

[← Chapter 4](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 6 →](#)

Chapter 5: The Spreadsheet Fails

Mai's spreadsheet had twenty-three tabs.

This was not, by itself, unusual. Mai's spreadsheets routinely had twenty-three tabs. The vacation planning spreadsheet that had brought them to this resort had started with seventeen tabs and grown to thirty-one before she'd finished, and she'd considered that modest, given that it included a risk assessment matrix, a weather probability forecast for the next seven days cross-referenced with Shammy's atmospheric sensitivity index, and a color-coded map of every exit in a fifty-kilometer radius, which she'd compiled for Ace, who had pretended not to need it and then memorized it anyway.

No, the twenty-three tabs were not the problem. The problem was tab seventeen.

Tab seventeen was titled *Provisional Pattern Analysis, Anomaly Behavioral Correlation Matrix*, and it contained, among other things, a timing analysis that mapped every anomalous event since their arrival against Mai's own movements and analytical actions, and the correlation coefficient was,

Mai stared at the number.

Her first thought was that she'd made an error in the formula. She checked. She hadn't. Her second thought was that 0.94 was close enough to 1.0 that she should double the sample size, reframe the variables, try again with a different baseline. She tried again.

The correlation coefficient was 0.94.

Ninety-four percent correlation between Mai's analytical activity and anomalous manifestations. When Mai observed, the anomaly responded. When Mai categorized, the anomaly reorganized according to her categories. When Mai created a new tab, the anomaly created a new manifestation that required a new tab.

It was following her. Not the way a predator follows prey. The way a student follows a teacher. The way a pattern follows a logic. The way something that thinks in patterns, the way Mai thought in patterns, would naturally gravitate toward another mind that spoke the same language.

She was feeding it.

Every observation she made, every data point she logged, every classification she assigned, the anomaly was reading her notes. Not literally. Not through her tablet. Through the pattern itself. Through the mathematical structure of her analysis. She was thinking in public, and the hotel was listening, and every thought she had was becoming a new Fibonacci spiral in the breakfast buffet or a new timing anomaly in the elevator or a new impossible view in the windows.

She was making it worse.

"Okay," Mai said, and her voice was level and precise and did not reflect the fact that her stomach had dropped through the floor and was currently somewhere in the hotel foundation, probably sitting

next to the ancient anomaly entity that had been reaching out through napkins and juice carafes and was now, apparently, also reaching out through her spreadsheet.

She closed the tablet.

The window across the room flickered. The view of the ocean shifted, blurred, and reformed into something different: the same ocean, the same beach, but the light was wrong, angled at 23.4 degrees, which was the tilt of the Earth's axis, which was the same angle the toast rack had been arranged at on the first day. The source was responding. She'd closed the tab, and the window had adjusted itself, as if acknowledging that she'd stopped feeding it and was now feeding her something instead.

She opened the tablet.

The window returned to normal.

She closed it again.

The window shifted again, and this time the light was warmer, the angle was gentler, and the view was of the ocean at sunset, even though it was eleven in the morning. A gift. The anomaly had given her a sunset because she'd stopped analyzing.

The correlation coefficient of 0.94 was still there, behind her eyelids, glowing like the juice carafes, like the sunset that was too precise, like every anomaly that had arranged itself according to mathematical principles that Mai recognized because they were HER mathematical principles.

"Mai." Ace, from the balcony doorway, watching her with those dark flat eyes that saw more than they let on. "What's wrong."

Not a question. A statement. Ace could read her the way Shammy could read the air, automatically, constantly, with the confidence of someone who knew the patterns well enough to detect when they'd shifted.

"The anomalies are following my analysis," Mai said. "Every time I categorize something, the anomaly responds to the category. Every time I identify a pattern, the anomaly incorporates the pattern. The correlation is," She stopped. Looked at her tablet. Looked at Ace. "I'm making it worse. My analysis is feeding the anomalies. The more I understand, the more there is to understand, because it's reading my understanding and responding to it."

Ace absorbed this. Took the three seconds she needed to process any tactical information, whether it was a threat assessment or a breakfast correlation or the fact that her partner's coping mechanism was actively creating the problems she was trying to solve.

"So stop analyzing," Ace said.

Mai looked at her.

