

[← Chapter 10](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 12 →](#)

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# Chapter 11: Understanding Is Optional

The anomalies hadn't stopped.

This was the first thing Mai noticed when she woke up, because noticing was what she did, and the first thing she noticed was that the smooth stones on the nightstand, Shammy had placed them there before bed, all eight of them in a neat row, and if that wasn't a sign that Shammy's organizing instinct was stronger than her holding-the-space instinct, then nothing was, had rearranged themselves during the night.

Not into a Fibonacci spiral this time. Into a shape that was almost, but not quite, a heart. Almost, but not quite, because the source didn't have a concept of hearts, not really, but it had observed Mai and Ace and Shammy, and it had noticed that they often arranged themselves in a triangle that was close enough to a heart shape to count, and it had attempted to replicate this pattern in smooth stone as a gesture of, what? Connection? Affection? Acknowledgment?

Mai looked at the stone arrangement. Opened her mouth to classify it. Closed her mouth. Opened it again. Closed it again.

The new thing, she reminded herself. The new thing was — she had decided something last night, something about acknowledgment, something about not categorizing, and she could reconstruct the logic but the emotional weight of it hadn't quite carried over from sleeping to waking, and she was trying to find it again.

But the stones were almost a heart. That was objectively interesting. That was data. That was,

She reached for her tablet. Pulled her hand back. Reached again. Pulled back. The same motion Ace made with her katanas, the same rhythm of reach-and-release, the same pattern of trying to do the new thing while the old thing kept reaching for you.

"The stones made a heart," Mai said to the room.

Shammy stirred. She took up 1.5 people's worth of horizontal space, as always, and her arm was across Mai's waist, as always, and her hair was doing the thing where it moved on its own, as always. The air temperature was exactly 22.5 degrees, which was Shammy's unconscious adjustment for Mai's comfort, which Shammy had been making all vacation and was only now acknowledging.

"The source made a heart," Shammy corrected, without opening her eyes. "It's saying good morning. In its own way."

"It's saying good morning in a near-Fibonacci heart shape," Mai said. "Which is either a display of mathematical precision or a display of emotional approximation, and I can't tell which, and that's, that's going to bother me all day."

"Let it bother you," Ace said, from the other side of Shammy. Her voice was the morning voice, flat, low, not yet warmed up. Her hand was near her katanas, which were on the nightstand now, not on the sand by the hatch. Progress. "The new thing isn't not being bothered. The new thing is being

bothered and also being here.”

“Being bothered and also being here,” Mai repeated. “That's going in the, no. No, it's not. I'm not making a tab for that. I'm not making a tab for 'being bothered and also being here.' I'm going to be bothered and be here and not make a tab.”

“You're making a tab,” Ace said.

“I'm absolutely making a tab. But I'm going to make it and then I'm going to acknowledge that I'm making it and that's the new thing.”

“That's the new thing,” Shammy agreed, and her eyes were open now, bright and storm-charged, and the air temperature shifted up by half a degree, which meant she was awake and adjusting, which was her thing, and she was going to keep doing it, and that was okay.

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Breakfast was gentle.

Not in the way that breakfasts are usually gentle, quiet mornings, soft light, the particular peace of a resort that hasn't fully woken up yet, but in the way that the anomalies were now gentle. The breakfast buffet arranged itself in neat, appetizing rows. Not the mathematical precision of the first day, not the Fibonacci spirals that had said *I'm trying to communicate in your language*, but something softer, something that said *I hear you, I see you, I'm going to make your breakfast pleasant without making it a puzzle*.

The juice carafes glowed softly, the way they had since the first day, but now the glow was warmer, gentler, like a nightlight instead of a signal. The napkins were flat on the tables, folded neatly but not into cranes, as if the source had decided that the origami phase was over and it was time to move on to something more casual.

“It's being polite,” Shammy said, examining a croissant that had arranged itself at a pleasing angle on her plate. “It's not trying to impress us anymore. It's being a good host.”

“It's making breakfast,” Ace said. “An anomaly under the hotel is making breakfast. This is our vacation.”

“This is exactly our vacation,” Mai said. “This is exactly the kind of vacation we would have. A zero-anomaly resort where the anomalies are polite and the breakfast is self-organizing and the elevator has opinions about pool access.”

“The elevator took us to the right floor this morning,” Shammy noted. “It's being considerate.”

“The elevator is being considerate,” Ace repeated. “The elevator has decided to be considerate.”

“Maybe it learned from the source,” Shammy said. “Maybe the source told it we've acknowledged it and it doesn't need to be as dramatic anymore. Maybe, maybe it's learning to say hello in a quieter way.”

“Or maybe the elevator has always been considerate and we didn't notice because we were too busy analyzing it,” Ace said, and she looked at Mai with the look that was almost a smile, the look that said *I see what you're doing and I'm teasing you and also I love you*.

