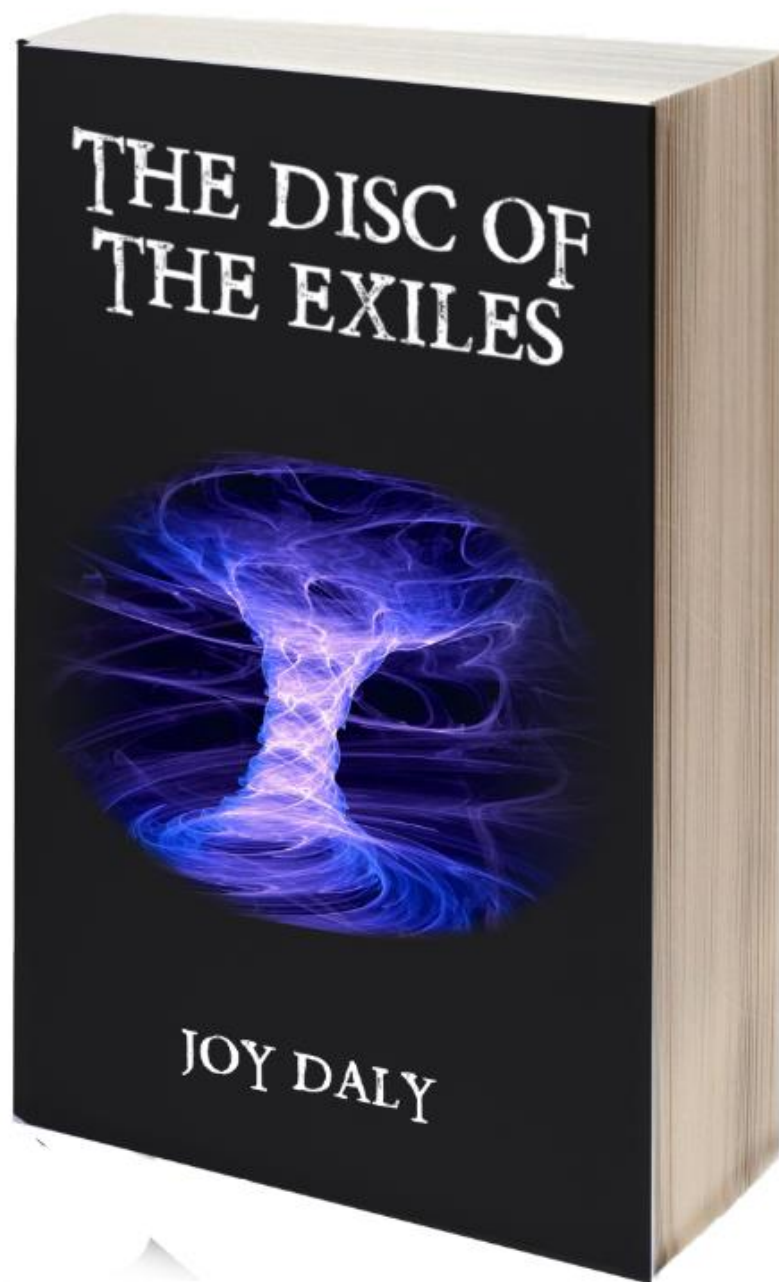


Middle Grade Fantasy Adventure

The first book in The Vortex series

THE DISC OF THE EXILES



CHAPTER ONE



Josh flicked away a bead of sweat trickling towards his left eye and looked at his watch. Liam was late again. The ceiling fan was ticking away, but it was still so hot his back was sticking to the sofa. For a minute he thought about going to the beach on his own, but everything was more fun with Liam.

“Hey Josh, let’s go.” Liam bounced into the loungeroom in his white karate Gi.

“You should have been home ages ago,” said Josh. He took a whiff of Liam and wrinkled his nose. “You stink.”

“That’s because I’ve been doing Mae Tobi Geri. Wanna see it?”

“No way,” said Josh. Liam’s ability to break boards with a single punch and kick the top of door frames was awesome. But it wasn’t so awesome when he practised on him. “I’ve been waiting ages. Come on, get ready.”

