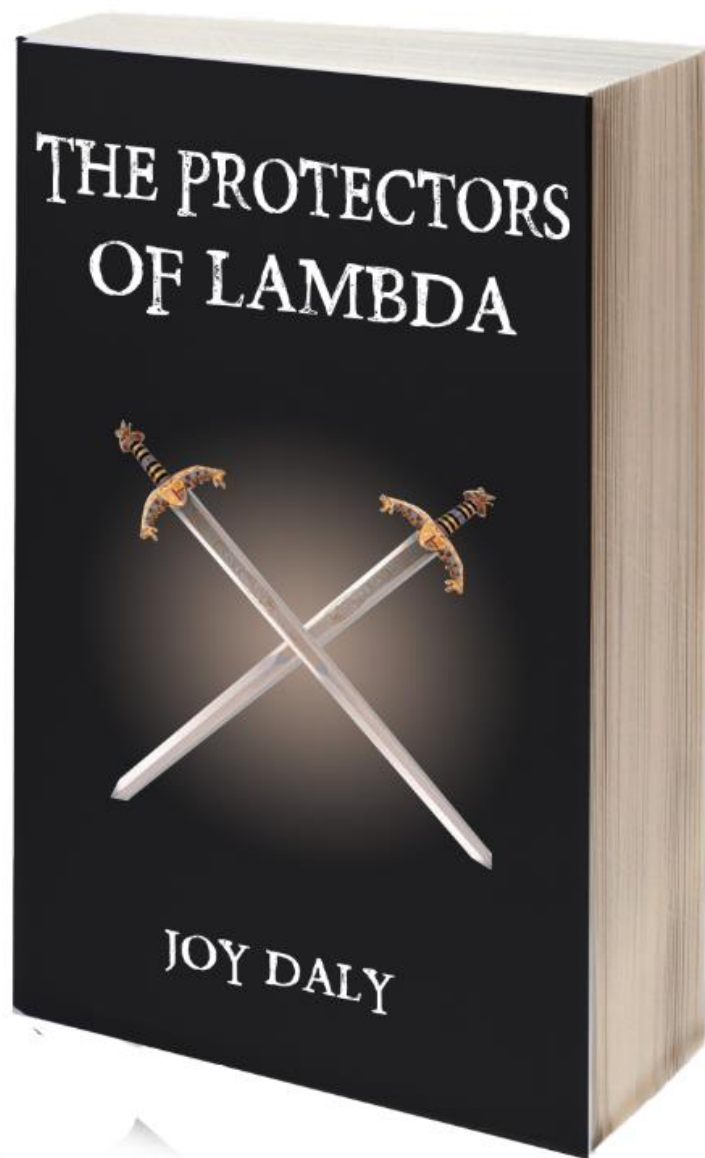


Middle Grade Fantasy Adventure  
The second book in The Vortex series

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# THE PROTECTORS OF LAMBDA

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## CHAPTER ONE



Josh's best friend was a girl. He had some mates in his U12 soccer team, but nobody was as good to talk to as Rebecca. The bell had rung for lunch and that was normally the time he kicked the ball around with some of the guys in his class. But there was nothing *normal* about today. He stared at his sneakered left foot, half expecting to see light blasting from the sides before he scanned the playground looking for Rebecca. He needed to talk to her badly.

"Hey, amoeba."

He spun around already knowing who it was. Liam. Great. The last person he wanted to see. "What," he said as he scowled up at his big brother, the total opposite to him in looks, personality and pretty much everything else too. Although only fifteen months separated them, Liam, nearly thirteen, was tall for his age, while he was short. Liam was super-strong from all his karate training and could snap boards in half with his bare hands. The only thing Josh did with his bare hands was play piano. He loved soccer; Liam hated any type of ball unless it was Newton's cradle. Liam was his brother, and most of the time that was cool.

But he still couldn't wait until Liam graduated from middle school. He looked at his foot, and Liam noticed.

"What's wrong? You're nervous."

"Nothing," said Josh, as his gaze swept the playground. Where was Rebecca? Even though he knew Liam was watching, he couldn't help it. He glanced down at his sneaker again.

"Why do you keep looking at your foot?"

"I don't," said Josh, but despite his best efforts, he checked out his foot again. Still no light, but for how much longer?

Liam's eyes narrowed. "It hasn't, has it?"

"What are you talking about?" Josh took a step back, knowing exactly what Liam meant."

"Your heel," said Liam as he took a step forward.

"Nah," said Josh and took another step back before spinning to run away.

Liam grabbed him.

"Let me go."

Liam tightened his grip. "Show me your heel."

"No," said Josh.

