The older thief felt a straying hand brush against the pistol hanging at his hip.  He could feel himself trying to push away from the world, trying step clear of his skin until this was done.  He was never truly in control of himself once the gun was drawn.

    His partner read the action and nodded curtly.  He started to head for the shop, marching across the deserted car park.  The older thief stood and watched him go for a few steps before he walked towards the remains of the low wall that ran along the end of the car park.  He planted himself behind it.  He spat on the dead grass and pulled his hat a little lower, so the brim was nearly over his eyes.

At times like this his old life would always bleed through.  Whether he wanted it to or not.  He couldn’t stop the ghost of his wife singing softly in his ear, as subtle as a regrettable thought.  It wasn’t what he needed to hear right now but she would always turn up.  She used to sing to herself when she cooked but she would always stop if he walked in.  If he ever heard her start he would stand in their small dining room and listen for a while, smiling to himself.

    He tried to distract himself from the ghost of her breathing down his neck.  He listened to the footfalls of his partner as he strode over to the little shop instead.  He counted them as he went.  Twenty one.  Twenty two.  Twenty three.  He wasn’t rushing.  Maybe that was a good sign.

He fought to control the hunger in his stomach as he listened.  He had seen so many good men fall to the hunger over these past ten years.  He had seen them run into fires to raid the flames for something to eat, something to drink.  He had seen men burn a friend's corpse only for the smell to grow too much for them to bear.  This felt no different.  They were just running into their own kind of fire, picking at a different kind of corpse.

    His hand strayed to his hip again as he surveyed the desolate road and the shells of the buildings around him.  No sign of movement.  The boots of his partner kept ringing out off the cracked tarmac of the car park.  He kept counting them.  Thirty five.  Thirty six.  Thirty seven.  Not a long way to run if there was any kind of trouble.  He hated to admit it but he did like the way the boy carried the rifle out in front of him at all times.  There was no pretence to the action.  It was a clear and simple declaration of intent.  I am armed and I am ready.  It was a rare thing these days.  A lot of men hid their weapons, old and the young alike.  The Lifeboats had changed them.  It had stripped them down to something grim and gaunt.  The barest minimums required of humanity.  Their bodies and their souls had become something to hang their clothes on in the mornings.

He checked the road in both directions.  Nothing stirred.  Smoke rose from a chimney stack back in town, but that was about it.  He pulled a pack of battered gum out of his pocket and crammed a slab of it between his jaws.  He started working on it.  The acid in his stomach rose and began to pitch a fit.  It would keep him sharp.  It would keep him keen and harsh until this was done.

    The boy didn’t look back as he slipped into the store.  His rifle raising as the door closed behind him.  His shouts were just audible for that moment, carried on the wind.  Then the door closed and silence settled.  He didn't fire a warning shot.  Another possible good omen.

The older thief surveyed the wrecked cars in front of the place.  Six of them.  Burnt out, gutted and left to rust.  No one would be sleeping in those.  They’d done a brief check yesterday but there were no sign of life.  All this silence made him wish he could explain away the cold surprise he could feel lurking in the air close by.