

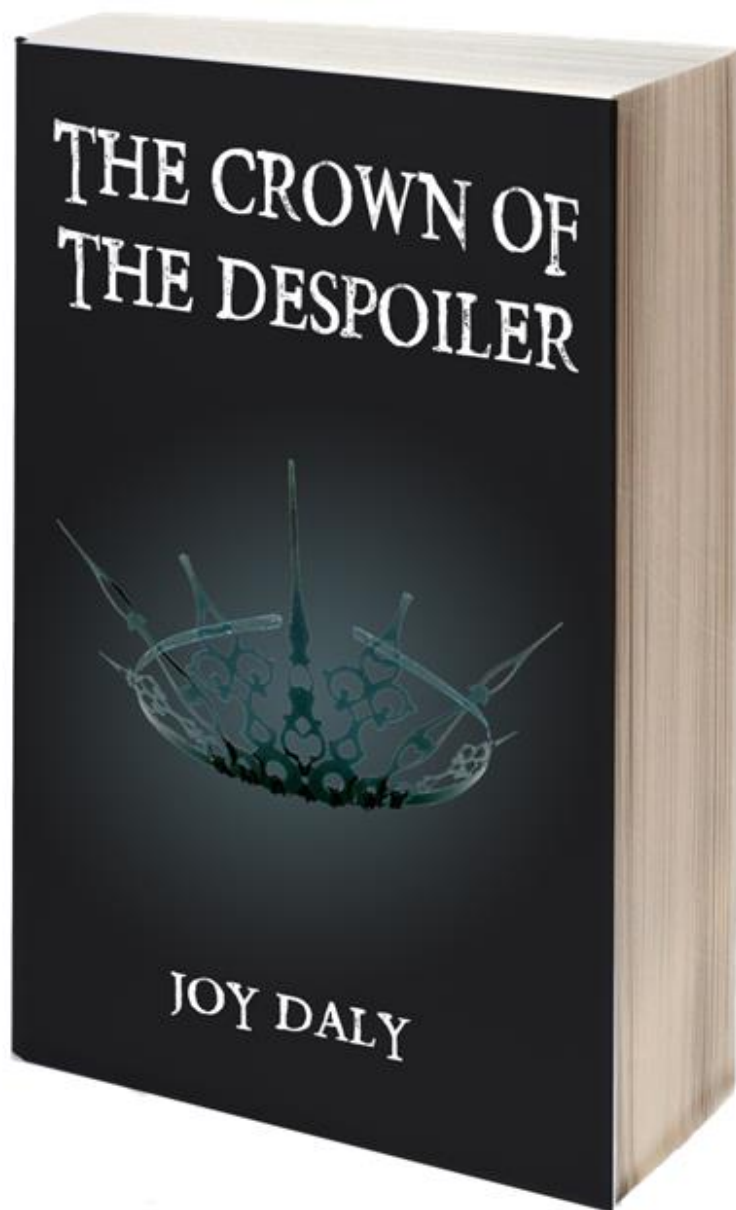
Middle Grade Fantasy Adventure

The fourth book in The Vortex series

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# THE CROWN OF THE DESPOILER

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## CHAPTER ONE



“I’m not going Josh, I don’t care what you say.” Rebecca’s sapphire eyes sparked as she glared at her best friend.

“But I need you. Otherwise, it’ll be me against Liam and David.” Josh’s voice was pleading.

They were sitting under a giant white gum at the park. A bag of lollies they’d bought at the deli across the road lay forgotten between them.

Rebecca pulled a face and put the tip of one black plait into her mouth, nibbling it with her teeth. She always did it when she was worried.

“You’re being paranoid. Liam’s your brother; he won’t side with David.”

“Don’t bet on it,” said Josh. His eyes darkened as he ran a hand through his sandy hair, brushing over the tuft at the back that made him look like a cocky.

“Remember last time on the raft and in Atlantis? He ignored everything we said. He only wanted to listen to David.”

Rebecca went to argue and stopped. “Yeah, okay Josh, maybe they did gang up on us and treat us like babies, but you shouldn’t even *want* to go.

“I don’t, but Liam and David are insane about it.”

“Talk them out of it.”

“I’ve tried, but Liam wants to find some orichalcum and save the world – you know what he’s like. And David ...” Josh’s voice trailed away as he thought. “I don’t know what’s driving him, but I have a bad feeling it has something to do with those voices.”

“You mean The Exiles?”

Josh looked out at the eucalypts swaying in the wind against each other. “As we were dragging you unconscious into the Vortex, voices blasted into our heads, *See you next time*. They sounded mean Rebecca,” and he gave a faint shudder. “David was quick to tell us that these voices were The Exiles. He reckoned he’d been hearing them ever since he found the crown on the raft. The Exiles were humans he said, our friends – and even better – enemies of the beasts that were trying to kill us. But I’m not so sure.”

