



The Curse of Deadman's Forest (Oracles of Delphi Keep (Paperback))

By Victoria Laurie

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The Curse of Deadman's Forest is the second book in the Oracles of Delphi Keep—a series with all the timeless charm of classics like the Chronicles of Narnia and all the action-packed adventure of a modern middle-grade blockbuster.

Since Ian Wigby and his sister, Theodosia, found the silver treasure box and the prophecy within it, their world has changed. There's no denying what they discovered in Morocco: a powerful evil is budding, and to defeat it, and save the world from darkness, six uniquely gifted children must be gathered.

According to prophecy, a trip through the magical portal near the castle will bring them to the third Oracle—a child with extraordinary powers to heal. But the very same prophecy foretells Ian's death should he venture through the portal again.

Everyone agrees: to risk Ian's life is too great a gamble. But when a terrible curse enters the keep, it becomes clear that there is no other choice.

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Gr 5-7—In this sequel to *Oracles of Delphi Keep* (Delacorte, 2009), Laurie places her characters at a crucial point in history: the buildup to the Nazi invasion of Poland, which triggered the beginning of World War II. Orphan siblings Ian and Theo are trying to fulfill the prophecy of Laodamia of Phoenicia and have become the center of a struggle to save humankind from devastating evil and violence. The brothers, who are in possession of certain magical abilities and objects, travel from Dover to Poland through a portal in search of the Healer, the third of six oracles, who will help them to save the world. In the process they face great danger at the hands of the evil Magus the Black and his equally malevolent siblings. While the attempt to connect ancient myth to modern historical events is interesting, the mythological connections include a mishmash of ancient Greece, medieval Christianity, and druidic Britain, and the connections fall flat. The sense of adventure is hampered by a meandering plot, wooden dialogue, and one-dimensional characters. The hint of romance is awkwardly presented and remains unresolved. Although the characters succeed in their quest for the Healer, the author has set up the ending for a sequel.—Sue Giffard, Ethical Culture Fieldston School, New York City. (c) Copyright 2010. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

About the Author

When Victoria Laurie was eleven, her family moved from the United States to England for a year abroad. She attended the American Community School at Cobham, and one day, while on a class field trip, she first glimpsed the White Cliffs of Dover. Her trip to the cliffs, the year abroad, and her grandfather's stories of his childhood as an orphan left such an indelible impression on her that when she turned to a career as an author, she was compelled to write the *Oracles of Delphi Keep* series. *The Curse of Deadman's Forest* is the second book in this series. The first book, *Oracles of Delphi Keep*, is available from Delacorte Press. You can visit Victoria at www.oraclesofdelphikeep.com.

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City of Phoenicia 1331 BC

The great Phoenician Oracle Laodamia stood, pensive and troubled, on the terrace overlooking her garden. It was a warm summer night, but a shiver snaked its way down her spine.

She'd had another nightmare, the same nightmare, in fact, that had haunted her for weeks. And try as she

might, she could not escape the terrible jumble of images that always began with four beautiful maidens being lured belowground by the underworld god Demogorgon, then ended with a massive conflict involving machinery and weaponry too fantastic to believe.

One thing was certain: if these visions of war and destruction were a portrait of the future—as Laodamia suspected they were—mankind was most assuredly doomed.

But what her role in all this was, Laodamia could not fathom. Even though she'd spent many a night worrying and wondering how she could possibly prevent what she knew was to come, the answers always eluded her. And that night was no different. The soft breeze and soothing flower scents wafting up from her garden brought her no new clarity. With a heavy sigh, she turned to go back to her bed, but as she was about to walk away from her terrace, a movement in the shadows caused her to jump.

"Do not be alarmed," called a voice from her garden.

"Who's there?" demanded the Oracle.

A shadowy hooded figure hobbled forward to stand in the faint light of the moon just below her balcony. "I mean you no harm," said the stranger. "I'm just an old crone begging the great Oracle for a brief audience."

Suspicious at first, Laodamia squinted at the intruder, but when the figure pulled back her hood and lifted her face for inspection, the Oracle could see she really was just an old woman. "Come back in the morning," Laodamia said gently. "I will have some bread and wine to share with you, old one, and then I will look into your future."

She had spoken with kindness, so Laodamia was shocked when the crone began to laugh softly. "It is not my future that concerns me, Oracle," she said. "It is yours."

A cold prickle curled along Laodamia's skin and for a moment she did not respond. Instead, she used her intuitive powers to assess the woman below. She knew immediately that the old woman meant her no harm, but she also had the sense that even given this late hour, she should grant the woman an audience. "Very well," she said at last. "I will come to you on that bench." The Oracle pointed to a beautifully carved stone chaise placed in the center of her magnificent garden.

