkwardly from his side. I recognised the slim bone neck, a small-engraved symbol of an arrow with a scruffy clump of rabbit fur attached to the end of it and an obsidian head. Jackrabbit people. My howl was coarse, angry, dark and mournful. It’s one of our cousins from the coast, what lingered of his salty aroma stuck to his fur, as did the blood. A crashing came from behind us and when I turned I could see Enola approaching, his heavy footsteps were fast. Spinning around to face my pack, I tried to assure them he could help but they were already taking slow steps back. Enola reached the clearing walking to the body; Ayame and I were the only ones who waited in the light, the rest of the pack hid in the shadows around us. His hands wrap around the arrow and gently slid it out, a pained but relieved whine slipped from the wolf’s mouth. In the moment the arrow left his body he leapt to his feet, lips revealing vicious teeth.
Miwok

He bared his hackles and brutal snarls sent goose bumps searing up my arms just as my bare chest was doused in salvia, bloodied and hot. “I didn’t do this, please!” My hands fall to my sides and I lower myself onto the ground in submission, it was all I could think of, getting closer to his teeth was the last thing I wanted to do but I was determined to help him. I took my chances pressing close to the brown dirt, small yellow petals floated in and out of my focus; I couldn’t risk him thinking I was going to stick another weapon into his side, so I stayed glued in the cowering position. I sucked in my breath and with all the courage in the world; I leaned forward and pressed both hands on the wound. The wolf stopped growling, replaced by the whimpering that we had heard before. I was in a vulnerable position so I had to keep taking swift glances around, Eyota’s muzzle twitching at passing scents, then back to the seeping wound. I felt warmth oozing through my fingers, which slowed after an agonizing instant. I looked at Eyota wondering if there’d be any protest for what I was doing. Instead he strode over to help convince the wolf to lie down again.

“Please, I’m trying to help” As soon as I had said it his legs gently gave way, his body unable to sustain his weight. Feeling certain that he wasn’t going to make any sudden movements, I slipped a hand to my hip where a small water flask hung on a braided, leather strap, slung carelessly over my body. Using a piece of moss I’d taken from our hut I covered the mouth of the flask and tipped it on an angle that saturated the moss. I cleaned the blood off the fur around the wound keeping steady pressure to stop any more bleeding. I peered through my open fingers, the wound was deep, fleshy and as quickly as it had stopped dark blood began to rise out of the gash again. Holding the moss over the wound I allowed it to soak, taking my hand away I gathered a handful of dirt and rolled it into a careful brown ball and soaked it in the water too. The muddy clump dripped as I pressed the moss patch to the wolf’s coat spreading the concoction slightly to keep it in place. Footsteps caught my attention and turning, I saw the face of the girl.

“What are you doing here?” My voice was more accusing than I had intended but this time alone, with the wolves was mine. Both protectively and slightly in a form of possessiveness, I shifted my weight, moving my body until I crouched between her and the wolves. “I followed you, I knew you were coming to look, I… I didn’t do it. I was trying to help him,” Tears welled in her eyes and I felt instantly guilty for my tone before “I know it’s alright, he’s going to heal. Did you find him like this?” I didn’t look at her, worried I’d loose my steady voice and become distracted by her beauty, the way I had when I first saw her. I busied myself with wrapping a band around the patch and wound, when I felt her edge the slightest bit closer. “Yes I saw the arrow hit him, I ran to help him but I didn’t know what to do to keep the blood in.” I took her pause for that being the end of her explanation. Pushing myself off the soil I gave Eyota a quick bow and placed my hand on the small of her back leading her away.
“Come, they can take care of him now, why were your screams so loud and scared...?” Taking my hesitation as the implied question she filled in the blanks. “Taini, my name is Taini.” It meant ‘returning moon’ I thought it was fitting given that a moonless night holds mystery and wonder and an underlying splendour. “Beautiful!” Apparently I was mumbling my thoughts as well as losing my mind, what more would this wandering girl reduce me too? Her cheeks lifted into a charming and disarming smile. I liked her, a lot. “Do you want to tell me anything more about yourself or am I to guess?” I wasn’t going to let my tongue trip up and give her an option where no information was required. “Along the coast that’s where I’m from. So where are you from?” We both knew the answer; all I had to do was admit it. “I don’t know, I was very young when the Miwok people found me, I was lost for a long time three moons maybe. I lived by myself, eating the trees fruits and making small settlings along the river.” Turning I gave a vague gesture to where the pack lurked far behind us. “I played with Eyota, the alpha male, he is my spirit animal.” As was most of the pack to our tribe, another reason we protect them. She turned sending her sweet, nut infused scent towards me. “How old are you now?” Her eyes searched my face eagerly, scrutinising every rugged detail. “Twenty. I’m taking the role as chief in the winter solstice” Saying it out loud showed me just how close the solstice was. Autumn had nearly frosted over and in a few days the frost won’t be melting once the sun is at its highest, rather the frost will thicken the closer winter comes.
Wolf:

