

Shroud Overview (1,000 Words)

A young woman, Lady Victoria Celestine, sits quietly before her father's casket. The mourners have all left and she is alone. A servant delivers two letters from her husband Johnathan Celestine: 1) one addressed to her; and 2) another addressed to her late father, Isaiah.

Opening the letter to her, she reads the loving correspondence detailing her husband's trip to America; however, when she opens the second letter addressed to her father, the tone is much more dreadful. Fearing for his life, Johnathan implores Isaiah to come to America and aid him. Collecting her younger brother, Abraham, Victoria immediately departs for America to help her husband.

Arriving by boat to New York, she secures passage to the west by train. On the train, she briefly exchanges glances with a powerful and odd noble, Lord Riven. They only exchange glances, something that strangely perplexes the European nobleman.

Transferring from train to stagecoach, she arrives in a small, desolate town called Shroud, deep in the Arizona Territory. The town seems abandoned and is surrounded by the Apache who fear to enter it.

Immediately, the off-putting townsfolk disavow any knowledge of Victoria's husband, the English surgeon and naturalist Johnathan Celestine. Undeterred, Victoria stays in Shroud with her younger brother, dedicated to finding her missing husband.

Over a period of days, Victoria concludes her husband was in town and that the townsfolk are lying about his arrival and disappearance. Aaron, a lone defector from the town's pact of silence, reluctantly informs Victoria her husband Johnathan did arrive several months ago, but has since vanished; however, Aaron knows the whereabouts of some of Johnathan's effects.

Taking Victoria to a remote cave, Aaron reveals several of Johnathan's possessions including his journal in which the missing naturalist declares his suspicions of the town's eccentric mayor, Mr. Undercroft. Having followed a long and convoluted history of half-truths and rumor, Johnathan theorizes the Spanish Mr. Undercroft might be a serial killer using an old Apache superstition as his cover. With these clues Victoria returns to Shroud to meet Mr. Undercroft personally to confirm or deny for herself her husband's bizarre theory. The meeting is odd, but not immediately indicting.

A brief confrontation with some of the town folk affords Victoria a chance to tell Aaron of her upbringing. She reveals that her very eclectic father wanted a boy, and raised her less as girl and more as a man: weapons, fighting, science, literature, travel, banking. As a result, Victoria is an odd anachronism against the more conservative Old West. She can more than take care of herself.

Defectors from the Confederacy, posing as Undercroft's lawmen, use Shroud as a refuge and have an uneasy alliance with Mr. Undercroft.

Sifting 350-year old papers from the Spanish Court obtained by Johnathan, Victoria discovers records of the expedition of Coronado, a Spanish conquistador who explored Arizona in 1550's. She finds a particular reference to the hanging of a Spanish soldier named Cinecusa. The report condemns Cinecusa for cannibalism and details his hanging on "the devil's tree."

Aaron tells Victoria this tree is nearby – she insists on seeing it. According to local lore, the tree has become cursed, tainted by the agonized souls of the hundreds of people who have died horribly on its branches. According to medieval lore, such a cursed tree might return the dead hanging from it back to life.

Victoria believes this is the source of Undercroft's deception: the mayor knows of the ancient Apache legend of Cinecusa, and is using it to keep the warlike Indians at bay. Undercroft and his men plunder wagon trains and military freight bound for California and stow it in the hidden town of Shroud.

The Apache believe the mayor is Cinecusa, a former Spanish soldier in the service of Coronado and condemned eater of children, who has haunted the desolate lands of Arizona for 350 years. That is why the Apache never attack the town of Shroud, for fear of the creature that lives there. The mayor perpetuates the Apache's superstition by murdering the children captured by his men during raids. The mayor then leaves the bones out in the hills and desert for the Apache to find.

Confronting Undercroft about his illegal activities, she warns him of her intent to travel to Santa Fe and return with Federal marshals. However, when she goes to collect her little brother, she discovers he has nearly been whipped to death by Undercroft's sadistic posse.

Sloan, the leader of the ex-confederate soldiers (The Greyriders), intimidates and threatens Victoria at gunpoint, assuring her that she is going nowhere.

Thereafter, Victoria removes her gravely injured little brother to the cave and nurses his wounds, while life in the town goes on as normal. While Victoria is washing Abraham's blood bandages, one of the Greyriders discovers her at the cave and attempts to rape her. During the fight, Victoria pulls the rustler's gun out of his own holster and shoots him repeatedly, killing him.

Realizing that she cannot escape, and that her husband was murdered by the Greyriders, Victoria decides to go on the offensive. Changing from her Victorian dresses to western wear she collected earlier from the general store, she returns to the town of Shroud.

Victoria successfully engages and kills the Greyriders to everyone's surprise.

That night, the heretofore unseen leader of the Greyriders, Jericho Lynch, arrives in town only to discover his entire posse has been murdered. Undercroft tells Lynch the angry bride of Johnathan Celestine killed his men.

Confronting Victoria, Lynch himself is killed but not before mortally wounding Victoria. Ultimately, the mayor confronts Victoria directly. The Dutch widow shoots the mayor, confident a lone bullet will kill the serial killer. However, Mayor Undercroft does not fall – he actually is the child-eating revenant Cinecusa.

The legend is true.

As the invincible mayor stands ready to kill Victoria, her younger brother has set fire to the cursed tree. Reverting to a mortal, Victoria murders the mayor and frees the town before dying.