Liam ignored Josh as he muscled him onto an empty classroom verandah away from all the kids and teachers and forced him to sit. "Sneaker off," he ordered.

Josh tried to push up, but Liam had him tight.

"What are you two doing?" Mr. Crispin called as he appeared from around the corner.

“Creepin’ Crispin,” muttered Liam. “Let me do the talking. Hi Mr. Crispin, we’re looking for a bit of privacy. My little brother has wet his pants.” He tousled Josh’s hair.

“What? That’s...” began Josh. “Ow,” he squeaked as Liam took a handful of his hair and gave it a yank.

“Yeah, I’m helping him clean up.” Liam gave a half-embarrassed, half-resigned shrug like he was used to this type of thing.

“Good, good, good,” Crispin said as he held up his hands and backed away. “If it’s too much of a... Good,” he repeated “And, ah, if Josh has these problems regularly, the school counsellor is always there for a bit of support. It can be hard for a big brother sometimes.” He gave Liam a sympathetic smile as he hurried away.

“Now,” said Liam as he turned back to Josh, “Off with your shoe.”

Josh punched Liam in the arm. “Why’d you say that?”

Liam gave Josh a quick jab in the stomach which made Josh spit out a lungful of air. “It got rid of him, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, but teachers talk. He’ll have my *wee problem* all around the staff room by the end of lunch. How would you like it if I said you peed yourself?”

Liam laughed. “Wouldn’t matter, because nobody would believe you. Come on. Get your shoe off. I’m not asking again.”

Josh muttered and kicked off his left sneaker.

“Wow,” said Liam as he took in the light spilling through Josh’s sock. “It’s happened. Six months of waiting and it’s finally happened.”

“Yeah,” agreed Josh, his shoulders sagging. “I thought it might be that. My foot’s been tingling for the last hour.”

“Sock off,” ordered Liam. He bent over Josh’s heel, squinting at the hole streaming light. “The Lambda character’s back too.” He traced the strange figure and shook his head. “You’d swear your heel was branded. We need to cut school and get home.”

“We can’t cut school,” said Josh as he pulled on his sock and sneaker.

“We can go to the front office and get a pass. We’ll blame your wee problem.”

“I don’t have a wee problem,” said Josh, scowling.

Liam reached into his backpack and pulled out his water bottle. “You do now.” He pointed it at Josh’s crutch and squeezed.

“Liam,” shouted Josh and knocked the bottle from his hand. “You’re such a jerk.”

Liam laughed. “Come on.”

“What about Rebecca?” said Josh.

“What about her?” said Liam.

Josh stared at Liam trying to work out why he was being so dumb. “If we’re going, she’s going.”

“No.” Liam shoved the water-bottle back in his pack and slung it on.

Josh couldn’t believe Liam was being such an idiot. “Why not? She was brilliant last time. If she hadn’t been with us, we might still be stuck in that jungle.”

“Because last time, when we got back, she didn’t even believe what had happened, and she threatened to tell Mum – and you know what that would have meant?”

Josh bit his bottom lip. Liam was attacking his best friend. Not cool. Not cool at all. “She didn’t tell, and we thought it hadn’t happened until we found the sapphire.

Liam’s voice rose. “We agreed, Josh. Next time, we’d go it alone.”

“No Liam. I never agreed we’d go at all. Last time, we almost died.”

“But we didn’t. It was a fantastic adventure, and nobody even knew we’d gone. And just think about how we got there. A wormhole’s always been speculative, but that’s the only logical explanation for the vortex. It’s something Einstein...”

“Shut up with your stupid science. I don’t care about Einstein. I’m not going, and without my heel, you can’t go either. End of story.”

Liam pulled Josh off the veranda, and they went toe-to-toe on the ground.

“What about the orichalcum, Josh?”

“What the heck is ori... ori whatever you said?”

“Orichalcum. That red sheet of energy we saw in the pyramid could be real orichalcum. I did heaps of research and...”

“Shut-up Liam, you know I hate when you spout.”

“And that’s why you never learn anything, Josh. Anyway, if it’s an alternative energy source, it could be the answer for our climate. All we need to do is bring some back this time.”

“All we need to do!” Josh squeezed his eyes shut. Liam was right. If there was a chance they could find an alternative energy source, they had to take it. He gave a sigh and nodded. “Yeah okay. But I’m only going if Rebecca goes, which means we’re not cutting school now.”

“I don’t like it, but okay,” said Liam.

“Tough,” said Josh. “I don’t like this either.” He pointed to the wet patch on the front of his shorts. “How am I supposed to explain it.”

“Just say you spilt water on yourself, but I don’t know whether anyone will believe you.” Liam laughed and took off.