Untying his black belt, Liam rat-tailed Josh on his bare legs and laughed as Josh squealed. “That’s for not letting me Mae Tobi Geri you,” he said as he headed for his bedroom.

Josh followed Liam and leaned in the doorway, watching as Liam dropped his Gi on the carpet, already piled high with dirty clothes. Mum was always onto him about it, but he didn't care. Sometimes he wished he could be like Liam.

"They've got a super-cool volcano demonstration at the library tomorrow," said Liam, as he pulled on his rashie and boardshorts. "You should come. You might learn something."

Josh shook his head and wondered for the millionth time how they could be brothers. Liam was tall for eleven, with dark hair that stood up in cool spikes, and a sick love for science. While he was short for ten, his hair was dirty-blond, and the only thing he hated more than science was seafood. "I'd sooner eat a can of tuna than go to the library," he said.

"No wonder you fail science," said Liam as he slapped on sunscreen.

"I fail nerdish too," said Josh.

"Haha," said Liam. "Last one down to the beach is a loser." He shoved Josh out of the way and raced down the hallway, through the kitchen, and past Mum at the sink.

"Did you put your uniform in the wash, Liam?" she said. "I'm sick of you leaving your dirty clothes on the carpet."

"Yeah," Liam lied as he flung open the sliding door, and vaulted over their dog, Max, sprawled at the entrance.

"No, he didn't. Call him back," said Josh as he flashed past her. If she called him back, he'd beat Liam by a mile.

"Liam, come back here," yelled Mum.

But Liam was gone, and Josh sighed. Liam wins again, he thought. Max was still in the doorway, and Josh stopped to scratch her favourite spot, right where her back joined her tail. She rolled over so he could rub her belly and he laughed. "I gotta go, Maxy. I'll do it when I get back."

Liam stood waiting for Josh at the path leading to the beach. “Loser,” he teased as Josh panted up to him.

Josh covered his mouth with his hand, catching back what he wanted to say. What would Liam do if he told him how he felt? Then he gave a snort as he imagined exactly what Liam would do. “Let’s go,” he said and sprinted over the blistering sand on tiptoes, whooping as he splashed into the delicious, cold water.

Liam echoed the whoops and drove through the breakers into the silver-blue ocean beyond. Catching a wave, Liam body-surfed in, and Josh, with perfect timing, leaped onto his back and drove him into the sand. Liam pushed up, snorting salty water from his nose. “You’re dead,” he yelled as Josh dived into the surf and escaped.

Treading water and ducking each other, they waited for the perfect cobalt waves that would shoot them to shore. Josh rode a monster all the way in and sprang to his feet. “I’ll beat you to the dunes,” he shouted, and his feet sizzled as he flew across the sand. He could hear Liam’s panting breath coming closer, but he was going to win. Then his left foot hit something that burned like crazy. He yelped and collapsed.

Liam ran up to him. “What’s wrong? Were you bitten? Was it a snake?” He took up a fighting stance, his head swivelling left and right.

Josh looked at Liam with his fists in the air, and even though his foot was still stinging, he grinned. If he spotted a snake he’d run a mile, while Liam would probably try to karate-chop it to death?

He lifted his foot and couldn’t make sense of what he was seeing. He blinked hard, but nothing changed. There were no cuts, no scrapes, no blood, no fang marks. Instead, there was a ten-cent sized hole drilled into his heel, and even worse, a light was shooting out of it. He rubbed his eyes and blinked again. But the light was still there and above it, on his arch, there

was some sort of weird mark. What had happened to his foot? “It’s... Its...” and his voice trailed away as he looked up at Liam for help.

“Let me see.” Liam dropped beside Josh and grabbed his foot. His eyes widened and he sucked in a quick breath. “A light and a hieroglyph,” he murmured. He bit his bottom lip and after a long pause said, “Inexplicable.”

