

30. **Malai's Mission**
By ReadWorks

Lexile: 910

It was the hottest day of the year. As Malai walked along a side street in the city of Bangkok, Thailand, an old woman walked up to her and smeared a pinkish liquid on her cheek. The woman laughed, then walked away. Malai wiped away the substance with her finger—it was colored talc powder combined with water, a common mixture used during the celebration of Songkran, or the Thai New Year. To mark the occasion, Thais throw water on each other—the streets are filled with people toting water guns and pick-up trucks full of partygoers in the back, dumping water on passersby. People from all over the world come to Thailand to celebrate Songkran. But Malai was tired, and all she wanted to do was to take a break from the water festival.

As she turned the corner, she stumbled upon a baby elephant with a mahout, someone who rides and looks after an elephant. The mahout was jabbing the elephant's ear with a stick, one that had a metal spike at its end. Malai ran up to the mahout and told him to stop; the elephant was clearly being hurt.

"But he misbehaved!" the mahout told Malai, shushing her in the process. "He didn't walk when I told him to."

"He's probably tired," Malai explained. She had seen so many tourists line up to ride elephants in the streets throughout the day, and couldn't imagine working in this heat for so long.

The mahout refused to listen. He gave Malai a dismissive look, then started to walk down the street, pushing the elephant from behind.

Malai knew there wasn't much she could do. She set off toward home. Upon her arrival, her mother was making tom yum, a popular and spicy Thai soup. Malai walked over to the kitchen counter and began chopping up spices to add to the soup.

"Mom, I know what I want to do during the summer before school starts again," Malai said. "I want to go volunteer at an elephant sanctuary."

* * *

Summer came quickly, and suddenly Malai was standing in front of Boon Lot's Elephant Sanctuary in northern Thailand. Her mom and dad both supported her wish to spend a few months at the sanctuary learning about the rehabilitation of the animals she so often saw in the streets of Bangkok.

"Welcome to the sanctuary!" Malai looked to her right. Standing there was a man dressed in loose khaki pants and a flowing beige shirt with a floppy tan hat perched on top of his head. He smiled widely and walked over to take her bags. "I'm Matt," he said. "Let me take you to your room!"

Malai smiled back but was too absorbed in her surroundings to say anything. She followed Matt in silence, looking around at the beautiful sanctuary that would be her home for the next three months. In the distance, she could see a few baby elephants playing in a large, muddy pool. As they crossed a rickety wooden bridge, she saw elephant trunks emerging from the dense foliage, swinging up and down in a playful manner.

"Well, here we are!" Matt said as he climbed the few stairs that led up to a modest cabin. A hammock was stretched out on the porch, and inside, there was only a simple bed with a mosquito net hanging above. Off to the right were four more cabins for other volunteers.

Matt noticed Malai's gaze drifting toward the other rooms. "Oh, they're all off doing their chores," he said. "You'll start on those tomorrow!"

* * *

At 6 a.m. sharp the next morning, Malai heard the sound of a bell ringing in the distance. "It's way too early for that to be the wake-up call," she thought. But just as she closed her eyes, she heard the loud creak of the floorboards in the adjacent room—the other

volunteers were getting up. She had met them the previous night at dinner. There were Bill and Jane, a young couple from Australia; Aaliyah, a college student from California; Rupon, a man from southern India; and lastly, Harriet, an older woman from London. Malai thought they were all incredibly kind, and so passionate about saving elephants from horrible living conditions.

The first task on the day's schedule was to walk the elephants to their new campsite in the forest. Volunteers had built a new shelter for rescued animals by planting trees in areas that had previously been cleared by villagers to create farmland.

On their way to pick up the elephants, Bill mentioned to Malai that they had just rescued one new elephant from a tourist camp nearby. Malai knew about these camps but had never been to one—she knew the horrific ways the camp owners treated the elephants. Tourists visit these camps daily, unaware of the inhumane treatment of the animals. The animals are made to perform tricks for audiences, and if they don't perform correctly, they are severely beaten. They are forced to give rides to people all day long, and the harness that is strapped to their backs harms their bodies. On top of everything else, they're not fed well.

When the group arrived at the elephant shelter, Malai could easily point out the new rescued animal on her own. On the baby's head were harsh white scars that stood out against its wrinkly, gray skin. Bill said that the scars came from the previous mahout's knife. Malai cringed at the thought. She walked over to the elephant and gently put her hand on the trunk. The baby responded by putting his trunk on Malai's shoulder.

"All right, guys, let's start hiking!" Matt called out to everyone. Everyone remained mostly silent throughout the walk to the new encampment, still tired from waking up so early. But Malai knew everyone was happy to be there. The baby elephant remained by Malai's side during the entire journey.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, what is a 'mahout'?

- A) someone who rides and looks after an elephant
- B) a celebration of the Thai New Year
- C) a volunteer at an elephant sanctuary
- D) a stick with a metal spike on the end

2. Based on the passage, how can Malai best be described?

- A) cranky and easily annoyed
- B) determined and passionate
- C) young and easily bored
- D) uncaring and selfish

3. Elephants are caring creatures.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A) Many elephants are used to give rides to people all day long.
- B) Elephants get tired when they work in the heat for too long.
- C) At tourist camps, elephants are capable of performing impressive tricks for audiences.
- D) When Malai placed her hand on the baby elephant's trunk, the elephant placed her trunk on Malai's shoulder.

4. What is the main reason Malai decides to volunteer at the elephant sanctuary during the summer?

- A) The mistreatment of elephants has always been a huge concern of hers, and she has always wanted to work in a sanctuary.
- B) The mistreatment of the baby elephant by the mahout, and the mahout's dismissal of her concern, made her want to do something to help all elephants.
- C) The heat of the summer and the crowds of tourists in Bangkok made her want to get away from the city.
- D) The mistreatment of the baby elephant by the mahout made her want to find a way to convince the mahout to treat his elephant better.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A) a girl's new mission to help train elephants for tourist camps
- B) a girl's new mission to learn about and help rehabilitate elephants
- C) a girl's dislike for the tourists in her home country
- D) a girl's adjustment to her new tasks at an elephant sanctuary

6. Read these sentences from the passage.

"On the baby's head were harsh white scars that stood out against its wrinkly, gray skin. Bill said that the scars came from the previous mahout's knife. Malai **cringed** at the thought."

What does the word "cringed" most nearly mean here?

- A) dismissed with annoyance
- B) laughed with disbelief
- C) shrank back in fear
- D) shuddered with disgust

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Malai decided to spend her summer volunteering at an elephant sanctuary _____ seeing a mahout mistreat his elephant in the streets of Bangkok.

- A) despite
- B) prior to
- C) after
- D) in lieu of

8. What jobs or tasks do elephants in Thailand perform, according to the passage?

9. List three ways mentioned by the passage that elephants in Thailand are mistreated.
