

## Aisle Twenty

By SakaraFox

Delight was the best way the older fox could describe it. Delight at seeing the ruins of this once grand temple, a monument to childhood tantrums, soothed by only the most sugar-laden treats displayed within. But that was a long time ago, and now this soulless palace of humming electric lights and sterile linoleum tiles was forsaken by its long-dead worshippers.

“Soo-purr-mark,” droned the younger fox at his side, squinting to read the gigantic, red letters bolted to the roof, the last two letters having fallen through a hole in the flimsy sheet metal. Like the rest of the building, the letters were covered in a thick layer of moss and vines, with chunks missing after a decade of neglect.

What were, in the older fox’s memories, pristine white walls and polished glass, had been sundered by roots and vines, while the ugly asphalt paving the way forward had been swallowed by green grass and young, spindly birch trees.

“It’s supermarket, little bud,” corrected the older fox with a soft chuckle, turning his gaze from the ruined temple to the smaller fox at his side. His brother, Kuveli.

They shared a look with their frigid blue eyes, the older fox’s smile fading slightly as he saw the innocent puzzlement in Kuveli’s eyes. Of course, he was born mere weeks before The Cataclysm, he wouldn’t remember places like these.

It was obvious the younger fox was a product of The Cataclysm, dressed as he was with a waterproofed deerskin draped over his shoulders, and a pair of shredded cargo trousers clinging to his scrawny body by a flayed climbing

rope. It was in stark contrast to the older fox, who wore a pair of dirty biking goggles on his forehead, and a buttoned green field jacket covered in colourful patches, like a rainbow flag on one arm and a green-eyed crow that covered his back, as well as a nametag on his breast reading: "Sakara."

"Super market..." The smaller fox glanced back at the ruins, scratching his cheek as he thought over the word. "What's so super about it?"

The older fox, Sakara, cocked his head to the side at the question. It was a good question, he had always hated this place, and everyone always complained about it. The things they would go on about, from the prices, to the checkout queues, to the maze-like parking.

"Well..." Sakara stammered for a moment, hesitating to speak as he crouched down and hopped off the rusted hulk of an old police car. "I guess, because you could get everything there," he finally reasoned, as much to himself as Kuveli.

"Everything, huh," repeated Kuveli as he pushed himself to his footpaws, shaking the dust from his deerskin, making it rustle loudly. "Well, why haven't we been to one before? I'd love to have *everything!*" The smaller fox skipped as he joined his brother's side, a wide smile beaming from his muzzle.

"That's simple," stated Sakara as he unslung the rifle from his shoulder, sliding the bolt open slightly and observing the coppery point of a loaded bullet. "Everyone knew you could get everything here. So, everyone came to get everything," he explained, as they both began to stroll through the maze of rotting, metal hulks. "And they left nothing."

"Oh, and the ones that didn't get anything," Kuveli pondered hesitantly, slowing his pace slightly and falling behind his brother. "Did they...?"

Sakara halted, then glanced back at his little brother, emotionless as he turned and kneeled to poke a skull with the barrel of his rifle. Kuveli gulped, keeping back from the corpse, but unable to look away.

“Count yourself lucky that you don’t remember the early days,” mumbled Sakara ominously as he stood back up, and turned to continue towards the supermarket. Kuveli jogged to catch up with him, leaping over the pile of moss-covered bones and snatching his big brother’s tail to hug tightly.

A pit of guilt formed in Sakara’s gut, his ears going flat. He shouldn’t have scared his brother like that, he saw enough death as it was, and he didn’t need to be reminded of it. Perhaps he could scrounge something up to say sorry.

They reached the glass doors, long since shattered and tossed aside, the shutters that once barred entry now ripped apart like paper by desperate paws. Empty cans littered the floor, clanking as Sakara kicked them aside, stooping low so he could slip into the darkness within.

