 He still couldn't work out why some men felt driven to keep these places open, stocking them with whatever they could.  It couldn't just be about making money or building any sort of an empire any more.  Maybe it was more about helping the community or maybe it was simply yet another way to occupy themselves and pass the time.  Or maybe it was some lingering form of duty, muscle memory of a former life.  Something they had always done.  A reason to get out of bed in the morning.  There was a lot of that delusion going around.

A couple of weeks back the two thieves had walked along a deserted stretch of motorway.  It had been a risk but they wanted to travel quickly.  Motorways weren’t always easy to negotiate now.  It wasn't just a case of all the abandoned cars and dead bodies.  There was always the chance of running into someone far worse than yourself.  Still they were quicker than cutting through smaller towns, near patrols of marshals and local militia.

It was down this particular stretch of four lane road that they had passed a guy washing abandoned cars.  There was no real reason for him to be there.  It was just how he chose to spend his days.  They had seen men pursue stranger options after all.  Although there was something tragic about that man, with his bucket of murky water and mouldering sponge.  The dim smile of satisfaction on his bruised and haggard face.  One hand little more than a stump.  He walked badly, dragging an infected leg behind him.  He only had one working eye but the other hadn’t been removed.  It was still there, hanging loose against his cheek.  Not that it seemed to bother him.  Probably the work of raiders.  For all the pain he must have felt he kept on cleaning those broken down and abandoned cars, always smiling to himself.  It was a toothless, vacant smile of childish bliss.

The older thief had watched him and wondered if it would be easier to just let go like that.  Let the madness in.  His travelling companion had felt differently.  He had shot the fool in the head and taken what he could use from his cart.  Which hadn't been a lot.

Survival had never been a pretty word but the world had changed it into something else now.  Something fouler, something more incendiary.  It could spark flames any second now.  Survival was a far more dangerous word than it used to be.  Men held it too close to their hearts.  It was a motto, a creed.  An alibi.  Maybe even a religion of sorts.  Survival was spelt with a lot more blood than it used to be and the older thief was certain the nature of it had changed.  It was no longer the survival of the fittest. No, now it was the survival of the keenest.

“We’re vultures,” he said, the thought slipping past his tired defences.

    The younger one turned his head and smiled like he’d just gotten some joke he’d heard years ago.

“Careful. That's a dirty word around here.”

    The wind whipped at them.  The older one could feel his heart starting to race.  His blood pumping harder.  He could taste the sharp metal tang of adrenaline rising at the back of his throat.  He looked at the hungry face of his partner.  Any job before now and the boy would never have offered to go in there alone.  Back then, of course, they’d had a third man with them.  A good, steadying influence on the boy.  A big man with a slow, strong way of speaking.  He never panicked.  He never looked worried.  He rarely even raised an eyebrow.  He looked over the devastation and always saw some new way for them to survive.  He had been as steady as a rock, right up until the moment those marshals had blown his knee apart with a shotgun.