We watch them disappear into the early twilight, a sense of warmth still slipping eagerly through the canopy, surprising for this cold time, teasing my body into thinking it could be warmer than it really is. The night and its trickery just couldn’t wait until full sundown could it? We moved slowly up El Capitan, winding effortlessly until the den came into sight. My ears pricked in alert, the first few stars peaked through the pink afternoon, and only the furthest of the ledge was caught in the sinking sun’s light. Peering down I could see three lanky, dark shapes moving along the tree line, even the night hadn’t mastered the illusion of fleshy figures despite all its torment. The men carried weapons and it only took the offhand footing behind me to send a few loose pebbles over the edge. I turned, Lykaios stood behind me, eyes trained on the three men below. I looked further beyond him; one of my Omegas had moved the stones in making way for the rest of the pack. “Tehya” My voice was barely audible but it was there in the twilight. He looked up; we were the only ones visible in the dying light and it would only be a few moments before the men head up the cliff. “Tehya, tell them to get in the shadows!” I hissed. “Eyota? What are you going to do?” Lykaios’ voice was sharp, the only sound on the cliff. In a few moments the savage slicing of an arrow passing by my ear joined it. I whiny into the dusk, lurching forward calling Lykaios and Tehya to my sides. The men had only seen three wolves and that’s all they would see. We ran at them, soon we came close enough to see the same image of the bone arrows with rabbit fur on the ends inked into their forearms. We sped through the trees fast and agile, smooth, faded streaks. The men bounded behind us. Whilst there were metres between our bodies, their weapons acted like an extension of their limbs almost reaching us. Together six projectiles weaved in and out of trees; leaping, crashing, war cries were sung and hollered composing the hunt and the hunted. “To the edge, the edge of the trees!” We burst out into the open field, small huts stood up ahead. Lykaios groaned beside me, the spear, which landed a few metres ahead of us, had clipped his flank. Tehya still ran ahead unaware of his brothers pain, all limbs clattering in an organised jumble. “Come on Lykaios, push!” Men poured out in front of us, Miwok people. They ushered us beyond their camp into the trees afar. Passing the small huts and wafting clouds of pine smelling steam, we came to the edge of the field. Skimming across the cool, dry grass, moving into the darkness, panting. The night had crept in while we were running, our eyes easily adjusting to the changing light. Lykaios’ whimper streamed in through his exhausted pants. Pushing him gently I try to audit gash; my coaxing finally encouraged him to move. He shift’s so that I can see the silver lit trail that spanned from his hip to the ground. Its even path carved a complex pattern down his leg. My gaze followed the trail to a tiny pool of shining red around his hind paw. In the field the men fought and the battle cries easily turned the sweet evening into a sickening cacophony of misery. We scouted the tree line working our way back around the field towards El Capitan, the shouts slowly muting, leaving only
the hum of the small insects. Then as if the empty darkness required a more rhythmic beat, the chorus of howls rose out of the silence. Smooth crescendos worked into the eerie quite, mourning and calling, sirens to those who worshiped the sad verses. Ancient songs were never elated; we only ever sung the melodies of old, describing a pining lover or desolate individual. As we trot up the steep face, the three of us join in the anthem. Lykaios’ pain raises his pitch and he sighs into the flecked night, providing a surging counterpart to the other lower intonation. We reach the den and see that everyone is perched on the edges. As we come closer the reel concludes, leaving the hum of the insects and night dwellers soul occupants of the bitter air.
Miwok:

Pain shot up my arm, my Aunt and my Uncle stood on either side of me, their hands braced on the dagger. It refused to move, careful fingers wrapped around the smooth handle, it pulled out of my arm, tearing skin with it. I holler the shaking scream rips through my mouth sending the birds perched just outside flying toward the mountains. I risk a glance at my arm blood trickled down the soft skin catching at my palm before gliding through my fingers to where the blade sat on the ground.