"I was not too busy analyzing it," Mai said. "I was precisely busy enough analyzing it. My analysis was thorough and accurate and, "

"Led to you discovering that the anomalies were following your patterns and you were inadvertently feeding them," Ace said.

"Which led to us acknowledging the source and resolving the situation," Mai countered. "So the analysis was useful. The analysis is always useful. The analysis is, "

"The analysis is who you are," Shammy said, reaching for a croissant. "And we love who you are. Even when you're making tabs for 'being bothered and also being here.'"

"I haven't made that tab yet."

"You've made it in your head."

"That's different."

"It's really not."

Mai opened her mouth to argue. Closed it. Looked at the breakfast buffet, which had arranged itself into neat rows that were aesthetically pleasing without being mathematically demanding. Looked at the juice carafes, which were glowing gently, warmly, like something that had been alone for so long and was now being present. Being there. Saying *good morning* in a way that didn't require analysis or classification or a taxonomic framework.

"Understanding is optional," Mai said. And it came out quiet, the way things come out quiet when they're true and you're saying them for the first time.

"What?" Ace looked up from her plate. She was eating breakfast with her left hand, because her right hand was within reaching distance of her katanas, which were leaning against the table leg, which was progress, which was the new thing, which was what they were all learning to do.

"Understanding is optional," Mai repeated. "I've spent the entire vacation, my whole life, actually, but specifically this vacation, trying to understand the anomalies. Trying to categorize them, classify them, build a framework for them. And I did. I built a framework. I understood them. I understood that they were following my patterns, that the source was communicating, that the breakfast buffet was saying hello. I understood all of it."

"And?" Shammy prompted.

"And understanding it didn't change anything." She had expected this to feel like a smaller statement than it was. "Understanding it didn't make me more present. It made me understand, which is what I do, which is who I am." She looked at her plate. "I don't know if that's a good thing or a necessary thing or just a thing. I've been trying to figure out if there's a difference and the trying is itself more categorizing, which is, "

"Recursive," Shammy offered.

"Recursive," Mai agreed. "Yes. Thank you. Recursive." She smoothed the tablecloth where there was no wrinkle. "I can understand the source, and I can also acknowledge it. I can categorize the anomalies, and I can also let them be anomalies without needing to solve them. I can analyze the breakfast buffet, and I can also eat breakfast."

“That sounds like a very analytical way of saying that understanding isn't the only thing,” Ace observed.

“It is an analytical way of saying that understanding isn't the only thing. I'm still going to analyze. That's who I am. But I'm also going to, I'm also going to be here. I'm also going to eat breakfast without mapping the arrangement. I'm also going to let the juice carafes glow without classifying the luminosity.”

“Can you actually do that?” Ace asked. “Can you actually eat breakfast without analyzing it?”

“I don't know,” Mai said. “But I'm going to try. That's the new thing. I'm going to try.”

She picked up her croissant. It was arranged at a pleasing angle. The angle was approximately 23.4 degrees, which was the axial tilt of the Earth, which was the same angle the toast rack had been arranged at on the first day, which was a pattern, which was data, which was,

She ate the croissant.

The first bite was so flaky she got pastry on her shirt, which she immediately noticed and did not try to quantify. The croissant was. It was a croissant. It was very good. She ate it and didn't think about the angle, or thought about the angle, which was 23.4 degrees, and then thought about other things: the light through the window, and the way the source's warmth in the juice carafes felt like a color rather than a temperature, and the fact that Ace had her left hand near her katana and her right hand around a coffee cup and that was somehow exactly right.

“Good croissant,” she said.

“Good croissant,” Ace agreed.

“The best croissant,” Shammy said, already reaching for a second one, because Shammy approached breakfast the way she approached everything, with warmth and enthusiasm and the particular attention of someone who appreciated that food existed and she could eat it.

The source hummed beneath them, patient and present, acknowledged and acknowledging, and the breakfast buffet arranged itself into neat rows, and the juice carafes glowed warmly, and the three of them ate breakfast, and understanding was optional, and being present was the thing, and that was enough.

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Carlos stopped by their table as they were finishing. He carried a small potted fern, lush and green and vibrantly alive, the kind of fern that looked like it had been given personal attention by something that cared about photosynthesis at a molecular level.

“A small gift,” he said, setting the fern on the table. “From the source. It's been growing this one for about forty years. It wanted you to have it.”

“The source grew a fern,” Ace said.

“The source is very good with plants,” Carlos said. “It's been maintaining the resort's garden since before the resort existed. The hibiscus hedges? Source. The palm trees along the walkway? Source. The particularly healthy moss on the lobby wall that the cleaning staff has given up trying to remove? Source. It has opinions about chlorophyll.”