Laodamia lit a lantern and carried it with her to meet the crone, who was patiently waiting on the bench when she arrived. The light cast eerie shadows in the wrinkles of the stranger's face. She appeared ancient and Laodamia couldn't help staring at her. The crone chuckled again, as if reading the Oracle's thoughts. Laodamia quickly dropped her eyes to her lap and apologized. "Forgive me, old one, but your face suggests a very long life."

This seemed to delight the crone. "Yes," she said, her voice raspy and dry with age. "I have lived far longer than I should have. And I shall not soon die, Oracle, which is even sadder still."

Laodamia regarded the woman again, puzzled by such a statement, but as it was the middle of the night and she was weary, she thought it best to get to the heart of the matter. "How may I assist you?" she asked.

The crone studied the Oracle for a long moment before speaking, and when she did, her voice was soft as a whisper. "I know of what you dream," she said.

Laodamia was startled by the statement and quickly dismissed it. She'd told no one what she'd been dreaming for the past month. Even though many of her attendants had sensed her fatigue and unease, she'd always covered it by suggesting that she was worn out from all the festivities surrounding her upcoming wedding. She attempted to cover yet again in front of the old crone. "I've been dreaming of my beloved," she said coyly. "Surely you've heard the talk of our impending marriage?"

The crone's face registered disappointment. "Do you take me for a fool, Oracle?" she asked pointedly. Laodamia's eyes widened. She was shocked by the impoliteness of the question, but before she could answer, the crone added, "I know where your dreams begin, in a cave with four maidens. I also know that your dreams end in a war that will decide the fate of man."

Laodamia gasped and her hand fluttered to her chest. "How could you know that?" she demanded. "I've told no one!"

The crone's smile returned. "I know what I know. But your role has not yet been revealed to you, has it, Oracle?"

Laodamia sat speechless next to the crone. It was as if the old woman were again reading her mind.

The crone took her silence for confirmation and chuckled. "I am here to reveal your part. It begins with a gift."

Laodamia recovered her voice. "A gift?"

Instead of answering her directly, the crone reached into the folds of her cloak and withdrew a small crystal. The lantern's light caught the stone, and small rainbows of color shimmered and bounced off it as the old woman cupped it in her gnarled hand and held it out to the Oracle. "Take this," she said without further explanation.

Laodamia looked closely at the beautiful object the woman was offering her. "Oh, but I couldn't, old one," she protested. "The gem appears far too precious for you to part with so easily. Surely you could trade it for food and lodging for yourself?" she suggested, noting the poor woman's ragged clothing and thin appearance.

The crone ignored the suggestion and placed the crystal into Laodamia's palm. "It is yours for the time being," she said. "And I've a feeling this gem will come back to me one day. An orphaned child of immense importance will return it to me when the hour of need is great. But for now, it is yours to use, then give away as you see fit."

Laodamia stared with wonder at the beautiful gem in her palm. "Exactly how am I to use this?"

Again the crone ignored the Oracle's question and instead got to her feet and began to shuffle away. "I must be off to see about my daughter."

"Your daughter?" asked Laodamia, and in that moment her intuitive powers detected a great sadness from the crone and she had a vision of a burial. "I'm so sorry for your loss, old one," she said gently.

The crone stopped moving and regarded Laodamia over her shoulder. The glint in her eyes held a mixture of emotions, from guilt to sadness to resignation, but the old woman did not comment further. Instead, she

merely nodded and began to shuffle away again.

“Wait!” called Laodamia, getting up and moving toward the crone. “May I at least offer you a soft bed and a meal in the morning?”

But the crone waved her hand dismissively and continued on her mission.

Laodamia tried one last time to engage the old woman. “May I at least know the name of the one who has offered me such kindness?” she asked.

At this the crone paused and turned to look back at the Oracle. “It is of no consequence,” she said. “And I shall not bother you again. Use the crystal, Oracle. It will help direct you in your purpose.” And with that, the crone disappeared into the shadows of the night.

Laodamia blinked in surprise. She’d been watching the crone one moment, and in the next the old woman had completely vanished.

Mystified by the encounter, the Oracle returned to the bench and sat down to study the crystal the old woman had given her. The gem was warm, and as she held it close to the lantern, she could see the smallest sliver of pink at its core. Laodamia could identify nearly every mineral known to man but she’d never come across one quite like this.

She was, however, adept at pulling out the energy of a crystal and discovering its secrets, so with little hesitation, she eased her awareness into the stone, seeking the treasures it might hold.

The next thing she knew, she was being roughly shaken. Laodamia blinked as sunlight sparkled through her half-closed lids. “Mia?” said a familiar voice, filled with concern. “Mia, please talk to me.”