Josh wrenched his foot from Liam’s grasp and cradled it with shaky hands. If Liam used the word inexplicable that was terrifying because Liam pretty much knew everything. He stared at the holey thing in the middle of his heel and wanted to touch it, but he was too scared. “This is so bad,” he moaned.

“No, Josh. This is cool, super cool.”

CHAPTER TWO



“Sit still, I’ll get a stick,” said Liam.

Josh nursed his foot as he watched Liam scale the dunes in four easy strides, searching the grass and tumbleweeds. A stick and Liam would not be good, and he rolled to his knees to make a run for it.

“Got one,” Liam said, and slid down the dune to leap onto Josh’s back. “Stop wriggling,” he ordered as he bent Josh’s knee to look at his heel. Taking aim, he jabbed the stick into the hole.

“Ow.” Josh bucked him off, his face bright red. “Why’d you do that?”

“To see if it’s a hole – and it’s not. Look, the point’s blunted.”

Josh stared at his foot and his heart began speeding up. If it wasn’t a hole, what was it? And how was it shooting light? “I don’t feel so good, Liam. What’s wrong with it?”

Liam rubbed his hands together and looked at the sun sinking behind the dunes. “I don’t know. I need more information. Tell me exactly what happened.”

Josh took a shaky breath as he thought. “Well, I was running, and I stood on something that burned. It hurt heaps, and I fell. That’s all I know. Except, it’s not hurting anymore, it’s just tingling.”

“Okay, that’s simple then,” said Liam. “We need to find whatever did this before it gets dark,”

Josh couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Was Liam crazy? Whatever had done this to his foot, might do even weirder things to the rest of him. “I don’t want to find it, Liam.”

“You’re kidding? It must be incredible; it’s going to be ...”

“Dangerous,” broke in Josh.

“Don’t be a wimp,” said Liam.

“I’m not a wimp, but I’m not stupid.”

“Debatable,” said Liam. “Where did it happen?”

Josh didn’t want to tell Liam anything. This thing should stay lost. But, if he didn’t give him something, Liam would torture it out of him. “Somewhere over there,” he waved his arms in the vague direction.

“Oh,” groaned Liam. Then his face brightened. “We can use the quadrant method.”

“What’s that?” As soon as Josh asked, he wanted to slap himself. When Liam started, he didn’t stop.

Liam shot him a superior look. “The quadrant method is used by police services through...”

“Shut it, Liam. You know I hate it when you spout.”

Liam was drawing long lines in the sand with the stick. “I don’t spout.” He pointed, “Left quadrant. Now”

Josh stuck out his tongue before testing his weight on his foot. Other than the faint tingling it felt normal. Shame it didn't look normal he thought, as his heel lit the sand. He stamped over to the dumb quadrant and started pacing.

It felt like hours to Josh, but only a couple of minutes had passed before he spied a small, grey disc lying in the sand. His stomach heaved and he swallowed vomit. And even though he had never seen it before, he knew this was it. This was the thing that had munted his heel. Alarms were going off in his head, and he so wished he hadn't found it. This thing was mega-dangerous, he could feel it. After shooting a quick glance at Liam, still pacing in his stupid quadrant, he began kicking sand over it. If he could bury it before Liam found out...

Liam looked across. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing?" said Josh, trying to sound normal.

Liam's eyes narrowed. "You found it."

"No." Josh could feel sweat popping out on his forehead.

"Give it."

"No, Liam. We need to bury it and..."

"You're being silly."

"I'm not. I've got a bad feeling about ..."

"Now," Liam held out his hand.

"This is a bad idea." Josh scooped up the disc and his hand began tingling. As quick as he could, he hurled it towards the water.

But Liam was lightning fast. With a massive leap, he snagged the disc in mid-air. As he landed, he spun and kicked Josh in the stomach. "If this had gone in, we'd have lost it."

Josh rubbed his stomach as he stared at the disc in Liam's hand. "That was the idea," he mumbled.

“Why don’t you think before you do dumb things, Josh? Without this disc we’ll have no hope of working out what’s happened. Which means your foot might stay like this.”