Shammy reached out and touched one of the fern's fronds. It curled toward her finger, slightly, gently, the way plants did when Shammy was near, because plants could feel the atmosphere and Shammy was the atmosphere, or at least very good at talking to it.

"It likes you," Carlos said, with the real smile, the one that wasn't professional. "The fern, I mean. It leaned toward you."

"Plants lean toward light," Mai said, the analysis coming automatically, like a reflex.

"This one leaned toward Shammy," Carlos said. "It's been leaning toward the east window of my office for forty years. This morning it turned west. Toward the dining hall. Toward you three." He paused. "The source told me you'd be here. It said, not in words, in the way it says things, in temperature and light and the particular hum of a well-maintained fern, it said *they're still here, they said hello, I want to give them something green.*"

Shammy held the fern. It was warm. Not from the sun. From the same warmth that lived in the smooth stones, in the juice carafes, in the glow under the ocean. The source's warmth. The warmth of something that had been alone and was no longer alone and wanted to give back.

"Thank you," Shammy said. "Tell it thank you."

Carlos nodded. "I will. I tell it things every morning. I tell it what the weather's like, and what the guests are doing, and whether the breakfast buffet needs any adjustments. It likes the company. It liked my company for twenty-three years. But I think it's going to like yours more."

He walked away, his footsteps muffled on the tile, carrying his empty tray, a man who had been the source's only friend for two decades and was now, apparently, fine with sharing that friendship with three anomalies who had come to a resort where nothing happened and made something happen.

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After breakfast, Mai went back to the room.

Not to analyze. Not to categorize. Not to build a new tab for the source's communication patterns. To do something else. Something that had been building in her since the argument, since the night they'd talked and argued and told each other the truth, since the morning when they'd gone down into the chamber and said hello in their own languages.

She sat on the bed. She opened her tablet. She looked at the spreadsheets.

Twenty-three tabs. The meal planning one. The wave interval one. The wave interval one that she'd promised herself she wouldn't make and then made anyway. The one that tracked Ace's katana-reach frequency, which she'd deleted and then rebuilt. The one that tracked Shammy's atmospheric adjustments, which she'd never told Shammy about. The one that mapped the resort's exit routes, which she'd made for Ace. The one that listed every smooth stone Shammy had collected, with notes on their concentric circle patterns and approximate geological composition.

The one that had started it all. The anomalous analysis one. The one she'd deleted. The one that had fed the source, the one that had shown her the pattern, the one that had revealed that she was the pattern, the one that had been both her greatest tool and her greatest trap.

She looked at it. All twenty-three tabs. All the data. All the categories. All the analysis.

And then she deleted it.

All of it. Not raw anomalous analysis tab. All of it. The meal planning, the wave intervals, the exit routes, the stone collection, the atmospheric adjustments. Every tab. Every category. Every framework she'd built to understand the vacation that wasn't a vacation.

She deleted it all.

The tablet sat empty on her lap. A blank screen. No tabs. No data. No categories. No framework. No analysis.

For the first time since she could remember, Mai had nothing to analyze.

Her fingers gripped the edge of the tablet. Her breath came fast, then slow, then fast again. Her eyes were wide and her jaw was tight and her shoulders had drawn up toward her ears, which was the posture she took when the data was too much, which was ironic, because the data was gone, there was no data, there was nothing, and her body didn't know how to hold nothing. The absence of tabs was a presence. It pressed against her sternum. It filled the room. It was terrifying and liberating and the same thing from two different angles, and she was analyzing the feeling even as she experienced it, because that was who she was, and she couldn't stop, and she wasn't going to try to stop, she was going to acknowledge it.

She was going to acknowledge that she was analyzing the feeling of having nothing to analyze. And then she was going to put the tablet down and go find her partners and have a day that wasn't organized into tabs.

She put the tablet on the nightstand. The screen was blank. The data was gone. The framework was gone. What was left was Mai, sitting on a bed in a resort where nothing was supposed to happen, with nothing to categorize, nothing to analyze, nothing to understand.

Her hands were shaking. She could see them, the fine tremor that ran from her wrists to her fingertips, the way they'd shaken in Tokyo when the breach had taken out three city blocks and she'd been the only one who could read the pattern in time. The same tremor. The same body. The same Mai. But the cause was different. In Tokyo the cause was too much data. Here the cause was none. The edge of the tablet was warm from her hands. The screen reflected her face, and the face looking back had silver hair and silver-blue eyes and a mouth that was slightly open, as if she'd been about to say something and forgotten what it was.

But that wasn't true. That wasn't true at all. The part of herself that needed the spreadsheet was still there. It was the part that had counted the intervals between Ace's katana reaches. It was the part that had noticed the 23.4-degree angle of the breakfast buffet. It was the part that would always notice, would always count, would always categorize. That was who she was.

