 A cold wind blew hard over the brittle surface of the faltering world that morning.  The arthritic sun rose slowly to claim its rightful place in the pale, stretched sky.  Its thin, sallow light bled meekly through the grey and impotent clouds.

    Already you could tell it was going to be another brutal, callous day.

    Somewhere beneath the bitter sky a dog barked wildly, blinded by the same old urges and primal suspicions that had always ruled its heart.  The hollowing wind pulled at the shambolic remains of houses scattered alongside the roadside.  It plucked tiles from their rooftops and blew clusters of litter into slow, meandering dances that followed the faces of the crumbling curbs until it was done with them.  Swirling newspaper pages and torn food wrappers.  Rolling empty beer cans and crushed cigarette butts.  Spent shell casings.  All of them moved together in drunken, giddy, brief dalliances.

     Two figures walked slowly along this broken road.  Two men.  Two thieves.  The sound of their boots rang out a tired, if purposeful tattoo on the cracked surface as they went.  They kept on looking dead ahead, bristling with adrenaline and anticipation.  They were focused on their destination and the task at hand.

“Look,” the younger one was saying, carrying his prized rifle out in his hands for all the world to see. “We’re done talking about this.  The plan is simple for a reason.  It’s staying that way.”

“Sure.” The older one kept a cigarette held between his cracked lips. “Simple.”

The older thief, for his sins, tried to leave his pistol sitting in its holster until he absolutely needed it.  He liked the idea that some days he might not even need it at all.  Of course, there were still the black days when it took all of his willpower to force himself to put it back there again.  Days when red mist fells.  Days when it felt as if every man left in this world was trying to test him.  Still, there was some desperate and overstretched part of himself that always had a say in the matter.  The side of him that didn't used to carry a gun.  The side of him that remembered who he'd used to be when the world was whole.  The part of him still said all of this was wrong.  It was convinced that if the gun stayed by his side then maybe others would pay him the same kindness.  Although these days he was beginning to worry he'd just created another superstition to live his life by.  You could drown in your private superstitions out here if you weren't careful.

He took the spent nub of the cigarette from between his lips and tossed it back over his shoulder.  The acrid taste of the first smoke of the day felt necessary if not necessarily good.  The dog end smouldered and died as it was left in their wake.  Ash crumbled to the ground.  Another breadcrumb to mark out their passage through this dying world.

    On the way here they had passed so many burnt out skeletons of homes.  So many ransacked ruins.  They had seen overgrown gardens reclaimed and clawed back by the strong hands of nature.  Fallen, bullet ridden fences.  Stone boundary walls built up and fortified with rusting barbed wire and concrete blocks.  They had seen rusting land mines surrounding farm crops and bodies left hanging in the trees as reminders of the new laws.  The Fall had clearly hit hard around here.

    The two thieves had remarked on it when they'd first entered this county.  The younger thief had reckoned it was something to do with it being so close to the ocean.  His parents had told him years ago that the sea always made men feel small and made them act funny if they stared at it for too long.  The older thief hadn’t said much on the matter.  He knew that it didn’t take a close proximity to water to force men to commit horrifying acts.  Especially these days.  Although some men had never needed an excuse.  His own father had taught him that.

“Look, there’s nothing to worry about,” the younger one said, his eyes cruel and hungry as he surveyed the land ahead of them. “The plan is solid.”

He had shaved all his ginger hair off a long time ago and he never let it grow back.  This was his new face.  That was how he liked to think of it.  Stripped down, sharp and savage.  He didn’t like his old face anymore.  He didn’t even like seeing photos of it.  It reminded him of a life he no longer had any claim to.  He had done terrible things since those photos had been taken.  Terrible things that this pale face dappled with rough, red scree suited well.

“It looked quiet yesterday, didn't it?” he carried on.  He spat on the decaying body of a dead bird as they passed it by. “It looked downright lonely to me.”

“Everywhere looks lonely now,” said the older thief. “Doesn’t mean it's safe.”

    The younger thief shook his head.  A dark smile on his lips.

“Sometimes I don’t know how you survived this long.  You ask me, you’re getting afraid of your own shadow.”

    His slightly heavy set companion shrugged.  It looked like an action of deflation.  The smile on his face was little more than a narrow, uncertain crease.

“In my defence my shadow does carry a gun.”

“Look, we’ve been out here long enough to know that we’re not running into any armed patrols.  Not like last time.  This is just another little place in the middle of nowhere.”

“Well, I don’t know about you but I don’t fancy getting shot in the middle of nowhere.”