Everything was blurred floating gradually, in and out of focus. My Uncle stood above me wrapping a piece of leather around my arm and winding it up over my shoulder. My lips parted, cracked and salty from my tears; two boys waited at the door whispering to one another, their eyes watched me toss uncomfortably. In a single moment the room was empty the morning sun shining brightly, flooding the pine hut with a white glare. I watched vivid replays of the fight that had taken place the evening before dance in my mind. Three wolves running toward camp, three Jackrabbit men running after them, a knife getting buried into my forearm twisting and writhing under the yielders fearsome grip.

A frosty breeze swept around my ankles pulling me from my thoughts. Rolling to the side I can see an unusual crowd forming just outside the mouth of the hut. Bracing myself against the wall, I work my way outside into the morning, my breath making little clouds just before my nose. I stride awkwardly into the crowd where I see the chief momentarily pause then tumble in a ghastly shape on the wet grass, limbs folded in weak configurations. Two men and one of our elder women rush toward him, straightening his body out. “What has happened to him?” My voice came out as a squeak all bravado lost to the cold. “He shouldn’t have engaged in the confrontation yesterday son, it put too much pressure on his heart.” I felt the colour drain from my face. Stepping forward I could see the shaking breaths of hot air float above his lips and a small trail of blood from his nose decorating his old features. I fall to my knees crushing the small mosaic of flowers beneath them. “Sir, it’s me Enola. What can I do?” There was nothing I could do but I thought if I offered my presence it would help in calming his staggered gasps. Suni’s hands lifted, searching the space around him for mine, taking it carefully I felt the feeble pressure of his fingers and sighed deeply. “Son there’s nothing to do until the solstice.” The crowd had thinned but those that remained, pressed closely to hear what he had to say. I glanced up a mix of pain and anger flashed across my face and the remaining throng of people dispersed returning to their daily business. “Will you be here? I mean for the ceremony?” I returned my gaze to his tired smile. “I’ll wait Enola, until solstice. But I can’t promise anything after that.” My heart sank I knew he couldn’t promise even the solstice, and that pulled at every nerve in my body adding to the lump in
my throat that had started to form the moment I had seen him splayed in the grass. I couldn’t get any words around it so I gave his hand a tight squeeze and stood, allowing the two men from before to carry him to his hut. Tears pricked at my eyes threatening their unwelcome escape, stumbling the conversation playing over again. He was dying, I knew it was wrong to expect anything of him but I couldn’t face the entire tribe at the ceremony alone. Leaving the tribe I set for the far off tree line, longing escape, seeking the refuge of the dark shrubbery.

Nearing the edge of the clearing a now familiar voice calls after me, without turning a guilty smile tugs at my mouth, moments before I had been close to tears now I eagerly await to see the bounding, joyous Taini behind me. An agile leap landed her on the centre of my back, unable to grip her with my wounded arm, I fell to the ground. A glorious laugh erupted from within her, eyes shining despite the now clouded sky and darkening valley. Her pale hair flicking over her shoulders and out across the grass as she rolled off my back, still laughing she looked sideways at me at the same time flashing me that same charming smile. Infected with her contagious delight, I beam a bashful smile in return, chuckling to myself pleased with my victory as a roseate blush filled her cheeks. Sobering we both hauled ourselves up so that we angled into each other. Tugging a small citrine flower from the grass and still slightly giggling to herself she looked up. “Don’t you just love it here?” She threw her arms up and flung herself on the ground again, inhaling earthy fragrances and she bust into another fit of laughter, intoxicated with the floral scents. “I do love it. I must say you’ve seen more action in the past four days than usually happens in months.” Her eyes fill with curiosity and she calms while repositioning her small frame to face me propping her head up on one hand. “Don’t those men usually come into your camp? On the coast there was always fighting, it’s more of a normal happening for me.” She stretched her arms up high as if craving the hidden sun, as she does her shirt lifts slightly revealing only her waist and long thin strips of shiny skin. The scar tissue wouldn’t usually stand out on her dark skin, but the grey sky and early moon used the reflective surface to mirror private shimmering images. “Were they from a feud?” I nodded toward the scars. She smoothed down her top, and resumed her comfortable position; still fiddling with the flower she whispered her answer. “No, my tribe, it’s a black rite they perform.” Her hands moved the deerskin from my shoulders, divulging similar silver scars, her finger tracing the map across my chest, the scars disappeared beneath the skin finishing at my torso. “Oh.” More needed to be said but what could I say, “sorry that happed to us” or “good to know you share my pain”. I’m not willing to reminisce on any part of my life before the Miwok people. I felt her fingers lace through mine acknowledging the unsaid request for mutual denial, no need to bring up the past when so much effort went into keeping it locked away. I flopped opposite to her imitating her angle, we held each other’s gaze for a long moment, all the pressing thoughts and surroundings slipping out of sight. A tear slithered from her eye in defiance of the secret smile she wore so exquisitely. Gently reaching forward I wiped the tear from her cheek “Don’t cry lovely”. She lifted her chin, “I wasn’t crying, I was thinking and it just slipped out” Her confession caught me off guard and the same urge that had seized me before in her presence stole me for a second time, “What thoughts would allow such a thing?” Her smile was coy, followed by question. “When you become chief who will you take as your consort?” I looked away, contemplating how I was going to answer. There
were many women in our tribe some pretty, some strong but none compared to Taini. “What if I asked you?” It was bold and I was scared she’d leap to her feet and run off into the brooding sunset but to my surprise she stayed still wearing her secret smile, “I would love that” I let out a breath, I hadn’t realised I was holding, grasping her hands a little tighter. “So would I”.

