He knew only too well that food was scarce out here, in the dead and crumbling regions.  Robbing a store like this was tantamount to killing a whole struggling town.  He also knew how hungry he was and that his partner was even hungrier.  So they needed to eat, regardless of how others around here coped from day to day after they were gone.  That was just how the world worked now.  For every man, everywhere.  It was no longer your business to care about any man but yourself.  If you tried to live any other way you would die.  Unless, maybe, you were one of the men who huddled together in the big cities.  All they did all day was pray, whip themselves and empty their seed into a paper cup, shedding a tear for all the women and children they had ever loved whilst they did it.  That was what earned you sanctuary these days.  A clean record, a clean medical test, a willingness to give samples and a totally gullible soul.  A blind sense of self righteousness also helped.  Like those fools wouldn’t die in the end anyway, same as every other men.  The Lifeboats would come back for them all soon enough.  There was nothing that really separated them from all those women and children they’d buried or burnt a few years ago.  It was all just a matter of time now and how you chose to spend it.  There were so many men out there now hunting for a distraction or playing at being something else.  They changed their names and cut themselves, they pretended they were a totally different animal.  Without a governing hand or any sort of hope in sight this world had become a bad reflection of the place it once was.

There it was.  Their destination.  Visible now and getting closer with every step.  Not that either of them broke into a run.  They took their time, kept themselves under control.  Their scavenger eyes scanning the land for signs of trouble.

    A large, empty car park sat in front of the small row of shops, its surface as cracked and ruined as the road that led up to it.  There were only a few vacant heaps of rust and some flat tyres left scattered across its web of empty spaces now.  There were a few old dark burn marks on the tarmac.  Shadows with nothing to cast them in the sunlight.  Men had clearly camped here at some point.  Most of the shops themselves were derelicts, uninhabited husks, but there at the centre was the jewel in the crown and it was still unguarded by the looks of it.

    The older one had been surprised at how few customers they’d seen go in there yesterday but his younger companion had sneered and said he reckoned not many locals would venture this far out anymore.  He reasoned they were more likely to be the kind of men who spent their days building little tokens to help their crops grow better and mending their fences.

He stopped and turned to face the car park and the shop beyond.  He licked his lips and ran a hand along his rifle.  His father’s old rifle.  He'd learned to hunt with this gun.  He felt his stomach start to burn.  It was a familiar pain.  Part of the routine these days.  His body was sharpening itself up for what lay ahead.  His yellowed eyes looked at the flat, barren world around him and the shop ahead of him like it was all just another target.  Another little kingdom for the taking.

His travelling companion and partner in crime stared past his greasy tangles of grey hair and ran a hand through his dry, wiry beard.  He felt sick.  He always did just before about they robbed a place.  Maybe it was because he could always find some trace evidence of his old life in these moments.  The battered, faded sales signs in the window.  The open sign on the door.  The posters advertising new movies for rent.  Adverts for fireworks, discount alcohol and lottery tickets.

Sometimes you’d walk through a door like that with a gun in your hand and a little bell would ring over your head.  It would make you stop for a moment.  It was such a simple little sound, but it was ghostly now.  It was haunted.  A shiver would run down your spine when you heard it.  Only that bell no longer summoned a smiling face to greet or serve you.  No, now it brought covering fire, pleas for mercy and occasional bloodshed.