Josh opened his mouth to argue and shut it again. What if his heel kept doing whatever it was doing? Mum would lose her mind as soon as she saw it. She’d rush him to hospital, and a doctor would take one look and ring the disease place. Then those people in white suits and masks would lock him up for the rest of the holidays. They’d do experiments for sure. Make him swallow disgusting medicine, stick him with needles, use probes. His eyes watered.

Liam was no longer looking at Josh. His attention was on the gun-metal disc with a glowing hole in its middle, covering his palm. “This is it. The hole’s the same size as the thing on your foot. And look at this character.” His finger traced the etched lines in the disk. “It matches the mark on your heel. It must have branded you, but how could it do that? It doesn’t have any heat.”

“I don’t know,” said Josh darkly. “It’s gotta have some sort of power.”

“What, is it magic?” scoffed Liam.

“Maybe.” Josh stuck out his chin. Some things were magic, he didn’t care what Liam said.

“Only little kids believe in magic, Josh.”

“Yeah, well how did it do this to my foot?”

Liam thought for a second, then nodded. “It has to be an allergic reaction.”

“*This* is not an allergy.” Josh lifted his heel and a beam cut through the darkening sky.

“It must be. As soon as we get onto my computer, we’ll work out what’s going on.”

“When mum sees my foot, the only thing that’ll be going on is a hospital visit. You know what she’s like.”

“Don’t worry about mum,” said Liam. “I’ll create a diversion, and once we get to my room, we’ll triple sock your foot until it’s back to normal.”

“But what if it stays like this?”

Liam laughed. “Well, you’ll never need a torch again.”

A wooden fence separated the boy’s house from Old Wally’s next door, and Josh shuddered as he remembered the last time he had talked to Old Wally. He crept along behind Liam, and as he rounded the corner, he spotted his besty, Rebecca. She was swinging her legs over their back deck as she munched on a slice of watermelon and patted Max.

“And there’s our diversion,” whispered Liam.

Rebecca, was ten years old and in the same grade as Josh. Her face was freckled, and she wore her black hair in plaits. She ate dinner at their place more than her own, and Josh knew it had something to do with her family. But whenever he asked her about it, she changed the subject. He wanted to help her, but he didn’t know what to do. Nearly every night he thought about it, but he still hadn’t come up with a thing that wouldn’t make her mad or sad or both.

“Hey Rebecca,” called Liam.

Rebecca sprang to her feet, and Josh grinned when he saw the watermelon juice streaking her volunteer Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary shirt. She was always spilling things.

“I’ve been waiting ages for you two. Have you been at the beach?” She gave them a closer look. “You look sneaky. What’s the go?”

Max dashed towards the boys at full speed, her tail wagging before she skidded to a stop. She whimpered and stared at Josh’s heel.

“Maxy, it’s alright girl. Come here.” Josh crouched down, but Max was having none of it. With a sharp bark, she scooted away, and Josh glanced at Liam before taking a sliding step forward.

Rebecca’s eyes widened. “What’s wrong with your foot? It’s glowing.”

“Sh,” said Liam. “Can you distract Mum until we can get to my bedroom?”

“She’s not here. She’s gone for milk.”

“Excellent. Let’s go,” and Liam opened the screen door into the kitchen.

“Josh, what’s going on?” said Rebecca.

“I don’t know. I stood on this weird...”

“Come on,” Liam ordered as he headed for his bedroom at the other end of the house.

Josh gritted his teeth and followed Liam down the hallway, his heel lighting the white tiles.

“Look at the floor,” said Rebecca. “Is that your foot?”

“Yeah, and that’s not the ...”

“Shut the door,” cut in Liam, as he dropped his pack on top of his dirty Gi, flicked on the lights, and drew the curtains. He swept three books, a tub of modelling clay, a broken pen, and an empty chip packet from his desk. Then he pulled the disc from his pocket and slid into the swivel chair. “Look at this,” he said, as he placed it under the bright halogen lamp, and Josh leaned over his shoulder. The dull, grey surface was now a bush-fire red, and the character was canary yellow.

“Why has the colour changed?” Josh took a step back and swatted Rebecca’s hand away as her fingers stretched to touch it. “Don’t. It’s dangerous.”