"I can't simply stop analyzing," Mai said, and she heard how that sounded, she heard the desperation in it, the way it came out too fast and too defensive and too much like someone who had been told to stop breathing.

"Yes you can."

"Ace. I can't. Analyzing is how I, it's how I," She stopped. Which was the wrong thing to stop on, because stopping on the incomplete sentence was a kind of analysis too, tracking her own argument in real time, and she was doing it, she was still doing it. "Can you please not be right about this."

"I'm right about this."

"I know."

A pause.

How I function. How I love. How I make sense of a world that doesn't make sense. How I keep the people I care about safe by understanding the things that threaten them. How I know who I am, because if I'm not the person who understands things, then I don't know who I am, and that's not, that's not a small thing, that's not a thing I can,

"I know," Ace said. And she crossed the room and sat beside Mai on the bed and took the tablet out of her hands and set it on the nightstand and held Mai's hands, and that was Ace's language, that was how she communicated when words weren't enough, and Mai felt the pressure of Ace's grip and the warmth of Ace's skin and the way Ace's shadow pressed against her own, and she thought: *this is what it feels like when someone reaches for you instead of a weapon.*

"I know," Ace said again. "But you asked me to stop reaching for my katanas. So I'm asking you to stop reaching for your spreadsheet."

"That's not the same,"

"It's exactly the same."

Mai opened her mouth. Closed it. The argument she was building, the structured, logical, beautifully subordinated argument about how her analysis was categorically different from Ace's hypervigilance because her analysis was necessary for understanding the anomaly and understanding was necessary for resolution and resolution was necessary for vacation, collapsed under the weight of its own precision.

It was the same. The spreadsheet was her katana. The analysis was her combat stance. The tabs were her exit count. They were both doing the same thing, holding onto the tool that made them feel safe, even when the tool was the thing making them unsafe.

"Okay," Mai said. And it came out wrong. Not level and precise and controlled. Wobbly. Her fingers curled against her palms, nails pressing crescents into skin, the way she gripped things when she couldn't grip the things she wanted to grip.

"Okay," Ace said, and squeezed her hands.

The morning passed without a spreadsheet.

This was, Mai decided, what dying felt like. If dying involved sitting on a beach and watching the ocean and not categorizing the waves and not timing the intervals between the swells and not noting the way the light refracted differently at different depths and not doing any of the things that made the world comprehensible and manageable and safe.

She lay on a beach towel. The sun was warm. The sand was, no. She was not going to analyze the sand's mineral composition. The sand was sand. It was warm and grainy and it was between her toes and it did not need to be classified.

The ocean was, the ocean was, the ocean was there. Being oceanic. Doing whatever oceans did when Mai wasn't quantifying its behavior.

Salt crusted on her lips. The towel beneath her was the color of terra cotta, which was not a category she needed to assign, which was a color name she already knew and did not need to cross-reference against the pantone database that lived in a tab she wasn't opening. A gull screamed overhead, and its call had a frequency she could identify, and she was not going to identify it. The breeze carried hibiscus and something sharper underneath, the mineral tang of the resort's water treatment system, and she could taste it at the back of her throat, and she was not going to build a tab for it.

This was fine.

This was not fine. This was the opposite of fine. This was a woman who had structured her entire identity around understanding things sitting on a beach and deliberately not understanding a thing, and the thing was the ocean, and the ocean was RIGHT THERE, being complicated and wave-shaped and full of data that she was choosing not to collect.

Her hand twitched toward the tablet she'd left in the room.

"Ace is going to count how many times you reach for that," Shammy said, materializing beside her with the quiet grace of someone who was part weather system and had learned to make her entrances feel like a change in the wind. "She's been counting her own reaches. She's at forty-seven today."

"Forty-seven?"

"Per hour. It's actually an improvement. Yesterday she was at sixty-three."

Mai turned her head to look at Shammy, who was settling onto the sand beside her with the particular care of someone who was too tall for most beach towels and had learned to arrange her limbs in configurations that didn't disturb anyone else's space. Her legs folded at angles that should have looked awkward on someone 195 centimeters tall but somehow looked like architecture instead, like a building that had found its natural shape. Shammy's hair was doing the thing where it moved on its own, shifting in a breeze that wasn't blowing, silver-white strands catching the sun and casting tiny rainbows on the sand that disappeared when Mai tried to track them.

