

Harley James and the Mystery of the Mayan Kings

By Leah Cupps

Chapter One: The Glowing Statue

Tikal, Guatemala, Present Day

You know how you just *know* something in your “knower”? As if you had a crystal ball built into your brain?

Well, today I had a feeling. This was going to be my year.

I, Harley Rebecca James, am going to win the Junior International Cryptography Competition.

What is that, you ask?

JICC is an online competition that follows the story of two explorers as they embark on a cryptographic adventure. Solving riddles and clues are my favorite things to do, so naturally, I love cryptography. Each week for twelve weeks, a new chapter is released, with a new code to break. Thousands of kids enter to win. And I was about to solve the clue for week two.

Thirty-nine characters. A famous phrase... got it!

I scribbled the answer down in my journal and smiled.

“Where there is ruin, there is hope for treasure,” I whispered to myself.

A quote from the ancient philosopher Rumi. Of course, I’ve heard Dad say this a hundred times.

The code itself had been easy to crack. The technique used was a simple Caesar shift. The hard part had been finding the key to unlock the cipher.

I couldn’t wait to get back to my room so I could log on and enter the answer.

“Harley? Have you finished your report on Mayan glyphs yet?” A voice suddenly broke through my thoughts.

Report?

Right, I was supposed to be finishing my homework, not cracking codes.

“Almost,” I replied, tucking a piece of unruly blonde hair out of my face. I was with my tutor Jessica Rodríguez and her dog, Daisy, sitting under the shade of the famous temples of Tikal, an ancient Mayan site nestled in the dense Guatemalan forest.

“Are you solving riddles again?”

I smiled in response, shrugging my shoulders.

“You need to finish your history assignment.”

Jessica frowned at me and readjusted her long legs, shifting in her chair. She was pretty when she smiled, but most of the time, I felt like she was scowling at me. I sat upright and grabbed my notebook.

She hated when I got distracted during homework time.

Upon hearing my voice, Daisy rose up from her spot next to Jessica and walked over to me. She licked my face, and I patted her on the head.

I was currently sweating through another afternoon of sixth-grade homework, my books scattered over a large blanket. I scribbled in the last few lines on my report and shoved them back into my history binder.

“Done!”

Daisy was tugging at my backpack, begging for a walk. I smiled at her. I’ve always wanted a dog, but it was one of the many things I had to give up as a famous world traveler.

Okay, not quite famous, but the world traveler part was spot on. You see, I’m a bit of a nomad. The only daughter of world-renowned archeologist and engineer, Russell James. Global traveler, student of the world.

Sounds great, doesn’t it?

I’ll admit it, some parts *are* great. Exploring remote sections of the world, making new friends, learning new languages.

But then there are the *other* parts of world travel: staying in hotels with no air conditioning and traveling to remote areas with big—I mean BIG—spiders isn’t always fun. There was one time in Peru when we spotted a Giant Huntsman spider the size of a dinner plate. I had nightmares about it for weeks.

And Dad? Let’s just say he’s overprotective. I’m never allowed to explore anywhere on my own. I can barely get alone time in my room without him checking on me every fifteen minutes. I love him dearly, but I’d just like a little more freedom.

Daisy placed her tiny furry chin on my outstretched leg, breaking me from my thoughts.

“You ready for a walk, girl?” I scratched her head. “I’m ready for a break, too.”

Daisy stood up, twirled around in a circle, and nudged at her leash.

“Jessica? Would you mind if I take Daisy for a walk?”

Jessica barely looked up. “Hmm?” Her eyes lingered on the pages of her book.

“I could use a break.”

She raised her eyes to me and Daisy, who was now shaking with anticipation. “Okay. Just remember, stay close—”

“I know, I know. Don’t talk to strangers and don’t go into the jungle.”

Jessica gave me a thin smile. “And be careful.”

“Of course.” I gave her my most confident grin. “Let’s go, Daisy!”

I swung my favorite purple backpack over my shoulders. This wasn’t just any backpack, mind you. It was decorated with patches from all over the world. Mom had given it to me, along with my first traveler’s patch from France. I kept all the necessities inside; cell phone, colored pencils, a leather notebook, gum, and a headlamp—just in case.

Daisy fell in step with me as we started out across the edge of the jungle. Tikal, Guatemala, was a huge archeological site full of Mayan temples, statues, and monuments. Some of the temples extended above the tops of the trees, like lighthouses in the forest. The Mayans built one of the largest ancient cities in the world... made with no bulldozers, no cranes, and no construction equipment of any kind.

I stared out over the city. *How did they do it?*

Everything was going great—I was being completely safe—until Daisy suddenly tugged me away from the path around the Temple of the Jaguar toward a dense spot in the jungle.

“No, Daisy,” I said, pulling back on her leash. “We have to stay on the path.”

If I left this path, I’d never be allowed out of Dad’s or Jessica’s sight again.

But Daisy wasn’t giving up. She pulled me into the brush and out of the sunlight. Not good. Snakes and spiders loved hanging out in the shade. I looked around nervously.

“What is it, girl?”

As my eyes adjusted to the shade, I saw a figure standing in the trees about fifteen feet away.

“Hello?” I said, my voice cracking. Daisy continued to pull me forward like a sled dog.

“Daisy, will you stop?”

But she was not giving up, and I couldn’t hold on any longer. The leash slipped from my hand, and she bolted into the jungle.