With effort Laodamia tried to wake herself from an unconscious state that felt much deeper than sleep. After a moment she stared up at her beloved in confusion. “Iyoclease?” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“By Zeus!” whispered Iyoclease, hugging her close. “I came the moment your servant told me you were found in the garden and they could not rouse you. I’ve been calling to you for many minutes, trying to bring you out of your trance.”

Laodamia pushed away from him a bit and looked up in astonishment. “What’s happened?” she asked as he lifted her carefully to carry her inside.

“You tell me,” he said, his face gentle and kind.

“We found you lying by the bench,” explained someone walking next to Iyoclease. Laodamia looked over and was relieved to see one of her most faithful apprentices, Adria.

And suddenly, it all came back to her in a flood. When she saw the position of the sun, Laodamia realized she’d been in some sort of trance since the night before, and remembered the things she’d seen during that time.

As Iyoclease laid her gently on her bed and smoothed back her hair, she knew with an absolute certainty what she must do. The crone had been right; the crystal had indeed clarified her role. “Iyoclease,” she said

urgently while he placed several pillows under her head.

“Shhh, my love,” he whispered. “I’ve sent for one of the healers. You should rest until she comes.”

“No!” she protested, gripping his arm. He looked at her in alarm but made no move to pull away. “Please,” she begged him. “I do not need a healer. I need parchment and my stylus. I have a prophecy that must be recorded.” The Oracle was afraid she might forget some of the messages that had come through her encounter with the crystal, and she was desperate to write them down.

“Mia,” Iyoclease said gently, sitting down next to her. “This is no time for prophecy writing.”

But Laodamia was insistent and eventually the writing materials were brought to her. Before she began to recount her terrible visions and the mission she was about to embark upon, however, she reached out to her betrothed and placed the crystal into his palm. “Here,” she whispered to him. “Take it.”

He looked at the pretty stone, with its unusual heat, and asked, “Is this some new charm to keep me safe?”

Laodamia shook her head, recalling the visions that had come to her and the gemstone’s important role in them. “No, my love. It is for your sister. You must have Adria make it into a sturdy necklace for her to wear.”

Iyoclease laughed. “Mia,” he said, “if you are thinking of giving it to Pelopia, Selyena will surely fight her for it. Perhaps I should cut it in half so neither feels slighted?”

Laodamia clutched at Iyoclease’s chest in horror. “No! Iyoclease, you must let no harm come to this gem. And it is to be given to your youngest sister, Jacinda.”

Iyoclease appeared unsettled by his betrothed’s urgent request. “Mia,” he said in a soothing tone, “Jacinda would lose it. She’s far too young to entrust with something so obviously precious to you.”

But Laodamia merely shook her head and insisted that he give it to Jacinda to care for. “It must go to her and no other,” she said, knowing that for the gem to fall into another’s hand would irrevocably alter the future. “Promise me you will see to it that she alone receives it and instruct her that she must wear it always?”

“Of course,” he said, wrapping her hand in his. “Yes, my love, I will do as you ask. But tell me why it must go to my baby sister of all people.”

“She is the only soul who can deliver it to the Guardian,” Laodamia said, already reaching for the stylus and blank parchment on her bed.

“The Guardian?” Iyoclease repeated.

“Yes,” said Laodamia. “I’ve seen it in my visions. Jacinda will entrust it to the Guardian, who will in turn give it to the One.”

Iyoclease’s face clearly showed his confusion. “And who is this One, Mia?”

“The greatest Oracle who will ever live, and the only one who can save mankind.”

Iyoclease continued to look at her with concern. “I thought you were the greatest Oracle who ever lived.”

But Laodamia simply shook her head. “No,” she said, her voice barely more than a whisper as she considered the raw power she’d felt from the One in her visions. “There is a gentle but profoundly intuitive soul, yet to be born, with far greater powers than I have. One who will be called upon to save the world from an unspeakable evil. But first I must write about the Guardian,” she mused.

“The Guardian?” Iyoclease asked again.

Laodamia nodded distractedly. “Yes,” she said. “Only the Guardian can protect the One long enough to gather the others. They will all be needed, you see. And I must write to tell the Guardian and the One how and where to find each of the others.”

“Are you quite sure you wouldn’t rather rest?” her betrothed asked.

Laodamia smiled at him, caught once more by the beauty of his face and his vivid blue eyes. “Yes, my love, I’m sure.”

Iyoclease got up from the bed and regarded her. “Is there anything else that I can do for you before I go, Mia?”

Laodamia looked up from the first words she was already writing on the parchment. “Yes, please,” she said earnestly. “You may find a man named Phaios. You will discover him in the market, selling small trinkets. There is a sundial that he has recently acquired. He is about to discover that the dial does not work and will be anxious to be rid of it. I must have that dial, Iyoclease.”

He smiled at her and leaned in to kiss her on the forehead. “Then you shall have it,” he assured her, and off he went to find his betrothed her treasure.

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