Wolf:

Ayame shook beside me, the cold slipped silently into the den. She pressed her body closer, head resting on my paws, looking out into the shortening day. Snowflakes drifted down from the sky delicate and subtle, a white veil concealing our home in the cliff. Shuddering breaths and melodic whines seeped into the air just as stealthy as the frost. Weeks had passed, and there was a steady trickle of snow falling delicately from the clouds. Two weeks earlier I would have taken the heavy clouds for a bitter shower not snow. Although winter was already upon us, autumn had been eminently much frostier than past years. The valley held warmth like a bowl in summer and as expected, it clasp the cold just as forcibly, blending the remains of what was once autumn and winter together, a blurred end and beginning. Enola became chief this winter solstice, the thought bugged me until I rose, careful not to disturb Ayame who had drifted into a carless sleep. Nails clicking on the smooth stone, I stole a look in the valley, which from the den you could see all of. Snow coated the ground, though the thin white veil did nothing to mask the ashen smoke rising from both tribes’ settlements. The Jackrabbit men stood in the sleet, hide protecting their soft human skin, sharpening the last of the seasons obsidian from the river mouth, which had since frozen over. The veiled basin showed little movement, the snow wasn’t thick, but winter’s cold presence wouldn’t be disregarded, especially by Enola. He paced, troubled by the threatening solstice as he did he carved small gorges along the tree line. Behind him the girl from the forest with the blonde hair much like his stood, tired as if from helping in the shouldering of his burdens. From my vantage point I see her catch him, small arms wrapping around his waist blocking his path, he returned the affection by crushing her against his chest head buried in the mass of wavy pale locks. “Look how he holds her” Ayame still shivering observes, now at my side. Together we watch, as they stand interlocked in the cold. “I’m not sure if I trust her”. I didn’t really care about who she was, in all honestly, I just didn’t like how he was so engulfed by her presence. I hadn’t seen him in the afternoons, no wandering soul in the dusk. “Don’t be jealous Eyota, be glad that he’s happy standing still and not running off into the distance.” I could see her smirking out of the corner of my eye, how was this amusing. “I’m not jealous. I’m only being cautious, and concerned for him.” We watched as they let go of each other and traced footprints back to a small hut. I turn waiting for Ayame to find something else condescending to say. “You’re envious of how happy she makes him. He still needs you Eyota as you need him. You were bound by the early year and you always will be.” She nudged my jaw. Letting her lick my neck I stole one last look behind me seeing Enola and the girl disappear into the u-ma-cha. If we weren’t to see each other before the weeks end, then I will see him at the ceremony. We’ve always been summoned to the ritual and we always watched from within the
shadows. Most of the chiefs for the Miwok people were born in the early year, meaning we were their spirit animals. Settling down again I watched the night creep in and waited for the morning’s distant arrival.

Miwok:
The sleet was dense but that wouldn’t stop any preparations. The men had already worked before daybreak by the silvery glint of the moon. Somewhere just inside the trees, ice had been cleared to make way for the ceremony commencing at dusk. Somewhere beyond the tree line lay a sacred place protected by a thick swaddle of dark oak trunks, and a tall stack of broken branches and kindling that had been drying for days. It is to burn until dawn, all through the longest night of the year. The women convened in several u-ma-chas, separating small nuts from their solid casings. I could hear the high pinching noise as the small shells gave way to the crushing rocks. Everything was amplified I couldn’t differentiate between the practicing chorus’ and the thrumming of my heart against my ribs. Solstice was here, creeping in the dead of winter.