“I know Josh, you’ve told me this before. I don’t know why you’re so hung up on them and not on everything else that happened.”

Josh couldn’t answer. Other than he was the one with the feelings, the intuition, not Rebecca, not Liam, not David. So why hadn’t he heard the voices until the very end? Was he jealous? He played with that idea for a bit and rejected it. Nah. Not jealous. Worried. He had a feeling that something bigger was going on. And those feelings were

also telling him that The Exiles were no friends of theirs, which made him wonder if David wasn't either. He'd tried to talk to Liam, but it had been no good.

"Here we go again," Liam had said, rolling his eyes, "You and your feelings. If you're too scared Josh, I'll go with David. All I need is for you to activate the disc."

"I'm not too scared Liam, or maybe I am. But that's ...."

Liam had cut him off. "Finding the orichalcum could provide our world with a new, clean energy source. We have greenhouse gasses, global warming, el Nino, melting of the polar ice-caps, blah, blah, blah. You know it as well as me Josh. So what do we do? Just because there's a little risk, do we sit on our hands and pretend we haven't discovered a possible solution?"

"Little risk! It's not a *little* risk Liam. Three times the Vortex has sucked us up and dropped us into weird lands with even weirder animals. We've been lucky to get back alive – really lucky."

Liam had come straight back at him. "Yeah, but we didn't die and we did get back. Look Josh, I'll go with David. No hassles, he's my best friend and I trust him like I trust you."

Josh had flinched at that. There was no way he'd let Liam go to a strange land with only David for backup.

Rebecca punched Josh in the arm. "So, what's the big deal with The Exiles?" she repeated impatiently.

"Huh?" Josh left the past and returned to Rebecca. He dug into the white paper bag until he found a Redskin and peeled it as he talked.

David had some sort of secret communication with them from the time he found the crown – so why didn't he tell us about it until we heard the voices ourselves?

There's something wrong with the whole thing.”

Rebecca shook her musk stick at him, “All the more reason not to go.”

“I don't have a choice Rebecca; I can't let Liam go with only David to rely on.”

Rebecca nodded, plucking a daisy from the carpet of grass and twirling it around in her fingers. “Well, the only way that you can avoid this is to hide your heel.”

“Yeah right, how am I supposed to do that? Even with a sock and shoe on, the light coming from it is making my runner glow – look.”

Josh held his left foot in the air. His runner looked like it was on fire. “Liam will never miss it.”

“What about double or triple socking it?”

“That might work except that it's the middle of summer. Liam will definitely smell a rat if my foot's wrapped up like a mummy. And besides, I don't know how long my heel will have the hole and hieroglyph. It'll probably keep doing its light-house impression until we activate the disc and jump into the Vortex. And what about the disc? It glows too. So even if Liam doesn't spot my foot, the minute he pulls the disc out to study it – and he does that all the time – the game will be up.”

“If he's so keen, why don't you let him activate it?”

“He can't.” Josh shook his head and brushed a fly that was buzzing his nose.

“For some reason, maybe because I stood on the disc in the first place, only I can make the Vortex appear from the centre of it. It must have a connection with my heel.”

Rebecca started pulling the petals off the daisy, screwing them into angry little balls and flicking them into the sky. “Then, I don’t understand why we’re having this conversation Josh. If it won’t activate without you – the problem’s solved.”

Scrunching up his face and shaking his head slowly Josh said, “It’s not that simple.”

“Why not?” Rebecca had stripped the daisy and she flicked away the stem.

“Because we *do* have major problems and Liam’s ideas about orichalcum might be the answer to *all* of them.

“Might, Josh. Hear that word, *might*? Orichalcum *might* be the answer. We *might* find it. Those psycho animals *might* kill us. We *might* find our way home again.”

Rebecca stopped and took a deep, shuddering breath. “Do you want to risk *your* life on a *might*?” What about the wolf, the lizard, the bighorn, the squid, the bull, the elephant? And that’s even before I start on the quicksand, the desert, collapsing buildings, dehydration and massive wounds that almost killed us. And what about...”

“It’s *all* might,” and he stared into her eyes. “I suppose we have to work out whether the *might* is worth it. Well?” He spoke into the silence, “Is it?”

Rebecca turned away and stared unseeing across the grass to the swings. Picking another daisy, she twirled it between her fingers and the silence lengthened. Shaking her head, she turned to Josh and said, “Okay, I’m in, but if I get killed, I’m going to be seriously annoyed with you.”

Josh threw his arms around her and gave her a huge hug. “Excellent!”

“So, when do we tell Liam and David about your heel?” Her voice wavered a little, and Josh understood. She was frightened, but she was going to do it anyway. If

anything happened to her, it would be all his fault. He almost backed out then, almost decided to try the triple-sock suggestion, almost. But he couldn't. Regardless of the risk, they had to try and get some orichalcum. Had to.