Shammy reached into her pocket and pulled out a smooth stone. Dark. Round. Concentric circles faintly visible. She examined it with the expression of someone who was reading a message in a language she almost understood.

"New one?" Mai asked, and she was proud of herself for not asking about the mineral composition.

"This morning. By the tide pool. It was waiting for me." Shammy turned the stone over. The concentric circles caught the light. "I think it has something to do with what's underneath. The source."

"You've thought that since the first one."

"I've known that since the first one." Shammy's voice was soft. The voice she used when she was

about to say something important, the voice that was warm and careful and had weather patterns in it. "Mai. I need to tell you something. I should have told you sooner."

Mai sat up. The beach towel shifted. The ocean did its ocean thing, uncategorized.

"The thing under the hotel," Shammy said. She was turning the stone over, the same slow rotation, like she'd forgotten she was doing it. "I've been feeling it since we arrived. Since the lobby." She paused. "Since before the lobby, actually. On the shuttle from the airport. There was a moment, maybe thirty kilometers out. I thought it was road noise."

She stopped turning the stone.

"It's like me, Mai. It's like me. A stabilized anomaly that chose to stay. That's been here, alone, for, I don't know how long. A very long time. And it's been reaching out. The breakfast, the elevator, the windows. The stones. All of it. It's been trying to say hello."

Mai stared at her.

"You knew," she said. Not an accusation. An observation. The correlation coefficient on that was 1.0.

"I knew," Shammy said. "I knew and I didn't say anything because, because I wanted it to only be a vacation. Because you both wanted it to only be a vacation. Because saying it out loud would make it real and making it real would mean dealing with it and I didn't want to deal with it, I wanted to lie on the beach and collect smooth stones and not be the person who has to hold the space for everyone."

"You didn't trust us to hold the space with you."

The words came out before Mai could stop them. Sharp. True. The kind of observation that Mai was good at, the kind that cut because it was accurate.

Shammy flinched. Not visibly. Shammy didn't flinch visibly. But the air around her shifted, dropped two degrees, rose one, settled at a temperature that was not quite comfortable, as if her emotional state had leaked into the atmosphere, which happened whenever she wasn't paying attention. The breeze that had been carrying hibiscus changed direction, came from the north instead, cooler, carrying salt instead of flowers.

"I trust you," Shammy said. "Both of you. I trust you more than I've ever trusted anything. But," She stopped. Looked at the stone in her hand. At the ocean. At Mai. "Trusting you doesn't mean I know how to let you help me. I've been holding things together for so long I don't, I don't know how to let go. Even a little. Even on vacation."

Mai heard herself say, "That's my line."

Shammy's almost-smile. "We have the same line. Different words."

The ocean pulled at the shore. A gull called. The smooth stone in Shammy's hand caught the light, and Mai noticed, she couldn't not notice, noticing was who she was, that the concentric circles were not carved into the stone but were part of its structure, as if the stone had grown in layers, the way a tree grows rings, the way an anomaly grows when it's been alone long enough to start building things.

She wasn't going to analyze it.

She wasn't.

The analysis would feed the anomaly. The correlation was 0.94. Every observation she made was a new data point that the entity underneath could read and respond to. She was making it worse by understanding it.

So she would not understand it. She would sit on the beach and not understand the ocean and not understand the stones and not understand the ancient entity under the hotel that had been reaching out through napkin cranes and juice carafes and windows that showed the truth, and she would be here, present, without categories, without tabs, without the only tool she'd ever trusted.

"Hey," Shammy said. Her hand found Mai's. Warm. The air temperature shifted up by one degree, which Shammy probably didn't mean to do but which Mai noticed anyway, because noticing was who she was, and right now who she was was having a very difficult time being on vacation.

"I'm okay," Mai said.

"You're not okay. You're having a spreadsheet withdrawal."

"That's not a real thing."

"Your hand has gone to where your tablet would be four times in the last two minutes."

Mai looked down. Her hand was, in fact, reaching for the phantom tablet. She put it in her lap. It drifted back toward the phantom tablet. She put it back in her lap.

