

The Death of Joan of Arc

A Lost Story from The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel

by Michael Scott, 1959–

Published: 2010

This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical and public figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical or public figures appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.



I am convinced this physician is killing me.

Certainly his treatments are much worse than what ails me. He comes each morning with his poultices and potions and pronounces me a little better every day. It gives my children comfort—except perhaps for my eldest son, Richard, who begrudges paying the physician to keep me alive. Richard imagines that when I leave this earth he will inherit everything, but he is wrong. My fortune will go to my youngest, William, who followed me into the army and fought valiantly for England in the wars against France.

In truth, there is little wrong with me, except the seventy years which lie heavily upon my bones and some old wounds which trouble me in damp weather. And seventy—or it might be seventy-one, or seventy-two, my mother was always vague about the year—is a goodly age in this, the Year of Our Lord 1481.

I have a few regrets. There was a girl I should have married, a war in which I should never have fought, a loaf of bread I should have shared, a lie to which I should never have listened. And there is a story I should have told.

It is time to tell it while I still can.

No doubt you will have been told the tale of the death of the Maid of Orléans. I have heard accounts told by people who were not there, who were either too young or too cowardly to have fought in that terrible war. I have listened to their boasts and their lies and never once have I been tempted to question them, to call them liars.

Perhaps I should have.

I know what happened on that day, the last day of May, in the Year of Our Lord 1431 in Rouen. I was there.

*—from the Last Will and Testament of William of York,
This day, the 13th day of October 1481*

William of York heard the crowd moan behind him, then a huge indrawn breath, and knew that the prisoner must have been brought up from the cells. He didn't turn to look. He had been fighting for most of his adult life and he had no wish to see another condemned prisoner—especially not this one.

„Eyes front,” he snapped at the two guards on the gate. They glowered at him but obediently turned back to watch the long straight road that led into the French town of Rouen. „If there's to be an attack, it will be now,” he added, „when the prisoner is in the open air.”

„There will be no attack,” one of the guards, a sullen Dutchman, said in his accented English. „The French want rid of her almost as much as we do.”

„Some, maybe,” William agreed, „but not all. I was there at Orléans, where she claimed her first great victory. I saw her fight at Jargeau and I was one of the few archers to escape from Patay. The French—the real French, the true French—worship her.” Pulling his heavy leather cloak tighter around his shoulders, William wandered out from beneath the shelter of the gate and stood in the center of the track. Despite his words, he doubted there would be any rescue attempt for the young woman the people were calling the Maid of Orléans. Any attack would be suicide. Rouen was a fortress. The guards had been doubled and then redoubled as the date of her execution grew nearer. English archers guarded the walls,

alongside German and Austrian mercenaries, and roving bands of savage Scots patrolled the fields.

Another rousing cheer went up inside the fortress and William turned to look back at the guards on the gate. The sound had distracted them and they were looking into the town square, where the huge pyre had been built.

„Eyes front,” William bellowed again.

„But they’re going to burn the witch,” Thomas, the younger guard, said excitedly.

„She’s no witch, she’s a nineteen-year-old girl,” William snapped, and immediately regretted his words. He would be reported to his commanders and marked down as either a potential heretic or a French sympathizer. Or both. The English Bowman turned back to the road. William’s sister, Anne, was nineteen years old, and every time he thought of the condemned girl, he was reminded of her.

In the distance, close to the edge of the forest, birds fluttered up into the morning sky, circled and then disappeared south.

William stared straight ahead, remaining perfectly still. Every archer knew that peripheral vision often revealed things that were otherwise missed. Something had startled the birds, something unusual—otherwise they would have settled back into the trees.

The big man turned his face slowly. The wind from the south was warm, scented with the rich growth of the forest, the hint of exotic flowers, the suggestion of vines. Closing his mouth and his eyes, he breathed in. If there were men massed under the distant trees, he should be able to smell their rank odor: a mixture of sweat, stinking clothes, rusting armor and horseflesh. There was nothing.

