  Christ, how he was hungry.  He kept chewing on the gum.  *Not long*, he told himself.  *Not long until we eat something other than dry rations*.  He tried not to think about what the boy was doing in there or what he might find.  That rifle was heavy and fully loaded and the boy had good aim with it.  There was no doubt about that.  He liked to pretend he could only fight close up but the older thief knew where that came from.  He knew that his young companion liked to be close to his kills.  He liked to watch them die.  He liked to listen to them splutter out.

Word around the town drunks last night was that this place was run by a couple of brothers.  Old men.  They had already been old when everything went wrong, when the Lifeboats had first reared its ugly head and the children had started to die.  Old or ancient, the shop keepers' age wouldn't cut them any slack with the man who had just walked in through their front door.  If they moved too slow or didn’t hear too well it would cost them and that rifle barked pretty loud when it got angry.  He would know all about it out here.

    The older thief shook the thought from his head and kept on watching the world around him.  No point fretting until something went wrong.  If something went wrong.

    He stayed calm.  As calm as he could allow.  Nothing stirred.  No sign to betray the coming of the storm he was so sure was out there, hiding around some sheltered corner.  Although he always felt like this when they were working.  He couldn't allow himself to deny it or quieten it down.  That was tempting fate on a scale he couldn't face.  Paranoia was best to be spoilt and fussed over at a time like this.  You didn't want it festering into any sort of reality because it felt left out.

    He turned his attention to the other shops in the row.  Nothing more than hollowed out faces now.  Scalped skulls.  Gravestones to a past that was never coming back.  A dry cleaners, a takeaway of some description, a hairdressers and a computer game place by the look of it.  Jesus, how he missed fast food.  Kung Po chicken, pizza, fish and chips.  Greasy kebab meat.  Thai curries and fierce, fiery enchiladas.  All just a phone call or a short drive away once upon a time.  He had to fight to shut the taste of them out of his mouth.  Food like that simply didn't exist anymore.  Or, if it did, it would come at a high price.  They had ran into a bunch of raiders once who kept a chef prisoner.  They had him chained up in a wagon, preparing steaks and other treats.  The deal seemed to be when they got bored of his food they were going to make him start cooking pieces of himself.  Another desperate life you could do nothing to help.  Although those steaks had smelt damn good.

    He worked harder at the gum and tried, yet again, to rein in the hunger.  When the kid came out of there he might have some fairly fresh bread or some tinned goods.  Maybe some new dry ration food.  There wouldn't be much else, but it would do.  Food was no longer a luxury or a hobby.  It wasn't an interest anymore.  It was fuel, plain and simple.  You ate or you starved.

He tried to think of something, anything to take his mind off the hunger.  He thought about the church they’d passed on the way to the town.  The ruined church with the tree growing out through the roof.  He couldn’t shake that image for some reason.  It had stuck with him since he'd first seen it.  The tree looked like it had punched right through the joists and tiles.  Now dead leaves were falling off the branches and scattering over the remains of the roof tiles.  There had been crows on those branches.  Or, at least, they were there when he remembered it now.  Large, black shapes watching them pass by.  When the birds had screeched and cawed the older thief was sure he'd heard some unspoken judgement or warning in their cries.

    His eyes were cold and focused now.  He let his eyes stray to the door his partner had gone through only moments ago.  It felt longer than it actually was.  Time played tricks on you when you were working, when you were waiting.  It refused to obey the simple tick of a clock.  There was still no movement, still no sound.  Nothing.  Which had to be good.  Still, though, he kept his left hand over the gun resting on his hip.  He hated waiting.  It never sat well with him.

    The wind blew up again and his loose tangles of grey hair moved with it.  He didn’t blink or fuss them away.  He just kept staring at the door.  He ran through scenarios that he was desperate to avoid.  It felt less like ticking them off and more like stopping them before they could catch him off guard.

    He cast an eye back at the town, just to make sure nothing was happening back there either.  It was a real rubble and dirt kind of place.  Nothing more than a ruin in the making.  Another shambolic footnote to the world that was.  Another festering knot of the fearful, the god botherers and the ever grieving.  Maybe the kid had been right.  Maybe there wouldn’t be any trouble here.  They had gone into town for a drink in last night.  The men in there, lit by fading candles, had already started to look like corpses.

    The first gunshot snapped him to full attention.

    His left hand twitched over his hip and the gun was in his grip.  He spat the gum out.  He was heading across the car park fast, before he even thought about what he was doing.  He moved quicker than it looked like his older frame should allow.  His boots drove him across the jigsaw puzzle of faded borders that made up the empty parking spaces.  He sucked in air and tried to keep the adrenaline down to a controllable surge.  He pictured a sea of marshals waiting in there for him.  He saw them armed to the teeth.  He looked over his shoulder as he kept moving.  No one behind him.

    The second gunshot made him speed up to a full pelt run.  His eyes focused on the shop door.  No one was coming out.  He couldn’t hear raised voices.