Wolf:
We crouched in the shadows, a thin line of warm bodies amidst the cold. They knew we were here, subtle movements around the edges of the clearing made obvious how cautious of our presence they were. Small skin drums began to sound summoning the spirits of ancestors, singing and chanting, they called. Men painted white wearing intricate head pieces comprised of a ravens feathers. The ritual had begun. Men and women danced for a long time, lengthy robes kicking up the sticks, bare feet slapping the ground. We waited until they had settled, watching the elder men arrange the headdress, I knew it from the first ceremony I had seen a long while ago. I was young and everything could be exactly the same, the singing, and beating, dancing all very much identical, except Enola and his taking over as chief. He stood there trembling beneath his bearskin, slow circles being drawn around him by women dragging long fingers in the chilly soil. “Soyala” their chants were loud and vigorous. “Soyala, Soyala” “Time of the winter solstice.” Enola stood on the stage of logs, face lit by the intense conflagration, two men assisted the old chief, his shaking hands raising the headdress high “On this night, Soyala, we praise our new chief!” The uproar behind him led to a chorus of applause, which met our lively barks surging further into the night. The biretta of raven feathers lands steadily on Enola’s head and just like that the ceremony plunged into another thriving carousal. We backed up leaving the festivities in the glowing light. “Eyota,” a whispered voice caught my attention, Ayame stood, watching lean outlines pacing around the site. “Look Eyota!” She didn’t have to say it again I was already watching two groups of people lurk in the obscurity of night. Some of the firelight seeped into the shadows illuminating men with light hair and dark skin, similar to Enola, then on the opposite side Jackrabbit men stalked with the same corrupt gazes. Without any warning the
fire burst sending flames pirouetting across the clearing scorching trees and searing men. More men crashed into the area crushing the small arrangements and knocking unsuspecting women to the ground. I examine the daunting scene, searching for Enola, instead I find Taini crouching away from the violence wrapping into the shadows. No the shadows were wrapping around her, lanky fingers slipping around her throat.

Miwok:

The feathers lit up gorgeously, causing small beads of sweat to form on my cheeks. I swatted the crown from my head, watching as the flames licked at the black plume until they tumbled down in small clumps of ash. The wolves edged back; they were no match for the orange glinting weapons reflecting the sickening glow before colliding with flesh. They slipped further into the shadows coughing as the smoke chased them, I couldn’t ask Eyota to put his pack in danger. I was the chief now. Suni lay gasping and choking on the air he couldn’t take the assault, his old body slowly giving into the cold night, infused with smoke. No one noticed his frail corpse, oblivious as fists connected with jaws sending a mixture of spit and blood every which way. Anger boiled up in my throat and I leapt on the invaders, throwing them to the ground, reaching for fallen weapons, swift movements avenging all the lifeless bodies adorning the damp soil. Taini struggled a short way from me, instinctively my feet shifted throwing my body forward, I came down on her assailant. His head hit the ground, with a solid crack. I moved off his wilted body revealing dark skin and disheveled blonde locks. I stood grabbing Taini and moving her behind me. "They’ve found us, we have to get out of here!” Her voice was a shrill cry in the erratic symphony. I see my Aunt writhe in the hands of a white haired man, both the jackrabbit people and the foreigners working quickly alongside each other. My people were getting slaughtered and I the new chief was watching. Concealed by the gloom, squeezing Taini to my chest, she tugs at my arms, twisting in my grip she faces me her scared voice echoing in my head. “Please Enola don’t let them get me, they’ll kill me and they won’t make it quick” Her voice shook with fear, was I to stand and fight for the lives of my people or run, saving Taini’s life and mine. Either way, a murderous sacrament waited. They fought in slow motion, men falling to the ground in a heap of human flesh. “What about the wolves?” my eyes searched beyond the fight into the shadows, barely visible tails whipped as they darted into the darkness. My stomach dropped from beneath me, as the possibility of not seeing Eyota again dawned on me. Men started to get dragged away by the Jackrabbit people beyond the trees, where screams rose above the canopy. Calling the children and women who remained abled, I ordered them to follow the wolves, the scene thinned slightly leaving only bodies and men who fought. My uncle looked at me, his body thrashing and sliding across the damp earth, eyes pleading for help but begging for me to run. His weary lips parted mouthing his last request “Run Enola, we love you, so run” I turn gazing into the distance, I looked back just in time to catch his head before it hit the ground, “I could never desert my people” I send a fierce glare at Taini, urging her to run. I couldn’t go but she could. A sad emotion slipped across her face. Her wincing steps led to clean bounds through the foliage and sleet, as she cast sorrowful glances back. A silent promise that this wouldn’t be goodbye and finally
her small figure faded leaving the massacre and thickening blaze in the ambit of the valley. My heart fell, already an eternity between us.