

# **CHAPTER 1**

After I finished using a fire hose to give Hugo his shower, I began the tedious process of trimming his footpads and cutting his toenails. It was a difficult job because it had to be done through steel bars. I wasn't allowed inside Hugo's cage under any circumstances, although I often ignored that rule at night when nobody else was around.

I prompted the elephant to stick his leg through a low hatch by touching each foot in turn with a long stick so I could work on it with a grooved knife and a file. Hugo was very cooperative. He'd traveled with a circus for most of his life so years of training and strict discipline had taught him how to make a trainer's job easier when he wanted to. Of course the fact that he would do almost anything asked of him if there was a chance he'd earn a food reward didn't hurt, so I handed him a carrot every time I completed work on one of his feet.

"Talk to me, you butt-ugly monster. Time to perform."

The Bioacoustics Research Department had erected his enclosure inside a huge warehouse the university leased near their campus. They'd used shipping containers in conjunction with massive steel bars and gates to form a temporary safe enclosure to house the elephant. I'd been instructed to encourage Hugo to vocalize as much as possible because every sound he made was supposed to be recorded in an effort to study elephant communications. He seemed to understand what was required of him and was happy to oblige.

My eyes followed the colorful ebb and flow of his grunts, barks, and roars as the huge elephant wandered around the circumference of his cage, sneaking the occasional glance in my direction as if to confirm that he was doing a good job for me. The sounds alone were almost overwhelming, but the colors were magnificent!

I had begun to understand some of the intricacies of Hugo's communications skills as I got to know him better. That made each noise the elephant created all the more fascinating because I always found myself speculating about what he was trying to say. In fact, this was the nature of the professor's project and the reason Hugo was here in the first place. Of course nobody else involved in the project could actually see Hugo's sounds like I could. That ability gave me a unique insight into Hugo's personality that, unfortunately, I could never share with the scientists. Synesthesia was abnormal enough, but had I ever revealed the kind of things I saw whenever I heard a sound, they'd have definitely thought I was crazy. Or some kind of freak. No, that would have to remain a secret.

Over the last week or so there had been several occasions when it seemed I was almost on the verge of understanding Hugo's innermost thoughts by deciphering the various colors produced by the sounds he made. As I grew up I'd gradually become accustomed to hearing and feeling colors, seeing sounds and even tasting shapes. People with synesthesia experience

some or all of these unusual sensations every day. Some find it distracting and annoying. I, on the other hand, relished the added perspective it provided, and couldn't imagine life without it. How boring it must be for normal people who had to live without the pleasure and insight these colors provided for me!

However, the possibility that I could also use this ability to actually read people's minds was a quantum leap in bizarreness; a prospect that simultaneously fascinated and frightened me. Consequently, I'd always been careful not to mention this aspect of my life to anyone out of fear that they'd consider me to be even more of a freak than I already was, at least in my own eyes. Not even my mother knew about it, although she was well aware of the more conventional aspects of my synesthesia.

The specific colors associated with Hugo's noisy soliloquy were nothing like those of the visible light spectrum I'd studied in school, but I'd learned to associate them with happiness while watching people laugh. As a result of my involvement with Hugo, I'd concluded that elephant's emotions were pretty much the same as ours, although I was sure I'd never understand why some humans act the way they do. Because I had long ago decided that I generally didn't care much for people anyway, spending time with an elephant was a welcome diversion and getting paid for it was an added bonus. As a high school student desperately in need of funding for my first year of university, I'd jumped at the job opportunity when it had been offered to me.

Even though Hugo and I would never be able to communicate directly, it was very satisfying to know with some certainty that my friend was indeed contented, even if it was only temporary. Nice that at least one of us was happy at the moment.

My next task that night was certainly one of the least glamorous aspects of my paid role in the project. I used a special rake to pull piles of elephant dung from inside the enclosure and then shoveled it into garbage bins. The university groundskeepers would recycle it later as garden fertilizer. The rake was something I'd constructed myself from an extendable aluminum pole so that I could scoop the entire cage without actually entering it. It needed to be done regularly because Hugo had a habit of playfully tossing dung at passersby if the enclosure wasn't cleaned to his standards.

I called the elephant over to me again and pointed with my stick toward the steel bars. "Hugo, old buddy, it's battery day today, so I need you to move up to the bars and stand still for a few minutes while I do my job. Okay?"

The elephant obeyed my request promptly, as usual. I climbed a stepladder so I could reach through the bars into a small container strapped securely to Hugo's massive back and change a battery pack inside. The electronics inside were supposed to monitor the various noises he made at certain unusual frequencies that were difficult to capture with conventional microphones. This task was always a little scary, but I trusted Hugo not to make any sudden moves that might knock me off the ladder as I leaned through the bars. The pack also contained a transmitter and a small computer unit that was well padded to protect it from damage. I glanced at

the wires that ran from the pack to implants and sensors on Hugo's head in order to make sure they hadn't come loose. Everything looked normal.

I confirmed that all the equipment was functioning properly by pressing a test button on the little computer and waiting for a green light to appear. The powerful computers that monitored the tests were locked inside an office on the second floor near the warehouse entrance. Only the professors had a key to this room so I had no way of checking to see that the data sent by Hugo's transmitter was being received. That wasn't my responsibility. My supervisor, Professor Blenheim, would tell me if there was a problem and then I'd have to work with technicians from her department to fix it. So far everything had worked perfectly although I sensed that the professor still wasn't happy with the results.

