Elegant Eats

As Cynthia walked around the restaurant, she saw that someone was watching a show on their phone as they were eating. As she walked past, she recognized the character Metatron speaking in a voiceover, coming from the device.

“What makes a story work? Is it the plot, the characters, the text? The subtext? And who gives a story the meaning? Is it the writer? ...Or you? Tonight, I thought I would tell you a little story, and let you decide.”

The air in *Elegant Eats* then shifted the moment the front door slammed open. A metallic ‘*bang!*’ cracked along the tiled walls, followed by a hiss of smoke that slithered across the stone flooring and swallowed up the smell of frying oil and ketchup packets. Customers jerked their heads up from plates, some frozen mid-bite, some already pushing back from booths with scraping chair legs.

Two figures stormed in. Their masks, hyenas with foam snouts and crazed grins stretched wide across plastic faces, were grotesque in the dim, fluorescent light of the establishment. In their hands were rifles, glossy black and clutched tight. The barrels glinted whenever the smoke curled around them.

Then came the noise: *skrrrrratatatataaa*! The sound of gunfire ricocheted off every surface, deafening. People screamed. A tray of cups filled with soda crashed to the floor. Parents dragged children by the wrist toward their nearest exits. Every body bolted, shoving through emergency doors, stumbling over each other in panic.

The chaos lasted for minutes that felt like hours.

When the haze thinned and the last pair of sneakers slapping out into the parking lot and as far from *Elegant Eats* as possible, three figures remained: the hyenas, panting behind their rubbery masks, and Cynthia; her apron still smeared with marinara sauce, her knuckles pressed to her mouth. She was laughing.

It started small, shoulders quaking, then poured out in a shriek that doubled her over. Her laughter rang off the tiles, sharper than the noise of the gunfire. She wheezed until her face flushed pink and tears streaked her cheeks.

And then, at last, she stopped.

****

The forest has been burning for hours by the time they split.

Cynthia could still smell the singed fur clinging to her jacket. The first hyena had been easy enough; it stumbled into their camp, teeth bared, eyes reflecting firelight. Shurley's knife had found its throat, and Mr. Calvert butchered it in silence. But after that, they hadn't stopped coming. Packs ghosted between the trees, their cackling carrying farther than the flames, as though the fire itself laughed at them.

One lunged out of the smoke, snarling, swiping a paw across Mr. Calvert's arm. Blood welled. He snarled right back, shoving the beast off with his boot. "You can hit me," he muttered, low and cold, "but I hit back, and I hit harder." The hyena yelped as his knife drove in, the hyena crumpling to the ground.

The three of them had been wandering for days, the forest a maze of smoke and snapping wood. Their rations had dwindled, then vanished. “Guys, it’s hyena meat or nothing”, Mr. Calvert reasoned simply, when they had no food left. Cynthia’s hands were still red from tearing strips of sinew apart.

“Listen,” Mr. Calvert crouched low, his mask of ash and sweat more beast than human, “the fire’s circling us. We can’t stay together. We’ll all choke if we do.”

Shurley glanced at his brother, then at Cynthia. His face was pale under the soot. “So, we... split?!”

“One chance:” reasoned Mr. Calvert. “Us two,” he motioned to himself and Shurley, “head west. Cynthia, south. Assuming we make it out of here, head home to safety. Both groups live far from each other, but if this chucklehead,” he pointed a thumb at his brother, “and I survive, we’ll find you and reconnect in around ten years from now. No excuses. Deal?”

The fire snapped in agreement, sparks climbing like stars.

“Not just that,” Shurley quipped, a smirk on his face, crazy whimsy reflecting from his eyes, back at the others, “let’s make it more fun. We’ll wear *something* so that you know it’s us. If we live, we’ll reunite for laughs. Wherever we find you; your job, wherever that may be, we’ll storm it. No real weapons or harm. Just noise. Some smoke... y’know, all of the theatrics. So you’ll know it’s us.”

Cynthia gave a shaky grin. “Heh, well, what are ya waiting for, Chinese New Year?! Get on outta here!”

They clasped hands, one last knot holding the three of them together. Then the fire surged, and they tore apart; Cynthia south, the twin brothers west, as they disappeared into the orange haze.

****
*

The smoke bombs had thinned. The static of the speakers still buzzed faintly, but the fake gunfire was gone.

Cynthia straightened behind the counter, chest still rising in aftershocks of laughter. She wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand, streaking sauce with tears.

“Ten years” she said hoarsely. She cleared her throat. “You sons of bitches actually did it.”

The two masks turned toward each other, then back to her. One brother reached up and peeled his off. Behind it, Mr. Calvert’s face; older now, sharper, but still lit with that reckless spark. The other followed, Shurley, grinning almost like the mask itself.

The restaurant was silent except for the low hum of the soda machine, still running and making obnoxious mechanical noises, while splitting ice in its internal tray.

“Cyyynnn,” Calvert said. “We kept the promise.”

Shurley chuckled. “Now... what’s good on the menu?” He paused. “It better not be hyena!” he added, with a nearly ear-to-ear grin.

Cynthia let out a ragged laugh, shaking her head as though the world itself had played her into a corner. She untied her apron, tossed it onto the counter, and stepped out from behind it.

“Boys,” she said, voice steady now, “it’s been a long damn decade.”

They sat together at a booth, the three of them, hyena masks tossed on the vinyl seats, while the smoke cleared and the outside world slowly forgot its panic.