William relaxed his shoulders. If there was anyone there—and he was beginning to doubt it now—then it was a small force or a few individuals. They were no threat. He rubbed his hands down the length of his longbow. He had been an archer all his life and he could fire between ten and twelve shots in a minute and hit everything he aimed at. There were thirty arrows in the quiver on his hip and at least a dozen archers on the wall behind him. They could lay down a withering rain of arrows. Nothing would survive.

Behind him he heard the crowd start to chant. “Witch... witch... witch...”

William shivered. Dying in battle was a hazard every soldier faced, and this young woman, this Joan, had fought gallantly. She deserved to die a soldier’s death, not to meet this terrible end she’d been condemned to suffer.

From the corner of his eye, William caught the flicker of motion. In one fluid movement, he drew an arrow and nocked it to the bowstring. „Someone’s coming!” he shouted. Behind him, he heard the two guards scramble into position.

„I don’t see anyone...” the Dutch guard began.

„There!” Thomas said.

„I see it,” another guard, high on the wall, shouted. „A single rider, moving fast...”

William’s eyesight had always been excellent. He could see the most distant objects with absolute clarity, though his close vision was often blurry. He turned to look at the shape. It was a single rider wearing unusual black and white armor that had gone out of fashion decades ago. The lone rider, who looked slender even

beneath the metal and leather armor, was sitting astride a huge black horse. Metal plates, the same color as the knight's armor, protected the horse, so that it was difficult to distinguish between the rider and the animal.

„How many?” he called up to the guard on the wall.

„One. Just one.”

„No one follows?”

„No one.”

„Any banners or flags?”

„None.”

William raised his bow and drew back the bowstring and waited for the rider to draw a little closer. He would loose the arrow in an arc that would direct it right into the center of the knight's chest. The arrow's heavy metal bodkin tip was designed to punch through a knight's metal armor.

„Is it an attack?” the Dutchman asked, coming out from the gate to stand beside the English archer. „It cannot be an attack. There is just one,” he said, answering his own question. Then he leaned forward and shaded his eyes with his hands. „Is that a girl?”

„It is a girl,” William whispered. He had just come to the same conclusion. Initially, he'd thought it might be a cape or a scarf, but now that the rider had drawn closer, he saw the mane of fiery red hair that streamed out behind her. Squinting against the light, he saw that she was not carrying a shield, nor was she holding the reins. She was clutching a long, slightly curved sword in each hand.

William raised his bow, drew the string back to his chin and loosed the arrow in one elegant movement. He didn't care who the rider was—but she was galloping toward him on a heavily armored horse, so she certainly wasn't a friend. He watched the arrow arc high into the air and drop, and knew his shot had been true. The force of the blow should be enough to unseat the rider. Then, before she could clamber to her feet, he and the other guards would rush in and...

The rider's right hand moved; the sword flashed... and sliced the arrow in two.

„Impossible,” Thomas said in a ragged whisper.

William fired again, twice in quick succession. He heard the twang-hiss of arrows shot from the battlements above his head, and suddenly there were six arrows raining down on the rider.

Sitting tall in the saddle, she moved her left and right hands, the swords blurs of metal as they sliced the arrows to slivers of wood.

„Demon!” The Dutchman turned and ran. The rider was close enough to see clearly now. It *was* a young woman, with pale skin and shockingly green eyes beneath the mane of bright red hair. And then William saw her lips curl and realized that the woman was smiling.

And that frightened William even more.

He fired again, this time aiming to take down the horse, but the unnaturally fast woman chopped the hissing arrow out of the air. He distinctly heard the whistle of the blade and the snap as the heavy arrow was sliced in two. Then he turned to run. „Close the gates, close the gates!” He heard wood scrape as the huge gates slowly started to close, but he knew the rider would be upon them before the gates sealed shut. They would have to stop her before she got into the town. The Dutchman suddenly appeared in front of William, a long, hook-headed pike in his

hands. He planted the end of the pike in the ground and positioned it so that the horse would run onto the spike. The young archer, Thomas, stood behind him and fired arrow after arrow at the approaching creature. Wood pinged and cracked as the rider cut arrow after arrow out of the air.

William reached the Dutch mercenary, grabbed hold of the thick shaft of the pike, then turned to face the rider, confident that she would not be able to stop her headlong plunge.