The sight that the brothers beheld was not promising. Chaos, destruction, and death. Bones littered the black-stained floors, covered in pungent mould and flecks of rotten flesh. Shelves and signs were overturned and piled atop each other, any goods long since pillaged or rotted away. Most of the gigantic steel lighting frames had come crashing down, and now they lay in tangled heaps of steel and broken glass.

“They said the drop was on Aisle Twenty,” said Kuveli, his voice echoing through the dark, empty aisles. “And that’s…” The little fox squinted again, looking up at the signs that hung over the entrance to each forbidding aisle. It was a miracle they were still there, else they might have been there all day, trying to figure out which aisle was which.

“That way!” Kuveli pointed left, following the numbers down from thirty-nine, a clear path laid out before them. At least they had that, and it wouldn’t be a struggle to carry the parcel back out.

“Hey, little bud, c’mere a second,” echoed Sakara’s voice, followed by a loud, metallic rattling. Kuveli turned, throwing his head to one side, leaping backwards as his brother rushed towards him with a rusty metal cart.

“Stop!” barked the little fox, the wheels of the cart screeching to a halt just short of his toes. It was like the cages they used to keep chickens, fixed upon tiny little wheels as big as his fist, nothing like his brother’s bike.

“Here, get in, I always wanted to try this,” insisted Sakara like an excited child, a wide smile on his muzzle as his tail wagged rapidly.

The smaller fox simply stared at him, bemused and a little bit worried about how quickly his brother’s mood had changed. But Sakara’s eyes betrayed no ill intent, they were innocent and full of excitement, which seemed to find its way into Kuveli too, as he felt his own tail begin to sway back and forth.

“N- no, it might be sharp,” protested Kuveli, shaking his head, trying to clear the bewildering feeling from his mind.

“Pleeeeeease,” begged Sakara, even going down on his knees and clasping his paws together. Though, even crouched, Kuveli was only slightly taller than his brother. “They never let us do this when I was your age, I’ll be damned if I let you miss out too.”

With a sigh, Kuveli glanced at the cart, then back at his brother’s pitiful performance. His legs did ache from the hike, it’d be worth it to take a break. Still, that old cart was rusty, and the metal was probably twisted. The last thing he wanted was for Sakara to be pulling shards of metal out of his backside.

“Fine,” huffed the little fox, his brother’s ears immediately perking up.

“Great! You won’t regret it.” Sakara leaped to his footpaws, lurching forward and wrapping his arms around his little brother, pulling him tight to his chest as he lifted the little fox up into the air, little legs kicking wildly, and dumped him unceremoniously into the cart.

“Wait a second-” Kuveli protested, throwing out his arms in protest, but his brother paid him no mind.

“You holding on tight in there?” Sakara gave the cart a shove, then suddenly pulled it back towards his chest. The little fox lurched back and forward as he did, almost banging his head on the rim of the cart.

“No!” Kuveli growled, his voice echoing all around the building, scattering a few pigeons that nested in the rafters.

“Next stop: Aisle twenty, and payday!”

With a rumble, the cart rocketed off, Sakara sprinting with all the strength his lanky legs could offer. The calloused wheels rattled, the whole cart shuddering and shaking as it bounced violently over each imperfection in its path. Clinging to the cage, Kuveli was pressed to the back of the cart, teeth grit, heart thundering in his chest.

From behind, Kuveli could hear a faint sound over the deafening rattle and roar of speeding steel. It was his brother, quietly humming to himself, making sounds like their motorcycle speeding down the street, and mimicking the screech of tires each time he swerved to avoid debris. The little fox couldn’t help but crack a smile, hearing his brother, and eventually joining in, both foxes pretending to race through empty streets together.

Glancing up, the little fox counted the aisles as they went by. Twenty-six, twenty-four, twenty-two, and...

“Twenty!” Kuveli yapped, the cart immediately screeching to a halt, throwing the little fox to the side as it spun wildly in circles, stopping as it came to face the aisle.