“Daisy!” I cried, dashing after her.

Branches and leaves whipped past me as I followed her deeper into the forest. I wasn’t about to lose Daisy in the jungle, rules, or no rules.

Just as I was about to run out of breath, Daisy stopped ahead of me with an excited, *yip!* Apparently, she had found something.

I caught up to her in a few long strides and peered into the jungle. Nestled behind a bramble of jungle leaves was a wall made of stone. After I grabbed Daisy’s leash, I took a step closer.

“What did you find, girl?”

Six nooks were carved into the side of the wall, about the size of my outstretched hand. Five of the nooks had carved stones placed inside. I recognized the carvings. They were Mayan.

In fact, I had just been studying them for my history lesson.

Now I was intrigued. Maybe that report would come in handy. Dad was always going on and on about using our great knowledge of history in the field.

The first five symbols stood for Jaguar, Sun, Snake, Rain, and Skull. But the sixth nook was empty. I touched the soft grooves of the granite. My code-finding mind went to work. There must be a stone that fits into the final slot. It must follow a *logical* pattern.

What do the glyphs for Jaguar, Sun, Snake, Rain, and Skull have in common? I bit the edge of my lip. I tried to think of something useful from my report. I had taken a particular interest in the Mayan glyphs, given my love of codes and symbols.

I knew that Kinich Ahau, the god of the sun, was often depicted as a jaguar. And Chaac, the god of rain, was drawn with the body of a snake. And the skull? Well, the god of earth, and the underworld, was Cizin. He was often shown as a skull.

I felt a little chill run up my spine. Creepy.

But back to the glyphs.

Jaguar, Sun, Snake, Rain, Skull... Earth?

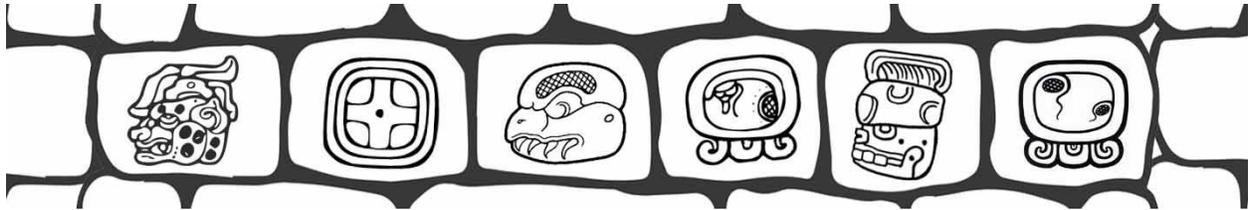
It was worth a shot.

There were stones scattered about the jungle floor and I quickly shifted through them, looking for earth symbol. A few were broken, some had parts of a carving. They represented everything from rain drops to mountains.

Then I stumbled over a sharp object jutting out of the jungle floor. I got down on my knees. I could see a stone half-buried in the mud. I dug my fingers into the ground and began to dig. When I was done, I stared at the stone.

It had the symbol for earth. Bingo!

I ran back to the center of the wall and placed it in the sixth nook. To my surprise, it fit perfectly in place.



Then something weird happened. The ground beneath began to rumble.

Was this an earthquake?

It wasn't that unusual for an earthquake to happen in Central America. But right after I placed the sixth symbol? That was a little odd.

The stones in front of me suddenly began to move, and I pulled Daisy back as several rocks began to fall. We huddled together near the ground. I placed my hands over my head and squeezed my eyes shut. A few seconds later, the shaking stopped.

I looked up. The center of the wall that held the carved stones had crumbled into a pile at my feet.

So much for solving that riddle.

"Come on, Daisy, we better get back," I said, pulling on her leash.

If my overprotective dad knew I was by myself in the jungle during an earthquake?

I shuddered at the thought.

But just as I was about to leave, my eyes caught on a peculiar green glow coming from the pile of stones.

Daisy must have noticed it too, because she walked back over to the spot. As she sniffed the ground, I saw she was standing over a small object that appeared to be lit from within. I squatted down and took a closer look.

It was a little statue, about as big as an eggplant. I reached down and touched it, feeling the cool surface on my skin. Perhaps it was made of jade?

I could hear Dad's voice in my head shouting, *You should be wearing gloves!*

Well, he wasn't here, so I picked it up.

It had to be a real Mayan artifact. What else would it be doing here in the jungle?

Then I got that weird feeling you get when someone's watching you. I spun around and looked every which way I could. Leaves were moving off toward the temple as if someone had just parted them.

I figured I had a few choices. I could run the piece back to Dad and share my discovery. That would be the obvious thing to do.

Or I could do some research of my own, find out who this little guy was. Maybe if I found out enough, I could convince Dad that I was old enough to explore on my own.

What should I do?

One thing I did know was I had to get out of there. The waving tree limbs gave me the heebie-jeebies.

And then, the answer hit me.

I'd pay a visit to my friend, Aly, whose parents managed one of the museums here in Tikal. She could help me figure out what it was.

"What do you think, Daisy girl? Should we get out of here? Check this one out ourselves?"

Daisy yipped back, obviously agreeing with me.

I stashed the statue in my backpack and set off towards our rental house in the village. First, I had to stop at home and enter this week's answer for the cryptography competition. After that, we'd head over to the museum.

I didn't know it at the time, but that little statue I had stuffed in my backpack? It was about to get me into a whole world of trouble.