Arrows whistled over their heads as Thomas continued to fire at the rapidly approaching rider. „Who is she?” he shouted, his voice high with terror.

„What is she?” William muttered. Unlike most others, he was not a superstitious man, but he had seen enough in his years fighting in the Scottish Highlands and the wilds of Ireland to realize that creatures who were more—and less—than human walked the shadows of this world. The rider was so close now that he could see the speckling of freckles across her nose, and he realized that she was around the same age as the condemned Frenchwoman. Her eyes, a brilliant grass green, were mesmerizing.

Only his reflexes saved him.

At the very last moment, just as the huge black mount reached the razor-sharp tip of the pike, the rider leaned low over the beast’s neck and the great horse leapt into the air. It sailed over the wooden pike. William and the Dutchman ducked. An iron-shod hoof punched into the mercenary’s breastplate, leaving a perfect semicircle in the metal. William saw the silver arc of a sword flashing toward him and threw up his bow to protect himself. The blade sliced through the thick yew, the force of the blow driving him back onto the muddy ground. The horse landed neatly and surged ahead. Thomas threw himself to one side to avoid being trampled, and then the red-haired rider was through the half-closed gates and racing toward the square.

„After her!” William shouted. The Dutch mercenary and the English Bowman looked at him as if he was mad. Then they turned and ran in the opposite direction.

William grabbed Thomas’s abandoned bow and raced after the rider. Maybe this Joan was a witch, and maybe the rider was a demon come to rescue her... but he’d never heard of a demon with freckles before. And why would a demon need to ride into the town—why not just materialize in the square? He was sure the red-haired girl was human. She was fast, but every archer knew stories of men who could catch arrows, and she rode the huge horse easily and without reins, but he’d watched mounted knights gallop into battle with a sword in one hand and a mace in the other, guiding their horses with their knees. And why would she bother swatting the arrows out of the air if they were no threat to her?

William followed a trail of devastation through the narrow, filthy streets. Scores of English footsoldiers and archers lay on the ground. A knight in armor had been flattened into the muddy road, the steel plate dented with the impression of the horse’s hooves. Another knight in chain mail lay crumpled in an awkward heap against a broken door, the metal links sliced apart, torn like cloth. A huge German mercenary sat in a dirty pool of water, his face the color of parchment. He was holding the stump of a shattered sword in both hands; the remaining chunk of metal lay half buried in the mud between his feet.

William rounded a corner and suddenly found himself in the town square.

Hundreds of people had crowded into the Vieux-Marché in Rouen earlier that day to watch the execution. Guards armed with staves and sticks had kept them away from the huge funeral pyre, while more soldiers patrolled the mob, looking for troublemakers. There were archers on the roofs of the surrounding buildings and mounted knights in the side streets. And despite the terrible event that was about to take place, there had been a carnival atmosphere, with jugglers and minstrels, food vendors and poets moving through the crowd.

Now it was chaos.

Up to that moment, William had wanted to believe that the girl on the black horse was human. Now he knew she was not.

The armored horse carved a path through the mob, right up to the tall pillar in the center of the square. Joan was tied to the pillar, and stood, eyes closed, face turned to the sky as Geoffroy Therage, the executioner, piled tall bundles of tinder-dry wood around her. The fire had been lit, and crackling flames and twisting black smoke were curling around the girl. Her clothes had started to smolder. The red-haired warrior leapt off the horse and sliced her way through the soldiers, her curved swords blurring so fast that they reflected the morning light until it seemed as if they blazed.

William saw the Frenchwoman open her eyes and look down. And then her face lit up with a brilliant smile. He saw her lips move and form a single word, a name. Later, much, much later, Geoffroy Therage told him she had said the word „*Scathach*”.