"This is who I am," Mai said, and it came out small, her voice compressed to a frequency she didn't recognize, thin and reedy, nothing like the structured precision she usually wielded like a blade. "I analyze. I categorize. I make sense of things. That's, that's the only way I know how to be in the world. And if I can't do that, if I can't understand what's happening,"

"Then what?" Shammy asked. Gently. The way Shammy asked everything, with the gentleness of someone who could be a storm but was choosing to be a breeze.

"Then I don't know who I am," Mai said.

And there it was. The lie. The thing she'd been carrying since before the vacation, since before the Tokyo breach, since before she'd learned to read patterns in the chaos of reality and discovered that reading patterns was the only thing that made the chaos bearable. *If I can understand it, I can control it. If I can control it, I'm safe. If I'm safe, I know who I am.* The chain of logic that had defined her for as long as she could remember.

And now the chain was broken. Because understanding was making things worse. Because control was an illusion. Because the anomaly wasn't a threat to be neutralized, it was a presence to be acknowledged. And Mai didn't have a tab for "acknowledgment." She didn't have a classification system for "something that's been alone for too long and wants to say hello."

She didn't have a tool for this.

"I don't have a tool for this," she said.

Shammy's arm went around her shoulders. Warm and long and careful, the way Shammy held things, with the particular attention of someone who knew how much pressure to apply and exactly when to let go. The air temperature shifted again, slightly, into the range that Mai found most comfortable, and Shammy caught herself doing it and made a small frustrated sound.

"I'm doing it again," Shammy said. "I'm, sorry. I know you asked me not to."

"I didn't ask you not to," Mai said. "I asked you to try. And trying means sometimes you do it and sometimes you don't. That's what trying looks like."

Shammy blinked. "That's what I told Ace. About the katanas."

"I know. I was listening. I'm always listening. I, I don't always know what to do with what I hear."

"Maybe you don't have to do anything with it," Shammy said. "Maybe hearing it is enough."

From the resort, Ace appeared. Walking toward them across the sand with her compact shadow at her heels and her hands, Mai checked, not on her katana hilts. Not reaching. Walking. The way other people walked, for no reason other than moving from one place to another.

She dropped onto the sand beside them. Not between them. Beside them. One more point in the triangle, the shape that held them all. Her shoulder pressed against Mai's, and Mai felt the shadow-pressure that Ace carried, the way it pressed against everything, the way it made the air heavier within a handspan of her skin. But right now the pressure was lighter. Not gone. Lighter.

"You closed the spreadsheet," Ace said. Not a question.

"I closed the spreadsheet."

"And?"

"And I'm having a small existential crisis about whether I exist outside of my capacity to categorize the world into data structures."

"Okay."

"That's it? 'Okay'?"

"You gave me 'okay' when I said I couldn't stop reaching for my katanas. I'm giving you 'okay' back." Ace's hand found Mai's free hand. Held it. "Okay."

Mai looked at Ace. At Shammy. At the ocean that she was not analyzing and the sand that she was not classifying and the sky that she was not mapping.

"Okay," she said.

They sat on the beach. The three of them. No spreadsheets. No katanas. No atmospheric adjustments, or at least, Mai was choosing not to notice the atmospheric adjustments, which was the closest she could come to not analyzing them.

Mai leaned back. Ace's shoulder was solid behind hers, a wall she could rest against, compact and dense the way everything about Ace was compact and dense. Shammy's arm was still around her, and Shammy's hair was drifting against Mai's cheek, strands that moved on their own, cool and electric. Mai closed her eyes and felt the sun on her face and the salt on her lips and the pressure of two bodies against hers, and for a moment, a half-second that stretched like taffy, she didn't count anything. Didn't categorize. Didn't analyze. Merely felt the warmth and the weight and the presence, and it was enough.

Then the moment passed, and she was counting again. The sand grains under her palm. The seconds

between wave sounds. The degrees of Shammy's body heat against her side. But the half-second had happened. It was real. It was data, if she wanted to make it data, which she did, because she was Mai, and data was what she did.

But it was also something else. Something that didn't need a tab.

Mai stood up. Not because the spreadsheet told her to. Because the ocean was there, and she wanted to touch it, and wanting to touch something without a reason was so alien to her operating system that she had to stop and verify that the impulse was real.

It was real. She wanted to put her hand in the water.