“What did I say, fun eh?” Sakara let out a hoarse chuckle as he panted, resting his paws on his knees and waiting to catch his breath. As he did, Kuveli hauled himself out of the cart, landing with a crunch in a mound of dirt and broken glass.

“I guess,” the little fox shrugged, his yellowing teeth clenched together in a broad, giddy smile. His brother snorted at that, reaching out and patting Kuveli on the shoulder.

“Don’t be modest, I can see that big smile of yours.” Sakara returned the gesture, smiling back at his little brother warmly, before they both turned to look down the aisle. Each of the brothers’ hackles rose, a chill rolling up their spines.

Aisle twenty was much less devastated, and yet, to Kuveli, that seemed to make it even worse. That long, narrow chokepoint disappearing into the oppressive darkness beyond, no crack in the roof to light their way. Reaching for his belt, Kuveli felt around for the flare strapped to his leg.

“Don’t waste it,” ordered Sakara in a half-whisper, the older fox looking over his shoulder at his brother. Big brother knew best, he was wiser, and so Kuveli obliged and left the flare unlit.

Scratching his head, the little fox considered their options. Perhaps there was a spare flashlight, or something to fashion a torch from. Wait, what about obvious solutions?

“Do you still have the lantern?” Kuveli asked hopefully, looking at the canvas backpack that clung to his brother’s back.

“I left it at home,” Sakara responded, then let out a growl and spat “shit!”

They both stood for a moment, Sakara with his rifle against his shoulder, his finger feathering the trigger as he kept the muzzle pointed into the darkness. The brothers looked about themselves, through the piles of debris and the meagre morsels of useless products that scavengers had left behind.

Then, something caught Sakara’s eye.

He lowered his rifle and slowly stepped forward, cautiously moving towards a stand on the left shelf of the aisle. Loyal, Kuveli followed in his pawprints, now keeping his paw on the knife in his breast pocket.

Tentatively, as they reached the stand, Sakara snatched something from one of the shelves and held it up to his muzzle. The younger fox recognised it straight away: A book. His brother loved books, they had piles of them at home, but he could never quite understand the appeal his brother saw in them.

Nonetheless, Kuveli’s curiosity got the better of him, and he snuck up beside his brother just as he opened the book to a random page.

“Hot local girls...?” Sakara mumbled, cocking his head to the side as he read the big, bold words at the top of the page, his gaze falling to observe the rest of the content, Kuveli following.

What met their eyes was the image of a naked weasel woman, a leather vest barely covering her breasts, and a skirt that only went as far as her thighs. The little fox couldn’t help but, like his brother, cock his head to the side. Both were confused, there wasn’t much in the way of words in this book.

“Must be why she’s taken all her clothes off,” Kuveli suggested, assuming the weasel was supposed to be hot, but not entirely confident in his assumption.

“It does say ‘summer edition,’ I suppose,” agreed Sakara as he closed the flimsy book and held the cover up before them. It was pink, with the black visage of a naked she-wolf, and the title, clear as day, reading: “Summer Howlers - Vol.3”

“I don’t get it,” grumbled Kuveli as he shook his head, turning away from the strange book and poking his nose into the opposite shelf.

“Neither do I, little bud,” Sakara sighed, carelessly tossing the magazine over the shelves and into the next aisle. “Let’s just get this over with,” he said as he turned and began to stroll down the aisle again, the darkness almost swallowing the older fox before Kuveli could catch up.

Their eyes adjusted slowly, the desolated shelves coming into view as they adapted to the rapidly fading light from the grimy front windows. They walked side-by-side with Sakara leading slightly, his rifle levelled against the darkness, sights raised, ready to intercept any threat that might be waiting to leap out at them.

Kuveli, meanwhile, was more concerned with finding the parcel. His starkly bright arctic eyes flicked from left to right, looking over each shelf and taking in every detail. Besides the odd, mould-covered bottle of washing liquid and moth-eaten boxes of detergent powder, there wasn’t much to see. As his brother had said, early scavengers had picked this place clean, like crows scouring a potato field.