“You’re being a wimp,” said Liam. “It’s just a disc.”

“It’s not *just* a disc. It’s made from weird stuff, and it’s done weird things to my heel.”

Rebecca stamped her foot. “Where did you find this disc? Why is it dangerous? And what is wrong with Josh’s heel?”

“Josh stood on it at the beach, and it’s not dangerous. Just a bit of light, it doesn’t even hurt him,” said Liam.

“Yeah, well I’ve got a feeling...”, began Josh.

“Your feelings are never based on fact,” said Liam. “Give me your foot. I need to take a closer look.”

Josh wanted to say no way. But if anybody could get his foot back to normal, it would be Liam. He rubbed his sweaty hands against his shorts and plonked his heel on the desk.

“Wow.” Liam shielded his eyes. “The light’s intensifying.”

Rebecca leaned against the backpack Josh was still wearing as she took a closer look. “How did the disc do that to his foot?”

“We’re going to find out. Let’s start with the character on the disc.” Liam pushed Josh’s foot off the desk and typed *single character hieroglyphs* into the search box.

“We’ll never find it,” said Rebecca as she scanned the screen. “There are too many search pages. It reminds me of something though.” She put her plait into her mouth and chewed as she thought. “Is it Lambda? Sort of looks the same if it had a smaller tail.”

“Maybe,” said Liam, and typed lambda into the search box. “Wow. Heaps about computers and coding. That’s not going to be much help. Let’s work out what it’s made from. That could explain why Josh is allergic to it.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not an allergy,” said Josh.

“Use your brains, Josh. It hasn’t done anything to me, and I’ve touched it heaps. It has to be an allergy.” Liam walked over to the shelves of books lining the wall opposite his bed and ran his fingers along the spines. “It looked like metal on the beach, but under the lamp it

looks crystal.” He pulled out his gemstone bible and began flicking through the pages. “If it’s not pyrope, it could be rhodonite. Is the face of it wrinkled?”

“I don’t know,” said Josh, and took a step away from it.

“Lift it up under the lamp,” ordered Liam.

“Pyrope, rhodonite, vegemite,” said Josh, “I don’t care what it’s made from, I’m not touching it.”

“Now,” ordered Liam.

Josh could feel the hairs lifting on his arms and swallowed hard as he picked it up. Instantly, it turned red with heat. He shrieked and dropped it.

Liam glanced up from the book and saw wisps of purple smoke snaking out from the disc to grow into blue flames that almost licked the curtains. “Flick it in the bin,” he shouted, pointing to the one under his desk.

Rebecca darted past Josh and used a tuning-fork in the pencil-holder to sweep the disc into the bin. As it fell, the blue flames streaked behind it like a comet and an ear-piercing whistle shrieked around the room as the lights went out.

“What did you do, Rebecca?” said Liam.

“Nothing. But look.” She pointed to the bin, her finger shaking.

It glowed like its metal sides were molten. Then a light with shivering threads of metallic silver blasted out to form a sucking, swelling vortex, changing colour from white to blood red to rainbow.

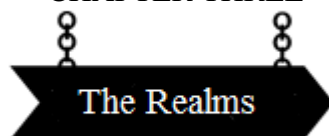
“Rebecca,” yelled Josh over the wind. “Get back.”

Rebecca looked at him, her eyes bulging. She didn’t move, and when it brushed her, she vanished.

“Rebecca.” Josh dived in after her, his heel blazing.

Liam looked at the door, looked at the vortex, then shut his eyes.

CHAPTER THREE



Liam found himself on his back, staring into a pinkish sky with the sun blazing at its centre. “What the...”, he muttered as his fingers scrabbled in the red dirt beneath him. He caught movement and saw Rebecca tangled in a bush about five meters away. As she struggled to escape, clouds of tangerine gas erupted from its orange berries. She was coughing and he took a step towards her. Then he stopped. “Where is Josh?”

Rebecca coughed and shrugged.