She walked toward the shoreline. Ace watched her go with those dark eyes that tracked movement with radar-precise, automatic constancy, but she didn't follow. She stayed on the sand with Shammy, and that was trust, Mai realized. That was Ace letting her walk toward something without positioning herself between Mai and the threat, because there was no threat, because this was the ocean, and it was wet, and Mai was allowed to touch it.

The sand changed temperature as she walked. Cool near the towel, warm in the middle, cool again near the waterline where the tide had pulled back and left the surface damp and packed. She could feel the difference through the soles of her feet. 3.7 degrees of variation across twelve meters. She could build a thermal map.

She didn't.

The water reached her toes. Cold. Sharp. The kind of cold that demanded categorization, that insisted on being placed in a temperature band, that screamed for a data point. Mai let it wash over her feet instead. The pull of the tide was gentle, rhythmic, the way breathing was rhythmic, the way heartbeats were rhythmic, the way things were when they weren't being analyzed but were being experienced.

She crouched. The water was clear enough to see the sand underneath, rippled in patterns that were, she was not going to name the patterns. She was not going to identify the wave-form. She was going to put her hand in the water and feel it and not think about the fact that the salt concentration was approximately 3.5% and the temperature was approximately 19 degrees and the current was moving at approximately 0.3 meters per second.

Her hand went in. Cold. Wet. The water slipped between her fingers, and the sand shifted under her palm, and the tide pushed against her wrist, and she was here, she was actually here, kneeling at the edge of an ocean she wasn't analyzing, and the world hadn't ended, and she was still Mai, and the water was still water, and the sky was still the sky, and she didn't need a tab to tell her any of that.

Behind her, she heard Shammy laugh. The warm, meandering kind of laugh, the kind that carried weather in it. And Ace's voice, flat and blunt: "She's touching the water."

"She's touching the water," Shammy agreed. "Without analyzing it."

"She's analyzing it. She's also touching it. That's the new thing."

Mai smiled. Her hand was in the ocean. Her mind was counting wave intervals. Both things were true. Both things could be true.

She walked back to them. The sand changed temperature as she crossed it — cool near the water, warm in the middle. She noted the transition point, approximately nine meters from the water's edge, because she was already categorizing again, she couldn't help it, that was fine, that was allowed. Shammy had rearranged herself on the sand, all 195 centimeters of her laid out at angles that shouldn't have been comfortable but somehow were. Ace sat cross-legged beside her, compact and dark and watchful. There was a small smear of sand on Ace's cheek. Mai did not mention it. She sat down and said nothing about the sand on Ace's cheek, which she was still thinking about, and then she thought: *this is a strange thing to be thinking about*, and then she thought: *yes, that's probably the point*. Shammy's hand was on Ace's knee, absent and warm, the way it always was, the way Shammy touched things, like the air around them needed to know they were connected.

Mai sat down between them. Shammy's arm returned to her shoulders. Ace's shoulder returned to hers. The triangle held.

Then the moment passed, and she was counting again. The sand grains under her palm. The seconds between wave sounds. The degrees of Shammy's body heat against her side. But the half-second had happened. It was real. It was data, if she wanted to make it data, which she did, because she was Mai, and data was what she did.

But it was also something else. Something that didn't need a tab.

The smooth stone in Shammy's pocket pulsed warm. The ocean pulled at the shore. And under the hotel, under the foundation, under everything, something old and patient and alone kept reaching out, and Mai, for the first time since they'd arrived, did not try to reach back with a spreadsheet.

She sat there. With them. In the not-knowing.

It was terrible.

It was also, in a way she couldn't categorize, the most honest she'd been all vacation.

[← Chapter 4](#) | [Index](#) | [Chapter 6](#) →—

© 2025-2026. "World of Ace, Mai and Shammy" and all original characters, settings, story elements, and concepts are the intellectual property of the author. All rights reserved.

Non-commercial fan works are allowed with attribution.

Commercial use, redistribution, or adaptation requires explicit permission from the author.

Contact: editor at publication-x.com

Check out our SubscribeStar page at <https://subscribestar.adult/konrad-k>

From:
<https://datavault.ws/> - **DataVault**

Permanent link:
<https://datavault.ws/doku.php/novellas:vacation-anomalies:chapter5>

Last update: **23/04/2026 16:20**