William watched the executioner scream and throw himself on his knees in front of the red-haired girl. She swatted him away as if he was a fly, and the sword in her left hand darted out, cutting away the burning wood. Then, standing back, the warrior chopped at the manacles around Joan's wrists. Metal sang off metal and the chains fell away. Scathach tossed one sword to Joan. William heard the red-haired warrior laugh, a sound of pure delight, as she turned and attacked the gathering knights. He watched, both awed and horrified, as the two women fought their way through the square. Nothing could stand against them. Even though she was weak from months in prison, Joan of Arc drove back the waves of English knights, while Scathach chopped arrows out of the air, and slashed and cut at anyone who came too close. William watched in amazement as she fought with fists and feet, her metal-gloved hands as deadly and dangerous as her sword. The two women were now standing back to back, working as a team, fighting their way to the black horse, which was surrounded by knights and soldiers attempting to catch it. The huge armored beast reared and kicked, cracking shields and shattering armor.

Ducking back into the side street, William tried to nock an arrow to his bow, but his hands were shaking too badly. He had never believed Joan was a witch, but the evidence was overwhelming. He didn't think the red-haired girl was a demon, but she certainly wasn't human. She was... He tried to find the right word. She was unnatural.

He pressed back against the wall as four heavily armored knights wielding broadswords, spears and axes rushed past him and attacked the two women. Joan ducked under a flailing ax and chopped its wooden handle in two. Scathach

neatly dodged the spear thrust at her, then grabbed the shaft and tugged, pulling the knight toward her. Off balance, he fell to the ground, bringing two of his companions with him in a heaped pile of metal and flesh. Scathach leapt onto the back of the fallen knights. She caught Joan's arm, hauled the smaller woman up and then flung her into the air. For a moment, the ragged warrior hung suspended in midair, and the image momentarily silenced the uproar in the square. Then Joan dropped onto the back of the black horse.

Scathach screamed, a long, terrifying, triumphant war cry that drove the men around her to the ground, holding their ears. Dancing lightly across the squirming bodies, she somersaulted onto the back of the black horse and dug in her heels. The armored beast surged forward, crashing through everything in its path. Arrows rained down from the roof, but the red-haired warrior knocked them out of the air as she and her companion raced toward the gate.

William realized with horror that they were escaping: one woman had defeated an entire army to rescue Joan of Arc. He pressed himself back against the alley wall as the horse bore down on him. Now that it was close, he could see that, like its mistress, it was not entirely natural. Beneath the spiked metal sheath that covered its head, its eyes blazed bloodred.

William could not allow the prisoner to escape. The moment the horse thundered past him, he stepped out of the shadows and fired after them.

The heavy metal-tipped arrow bit deeply into Joan's shoulder. She shuddered and slumped forward and would have fallen from the horse if Scathach had not caught her. The red-haired girl screamed again, but this time it was a sound of pure anguish. Then she turned to look back at William, and he saw her face undergo a terrible transformation, mouth opening to reveal a maw of needle-sharp teeth. She pointed her sword at him, and although she did not speak, he clearly heard her words in his head: *You will pay for this injury. I swear it.* Then she pulled the arrow out of her friend's shoulder and flung it back at William. It hit him with tremendous force, striking him high on the arm, breaking bone and tearing muscle, and in that instant, William of York knew he would never pull a bow again.

In the last moments before unconsciousness claimed him, he watched Joan of Arc and the red-haired warrior escape on the black horse.

Joan of Arc escaped—but that is the story you have never heard.

History records that Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orléans, died in Rouen on that last day of May in the Year of Our Lord 1431.

A girl died that day, but it was not Joan.

Sick with pain, I watched as a girl who bore but the slightest resemblance to the Maid of Orléans was dragged out of the dungeons and hauled to the place of execution. Knights moved through the crowd, warning the people that if they spoke about what had just happened, they would be condemned as heretics and suffer the same fate.

I could not bear to stand and watch an innocent girl die. I walked away from Rouen, abandoning everything I owned, and began the long journey back to

England. After that day I never fought in another war. My left arm withered and I was never able to hold a bow again.

I have often wondered what happened to the Maid of Orléans and Scathach, the red-haired, green-eyed warrior who rescued her. Where had they gone? Had Joan survived the wound I gave her? I hoped she had. And what of Scathach? Did she still live? I was guessing she did: I imagined that killing her would be almost impossible.

*—from the Last Will and Testament of William of York,
This day, the 13th day of October 1481*