I zipped up the pack and tapped Hugo gently on the butt to tell him we were finished. Now it was time for his reward. The elephant trumpeted with joy and ran circles around the enclosure as soon as he saw the bag of apples in my hand.

"Careful, big guy! You're a senior citizen now, so we don't want you to get too excited."

I was forced to dodge the elephant's flailing trunk several times while I fed him apples through the bars. I knew Hugo wasn't deliberately trying to hurt me because when elephants decided they didn't like someone they weren't at all subtle when it came to demonstrating their feelings. No, this was clearly just playful behavior on Hugo's part, and as long as I kept an eye out for it, the massive trunk wasn't really a threat. The row of heavy, vertical steel bars that separated us were just wide enough for his trunk, but far too narrow for the rest of his massive body to fit through.

The fact that Hugo had killed a circus trainer many years ago was proof enough that even the gentlest of elephants could be dangerous, although the death might well have been the result of an accident. Nobody seemed to know the exact details about how it had happened, and because Hugo was the only elephant these scientists had a realistic chance of obtaining for their experiments, they hadn't wanted to ask too many questions. As a result I had been warned repeatedly not to let my guard down, even though the two of us had become friends over the last couple of months. I hadn't seen any sign of Hugo's alleged violent disposition although he could certainly be stubborn and temperamental when he was in a bad mood.

While he wasn't looking I removed a special apple from my jacket pocket and allowed him to take it after teasing him momentarily by hiding it behind my back. As Hugo grasped the apple in the end of his trunk, he examined it carefully by holding it in front of one eye. I stood nearby and watched patiently. I'd used this same method to trick Hugo into taking his pills ever since the day we met. So far it had always worked, so why should tonight be any different?

My question was answered moments later as Hugo deliberately banged the apple on the floor of his enclosure. It fell apart and the pills that I had carefully hidden inside the hollowed-out core spilled out. Hugo trumpeted his victory loudly as he picked up the pieces of the apple and carefully stuffed

them into his mouth. He then stomped the pills into powder with one of his massive feet. It looked to me like he was grinning, although of course that was impossible.

Now I'd have to find a new way to give Hugo his medications, and I'd have to mention that in my log book for the professor. Would she even care?

Hugo stiffened and raised his trunk to cast the air for scent. He abruptly turned his head toward the gymnasium door and let out a huge roar, which by its color I knew was an aggressively hostile gesture. Elephants can actually identify people they don't like by their smell, so I knew what to expect next.

"Professor Blenheim, I wasn't expecting to see you tonight," I said as she marched purposefully into the warehouse.

"There are a few things I need to do in the office and I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd drop by. No reason you need to stick around now that I'm here, so why don't you head home early?"

Even if I hadn't seen from the color of her words that she was being deceptive, I'd still have known by the expression on her face that she was up to something. She was someone who should never play poker.

"I'm running a little late, but the equipment checks are all done and I'll be through in a couple of minutes. Oh, and there's a problem with his meds I need to talk to you about."

"We can discuss that some other time. Just finish what you're doing and head out."

She touched my arm sympathetically, almost as an afterthought. "How is your mother? Last time we talked, she wasn't feeling very well."

"Still the same. Her migraines are getting worse and she's feeling pretty sorry for herself these days," I said as I looked her in the eye. I knew she wasn't the least bit interested in me or my mother. Again, I didn't need to see the color of her words to know she was being insincere.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched as Hugo stared at the professor and grunted. The color of the sounds he was directing at her through the cage had darkened ominously. Clearly he had developed an intense dislike of her for some reason.

"I thought I was supposed to be the only one to have direct contact with Hugo. Have you had problems with him while I wasn't here?"

"Nothing that need concern you," she said dismissively.

"I wouldn't go near him if I was you. He doesn't seem to like you very much."

"I don't care if he likes me or not. What concerns me is that he isn't producing the kinds of sounds I'm looking for. If we don't get results soon..."

"I'm doing my best and he's doing his best too. It would be helpful if you could be a little more specific about what you need us to do."

She shook her head. "I'm beginning to wonder if he just doesn't have it in him anymore. He's pretty old."

"Honestly, he'll do whatever you want if we can just point him in the right direction. Just give us a little more time."

"We may not have much more time."

That was an ominous note because aside from our local zoo, which specialized in housing problem elephants, there really was nowhere else that would accept an elephant with Hugo's troubled reputation. There wasn't even a guarantee that the local facility would be able to take him back when his work here was done because their capacity was limited and there was already a waiting list.

"I thought we were guaranteed at least another year in this facility?"

"So did I," she said, "but one of our grants just fell through. We'll have to wait and see what happens, but I'm not optimistic, given the lack of results so far."

"That's depressing."

"Isn't it though," she said as she put her hand on my elbow and began guiding me toward the door. "Time for you to get your beauty rest, Andy."

I dug my heels in as we reached the door. "Hang on a second. I'd really like to stay a while longer and make sure Hugo is tucked in properly. Would you mind?"

My instincts were telling me that I should stay, and Hugo's plaintive cries as he watched me leave just made me all the more reluctant to depart until I knew for sure what her real intentions were.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I would," she said. "Not to worry, I'll make sure you won't be docked any pay for leaving early."

I started to protest but before I could say anything she had opened the warehouse door and physically pushed me through. I'm bigger than her, and I could have resisted, but I didn't.

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