“Hey,” whispered Sakara to the best of his ability, but his voice still managed to echo off the shelves and down the aisle, “check that out.” He thrust the rifle forward, the muzzle pointed at a chaotic scene that lay before them.



One of the shelves had been pushed over from the aisle opposite, and beneath the wreckage lay a shattered, yellowing skeleton. That seemed like as good a landmark as any, and Sakara pushed ahead, crouching on one knee beside the overturned shelf.

Kuveli shuffled over to join him, his cloak rustling and disturbing the fragile silence. He, too, crouched down beside the skull of the skeleton, recognising it as that of a feline with its shorter muzzle. One arm was still clutching the shelves while the other was thrown over their eyes, frozen in this pose for ten whole years since The Cataclysm.

Following the remains, Kuveli spied something hidden within the cracked and shattered ribs, shoved up against the shelf. Squinting, the little fox leaned in for a closer look, the miserable stench of death still lingering in his nose.

It was small and box-shaped, wrapped in waxy brown paper, no bigger than his big brother's clenched fist. Was that really it? It was so small!

Without hesitating, he slipped a paw between the ribs and grabbed the box. It was too small to just pull out, unless he snapped a rib off, so Kuveli pushed it towards the skull and slipped the box through the collar bone. Then, the little fox lifted it up, beholding the tiny parcel they had come to collect. Or at least, what he thought was the parcel.

“Hey, uh... Little bud, you done?” Sakara's voice seemed shaky and nervous, drawing his little brother's attention. He could hear the metallic clinking as the rifle shook in Sakara's shivering paws.

What had gotten his brother jumpy? Perhaps Kuveli didn't want to find out.

“Yeah, I’ve got it, let’s go home already,” Kuveli responded calmly, slipping the parcel into his fittingly small shoulder bag.

Nodding, Sakara backed up step-by-step, keeping his rifle raised and ready to fire. Something had him spooked, and the longer he took, the more his paranoia seemed to infect Kuveli.

“C’mon,” insisted the younger fox, unable to take his eyes off the darkness his brother aimed into, “there isn’t anything there.”

As Kuveli barked those last words, his brother let out a yelp. As Sakara stepped back, his footpaw had landed on the feline’s skull, the weathered bone shattering beneath the fox’s weight. He lost his footing, stumbling backwards through shards of skull, before falling onto his back with a thump.

The sound echoed through the whole building, reverberating up and down the aisles and even disturbing the thin layer of dust that covered every surface. With each pass it faded, little by little, until silence ruled once again.

But that silence was short-lived.

A furious roar answered the disturbance, loud enough that Kuveli could swear it shook the shelves. At the very least, it made every hair on his body stand on end, the little fox practically doubling in size as his fur instinctively puffed out. Kuveli whipped out the kitchen knife from beneath his cloak and held it out in front of him, scurrying over to his brother and, with his other paw, reaching out to help him stand.

“I said let’s go!” he barked, snatching his big brother by the strap of his goggles and tugging as hard as he could. Sakara didn’t hesitate, pushing himself to his footpaws, hardly noticing his little brother’s tugs.

“Way ahead of you,” panted Sakara as he turned and wrapped an arm around his little brother’s shoulders. Kuveli couldn’t run as fast, and he had to think quick. “Back to the cart, I’ll push you.”

“Got it,” acknowledged Kuveli, nodding to his big brother. And with that, they both sprinted back down the aisle, leaping over debris as they made sure to match each other’s speed. All the while, the sound of furious, thumping paws echoed all around them, too far removed to be pinpointed by their keen ears.

It was easy to reach the cart, the aisle mostly clear, and Kuveli vaulted into the cage ahead of Sakara, who followed close behind. The older fox grabbed the handlebar, tossing his rifle in the cart.

“She’s yours for now, little bud, make good use of her.” Sakara patted his brother on the back, watching as the little fox shifted into a comfortable position, then awkwardly picked up the rifle. As soon as he was sure Kuveli had a good grip, he pushed them away.