He spun around, calling “Josh”, and heard a faint, gurgling answer, but he couldn’t trace the sound.

Rebecca staggered towards him, still coughing as she brushed orange pollen from her shirt and arms. “What’s happening? Where are we? What is...?”

“Sh, Rebecca,” he ordered. “Listen for Josh.”

“Sorry,” she coughed again and stuck her face into her arm, which made her cough more.

Liam scowled at her. “Josh,” he yelled. “Where are you?”

“Here,” came the faint reply, sounding like it was underwater.

They tracked Josh’s voice to the two-metre-high, funnel-shaped plants, growing in red and purple clumps and surrounded by towering trees.

He must be hiding behind them,” said Liam. “Stop mucking around Josh. Come out.”

But Josh didn’t appear. Instead, they heard more of the bubbly words they’d heard before. “I’m trapped in something. Get me out. Hurry.”

“He couldn’t be – could he?” said Liam and rapped on the funnel plant’s leathery exterior. “Josh?”

“Liam”, Josh answered, and they heard splashing and choking from inside. “I’m drowning.”

Liam tucked his thumb over his fingers to form a fist. Yelling, “Kiai,” he punched into the plant’s body. It didn’t flex a millimetre and he turned to Rebecca. “I can get through six planks of wood at grading. What is this?”

“It looks like one of those carnivorous pitcher plants, but it’s way too big.”

“Carnivorous?” said Liam.

“Yeah, prey can’t climb out of the funnel, and it’s drowned and digested.”

Liam stared at the plant with huge eyes. “What? Is Josh being drowned and digested?”

“Maybe,” she whispered.

Liam punched the trumpet again and again. “Hold on Josh,” he panted. “We’re going to get you out.”

Rebecca chewed on her knuckle as she watched. “It’s not working, Liam. We need a rope.” She spotted some vines swinging from the jungle’s canopy. “How about those?”

Liam threw one last punch and dashed towards them. He wrapped his hand around the thickest one and yanked. It didn’t budge. “Rebecca, help.”

Rebecca pressed her mouth to the pitcher. “Keep treading water, Josh, we’ll be right back.” She ran to Liam and placed her hands above his. “Yuk,” she wiped slime onto her trousers. “What is this?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just pull on three. One, two three.” Liam felt a little give. “It’s coming. Again.” It gave a little more. “Again.”

It snapped, and they tumbled to the ground.

Everything was murky in the pitcher and Josh’s vision blurred. He rubbed his eyes, and they started stinging. Something was burning his legs. He tried to slide up the wall, his back jammed on one side and his feet jammed against the other. But it was too slippery, and he splashed back into the liquid, swallowing a bit. What if it was acid? What if it started eating out his throat and stomach? “Help,” he choked in a voice he could hardly hear. There was no answer. What if Liam and Rebecca were trapped too? He tried to breath, tried to hold it together, but it was all closing in.

Rebecca coiled the vine, then screamed and flung it away. “It bit me,” she said as blood beaded her palm.

“Vines don’t bite.” Liam grabbed it and examined the end. The vine lunged at his nose, and he yelped as he jerked it back and pinned it to the ground with his foot. “We need a rock.”

Rebecca pulled a face before hoisting a good-sized one from a pile of red-coloured stones under a tree.

“You bash it’s head in, while I hold it down,” he said.

“I don’t want...” she glanced at the pitcher plant and took a shaky breath. “Okay.” She raised the rock above her head and struck hard. The thing gave a small hiss as it died.

“Sorry,” She whispered.

Liam ran to the plant, the vine slithering behind. “Josh, we’re throwing in a vine. When you catch it, tie it around your waist, and we’ll haul you up.”

“Hurry Liam. I don’t know how much longer I can fight it. It’s pulling me down,” Josh said between coughing and choking.

Liam looped the vine, aimed for the funnel entrance, threw... and missed. He re-looped with shaking fingers, aimed, threw... missed.

Rebecca snatched it from his hands, let sail, and they watched as it dropped into the plant.

“Josh, loop it around your waist now,” yelled Liam. “Josh. Josh.”

There was no answer.