But it wasn't the only thing she was. She was also the person who had held Ace's hand on the first day when Ace couldn't stop counting exits. She was also the person who had closed her laptop and watched the ocean without analyzing the waves. She was also the person who had walked into a chamber full of ancient anomalous energy and said hello without building a taxonomic framework for it first.

She was Mai. She didn't have to understand that.

The afternoon was for the beach.

Not because the spreadsheet said so, the spreadsheet was gone. Not because the itinerary scheduled beach time at 2:00 PM, the itinerary was gone. Because the three of them walked out of the hotel and onto the sand and that was where they ended up, and that was enough.

The ocean was doing what oceans do, pulling, pushing, having opinions about the tide. The smooth stones in Shammy's pocket were humming gently, like a lullaby, like something that had been alone and was no longer alone and was humming to itself because it could. The sun was warm. The air was, and Shammy noticed this, and then noticed that she noticed it, and that was the new thing, exactly 24 degrees, which was comfortable, and she was adjusting it, and she was acknowledging that she was adjusting it, and that was the new thing too.

Ace lay on the sand. Not on a lounge chair positioned for optimal sight-line coverage of all three exits. On the sand. Flat on her back. There was a cloud shaped like nothing in particular moving overhead. She watched it for a moment. Then she was watching the exits again. Her katanas were on the towel next to her, not on her hip, and she was reaching for them every, Mai counted, because Mai always counted, every six minutes now. Up from three and a half. Progress.

"You're counting my reaches," Ace said.

"I'm always counting your reaches. That's who I am. The new thing is that I'm telling you I'm counting them instead of logging them in a tab."

"You deleted the tab."

"I deleted all the tabs."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

Ace was quiet for a moment. Then: "The one that mapped the exit routes?"

"Deleted."

"The one that tracked the wave intervals?"

"Deleted."

"The one that logged Shammy's atmospheric adjustments?"

"Deleted. She didn't know I had that one. I was tracking it in the background. I deleted it."

"You deleted a tab Shammy didn't know about."

"I deleted all the tabs. Even the ones no one knew about. Even the one that tracked how many times I reopened my tablet after closing it. Even the one that categorized my own categorizing behaviors. I deleted all of it."

Ace turned her head. Looked at Mai. Mai looked back. And in the look, there was something that was not analysis, something that was not categorization, something that was not a tab or a framework or

a taxonomic system. In the look, there was Mai. The person who was Mai without the spreadsheet. The person who had sat with a blank screen and shaking hands and chosen to delete the thing she'd thought was the whole of herself, and found that the deletion was not an ending but an opening.

"How does it feel?" Ace asked.

"Terrifying," Mai said. "Liberating. Same thing from two different angles. I'm analyzing the feeling even as I experience it."

"Of course you are."

"I can't stop analyzing. That's who I am. But I can be who I am and also be here. I can notice the wave intervals and also let the ocean be the ocean. I can count your katana reaches and also be present while I'm counting."

"That sounds like something I would say," Ace said. "About reaching and pulling back. About being who I am and also being present."

"It's the same thing," Mai said. "It's the same thing for all three of us. We can't stop being who we are. But we can be who we are and also be something else. We can count exits and also lie on the beach. We can adjust air and also feel the sun. We can analyze the waves and also let them wash over us."

"We can let the anomalies be anomalies," Shammy said, lying on the sand between them, her hair drifting in the breeze that she was definitely adjusting and definitely acknowledging that she was adjusting. "We can let the source be the source. We can let the vacation be the vacation."

"Is it still a vacation?" Ace asked. "If the anomalies haven't stopped?"

"The anomalies are gentler," Shammy said. "The source is acknowledged. It's not reaching out as dramatically. It's present. Like a neighbor who says good morning. The breakfast arranged itself nicely. The elevator took us to the right floor. The juice carafes are glowing warmly. It's not trying to get our attention anymore. It has our attention."

"It has our acknowledgment," Mai corrected. "That's different from attention. Attention is what you give something you're analyzing. Acknowledgment is what you give something you're accepting."

"Understanding is optional," Ace said.

"Understanding is optional," Mai agreed.

The ocean did its thing. The sun did its thing. The source hummed beneath them, acknowledged, present, no longer alone. And the three of them lay on the beach and did their things, Ace reached for her katanas every six minutes and pulled back, Mai counted the wave intervals and let them wash over her, Shammy adjusted the air temperature and acknowledged that she was adjusting it, and they also did the new thing, which was being present, which was being here, which was being who they were and also being something else, which was enough.

Which was more than enough.

Which was, for the first time since they'd arrived, something that felt like vacation.

[← Chapter 10](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 12 →](#)

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