Again the cart rattled and shook, speeding down the front of the supermarket, each aisle passing by on their left. The heavy thudding of pursuing paws only grew louder, clearly able to pinpoint them from the sound of the cart, but Sakara paid no mind to that. He pushed them both onwards as Kuveli struggled to keep a steady aim, the cart shaking him violently as it passed over each obstacle.

Aisle thirty, thirty-two, thirty-

Just as they began to make headway, there was a colossal crash. A cacophony of noise as the aisle ahead of them erupted into chaos. One of the shelves was swept aside like a toy, flying across the path of the two foxes as a gigantic, brown-furred mass emerged from the darkness.

Digging his heels in, Sakara yelped as he struggled to bring the speeding cart to a halt. Kuveli tried to raise his sights, but thinking fast, his big brother threw his weight to the right, causing the cart to spin wildly and crash into the shelves of another aisle.

“Bear!” Sakara cried at the top of his lungs, reaching for his belt and whipping out his contingency plan: An odd-looking revolver with a snub muzzle.

Growling, the older fox stood fast against the bear as it clambered over the wrecked shelves, cocking the hammer of his revolver and squeezing the trigger.

*Pop, pop, pop!* Three rounds in quick succession, the first pinging off the ruined shelves at the bear’s feet, the second tearing up the linoleum tiles, while the third was lucky. With a deafening roar, the bear reared up, the third bullet embedding itself in its shoulder, giving the brothers some desperately needed time.

“I think you just made it angry,” shouted Kuveli as he wriggled free of the overturned cart, clinging to the rifle with flecks of blood spattered over his forehead. He wasn’t wrong, and Sakara knew to run, as he scrambled into the aisle with his brother.

“You don’t say, huh,” Sakara spat back, grabbing Kuveli under the arms and hauling him up onto the shelves. He did not protest, latching onto the shelves and perching himself on top of them, extending a paw back to his big brother.

Sakara brushed the offer away, hopping onto the overturned cart and using it as a stepping stone to climb onto the shelves. Just as he did, the bear

crashed back down, its eyes, burning with agony and hatred, were turned upon the two lofty foxes. Once again, it charged recklessly at them.

What now? Sakara had to act quickly, glancing around. He noticed light streaming in from where the bear had thrown the shelves, seeing that it had torn down the gate and smashed the glass. Yes, that would be their escape.

“To the other shelves,” ordered Sakara as he pointed at the broken window. Kuveli nodded, then stood from his perch and jumped across the aisle. The bear ignored him, still coming for Sakara, roaring and frothing as the bullet ground against its very bones.

Sakara shook his head, he couldn't fuck this up. Steady, steady...

With all the strength his burning legs could offer, he leaped into the air and over the linoleum chasm below. But it wasn't enough, and he began to fall short, cursing as his chest slammed into the shelves, clinging on by his fingertips. The bear turned, its prey now within its vicious grasp.

Raising a gigantic paw, the bear swiped at Sakara, but a loud *crack* stopped it mid-swing. Another bullet whizzed through air, shearing through the bear's paw, while Kuveli sat perched upon the shelves, a smoking rifle pressed against his shoulder.

Seizing the opportunity, Sakara scrambled up the shelves and grabbed his brother's arm, laughing nervously.

“Good shot, little bud,” he beamed with an unsteady smile, giving his brother a shove and insisting they keep moving. Sakara hopped off the other side of the shelves first, while Kuveli glanced back at the bear, roaring and throwing its weight around as it tried to dislodge the bullet.

As he watched, he could feel something welling up in his gut. Regret. He felt sorry for the bear, it was suffering. And all because they had trespassed

where it lived, and then put two bullets into its body. If it lived, the scars would be deep.

Letting off a long sigh, Kuveli followed his brother off the shelves, joining him as they both stooped and scabbled back out into the warm embrace of daylight. Both brothers had to agree, as they looked at the parcel they had recovered:

It better have been worth it.