

Prologue

Over three centuries had passed since the cataclysmic event that had reshaped the world, reducing it to a mere shadow of its former self. The once-great civilisations had crumbled, their towering achievements reduced to ruins and dust. In a desolate, dystopian future, a chilling 350 years have passed since the world teetered on the precipice of oblivion. A megalomaniacal tyrant, his ambitions thwarted, unleashed a catastrophic inferno upon the planet. This malevolent act scorched the earth, tainting the very air we breathe and corrupting the once-fertile soil. It was an apocalypse that nearly wiped the canvas of civilisation utterly clean.

Now, gazing upon the landscape of England, it's as though time itself has been spun backwards, transporting us not to the 24th century but rather to the echoing depths of the 12th century. The relics of progress and prosperity have crumbled into the annals of history.

In the harrowing aftermath of this global collapse, humanity stood bereft of the knowledge and skills that once powered their civilisation. They had lost the art of crafting even the most rudimentary of essentials: electricity, the lifeblood of the bygone era, lay dormant; fuel for the once-mighty combustion engines had dwindled into a dim memory. The very foundations upon which civilisation had stood, pillars like law and order, the apparatus of governance, had been swept away by the unforgiving tides of chaos.

Within the remnants of ancient metropolises that had somehow survived the nuclear storms, ruthless gangs arose to seize control. They prowled the crumbling streets, their dominion extending deep into the heartland, scavenging ruthlessly for sustenance. The once-thriving cities had devolved into lawless wastelands where anarchy reigned supreme.

Survivors, driven to the brink by the ceaseless terror, fled in droves. Forced into the unforgiving wilderness, they clung to the faintest glimmers of hope, venturing into the remotest corners of the earth in their quest for sanctuary. In this forsaken world, humanity's fight for survival was a symphony of despair, echoing across the vast, desolate expanse of a world forever changed.

Within a mere decade, once-thriving cities crumbled into desolation, their once-bustling streets now haunted echoes of a bygone era, fading into the hushed annals of history. The relentless march of time consigned them to the shadows of memory.

Amidst this harrowing decay, humanity coalesced into small, resilient enclaves, mere islands in a sea of desolation. In groups of twenty souls or fewer, they clung to one another, forging new family bonds amidst the ashes of the old world. It was a survival born of necessity, a testament to the unyielding human spirit.

In those early, unforgiving years, a staggering ninety-five percent of the nation's once-teeming populace succumbed to the inexorable spectre of starvation or brutality of gangs stockpiling the remaining dwindling supplies. The bounty of yesteryears, once stored in supermarket aisles, had dwindled to nought. Those who remained faced a brutal reckoning, grappling with the bitter reality that sustenance was a fleeting luxury.

Amidst this stark attrition, the surviving enclaves remained sparse and scattered, like precious oases in a vast, unforgiving desert. But as the centuries wore on and the population slowly clawed its way back from the abyss, a tentative transformation began to unfurl.

People, driven by necessity and fuelled by the primal instinct for connection, ventured beyond their tightly-knit communities. The spectre of stranger danger, once paramount, began to wane as the world opened up once more. Slowly but surely, they rekindled the ancient practice of trade, forging bonds with other resilient pockets of humanity.

What was once mere villages burgeoned into modest towns, their growth mirroring the resurgence of hope. Yet, with each passing day, the skills and comforts of the once pervasive 21st century slipped further into obscurity. These conveniences, these trappings of a bygone era, had vanished like grains of sand in the wind, save for a precious few tomes that had miraculously survived the ravages of time. These books, treasured relics of an easier life, heralded the dawn of a new age, an age where humanity sought to rebuild with wisdom gained from the past, forging a path forward in this brave new world.

In the early throes of the 23rd century, a haunting veil of desolation shrouded the land. The once-mighty edifice of old-world infrastructure, laws, and governance had crumbled into the abyss of history. In the ensuing chaos, an ominous breed of powerbrokers emerged, relentless in their pursuit of dominance. These were the architects of a new era, a grim epoch ruled by the iron fist of warlords, who audaciously donned the mantle of sheriffs. Their might was personified in their ruthless enforcers, a merciless cadre known simply as the Guard.

At first, their ascent bore certain benefits, offering a semblance of order in a world plunged into lawlessness. The sheriffs carved pathways through the tangled wilderness, resurrecting town walls, reviving forgotten roads, and even reconstructing castles, albeit at a heavy toll upon the hitherto peaceful denizens of the land.

Where once towering skyscrapers had scraped the heavens, humble wooden houses now stood as the modest abodes of the populace. The once-paved roads had yielded to encroaching forests, their former grandeur reduced to mere myths whispered by the wind. In this transformation, the sheriffs wielded their newfound authority, initially with subtlety, winning the trust of the beleaguered masses, steadily expanding their sphere of influence until they held dominion overall.

Taxes, ostensibly levied to fund these rejuvenating endeavours, swiftly morphed into chains of servitude. Those who dared defy the relentless taxation found themselves thrust into the abyss of captivity, their freedom a casualty of fiscal disobedience. The once proud and free populations, who had savoured the simplicity of life as farmers and artisans, converged into the sheriffs' tightly controlled principalities.

Overnight, they ceased to be individuals, transformed into mere chattel, a commodity to be manipulated and regulated. The sheriffs, some of whom had deciphered the ancient texts and maps, bestowed names upon these territories, evoking the distant echoes of long-forgotten counties and towns. Nottingham, once a tranquil haven, was among the mournful echoes of the past, now overshadowed by the grim spectre of sheriff's rule. The land had metamorphosed, its people ensnared in the relentless grip of this authoritarian dystopia, where the price of order was the very essence of their humanity.

Nottingham, once a haven of tranquil existence, now lay shackled under the oppressive yoke of its neighbouring conqueror, the sheriff of Newark. His rule, an unrelenting tempest of cruelty and power, brooked no opposition. In this nightmarish regime, defiance was met with ruthless, unmerciful retribution. Factions that dared to defy his dominion were summarily crushed beneath the iron heel of his tyranny. Those who dared to lead insurrections were doomed to a grisly fate. The ringleaders, their guilt pronounced by a merciless court of his making, faced the hallowed gallows, where they would draw their last, agonising breaths before a jeering public.

But the sheriff's cruelty knew no bounds. In his quest for absolute submission, he devised a more sinister torment for the co-conspirators. These unfortunate souls would be ensnared in the web of servitude, their freedom a distant memory, their futures uncertain and bleak, toiling endlessly to repay their perceived debt to the merciless sheriff.

Yet, in the shadow of this malevolent rule, a beacon of resistance flickered to life. Loxley, a humble hamlet, steadfastly refused to bow beneath the weight of exorbitant taxes. A rebellion was

brewing, led by none other than the venerable village elder, the indomitable Big Tim, a stalwart of their community, the baker. Alongside him stood the resilient miller, and a master artisan skilled in the craft of bow-making, a carpenter who doubled as a deft leatherworker.

Their transgression was to proclaim the injustice of the sheriff's demands, a grievance too loud and clear to be ignored. The sheriff, in his insatiable thirst for dominance, saw this defiance as a spark that could ignite the flames of rebellion in neighbouring settlements. And so, he resolved to make a sinister example of these brave souls, to send an unambiguous message to all who dared question his rule. The fate of Loxley hung in the balance, as the stage was set for a dramatic showdown between the forces of oppression and the flickering ember of resistance.