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MIKHAIL FEDOROV

Decisions on the Edge of Chaos

A BUSINESS NOVEL



Mikhail Fedorov

**Decisions on the Edge
of Chaos. A Business Novel**

«Издательские решения»

Fedorov M.

Decisions on the Edge of Chaos. A Business Novel / M. Fedorov —
«Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-00-696033-6

A business novel about the daily lives of managers navigating severe crises, where the exploration of real-world tools — from decision matrices and scenario planning to network structures — becomes part of the narrative. Following Alexey, who confronts a chain of unforeseen failures, the book reveals how familiar methods break down, forcing the hero on a journey from a confident technocrat to a reassembled man who finds strength not in control, but in ethical foundations and in service.

ISBN 978-5-00-696033-6

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Decisions on the Edge of Chaos

A Business Novel

Mikhail Fedorov

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ISBN 978-5-0069-6033-6

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From the Author

This book grew out of a practical question: how do you make high-quality decisions under intense time pressure, with uncertainty and conflicting data?

Like many executives, especially those responsible for risk analysis and control, I was unsatisfied with abstract theories. I wanted to understand the *mechanics* of thinking in a moment of crisis. My guides became the works of Carl Spetzler¹, Daniel Kahneman², and other researchers who broke down the decision-making process into its components: from framing and seeking alternatives to accounting for cognitive biases. I even translated and published Carl Spetzler's book "Decision Quality" in Russian and completed his author's course "Strategic Decisions and Risk Management" at Stanford University (at the time).

But soon I encountered a limitation. These brilliant, rational tools, born from the logic of Western Protestant ethics, worked poorly in our reality. Not because our reality is somehow different. No, technically everything works more than effectively. But they prescribe analyzing the "human material" – fatigue, grievances, silent resistance, unspoken fears, that very "mysterious Russian soul" that breaks any, even the most perfect algorithms – from the perspective of those very decision-making criteria. And this clashes with something deep inside me.

So I turned to another source – classic Russian literature. To Dostoevsky, who delved into the motives behind actions. To Chekhov, who showed the drama in everyday life. It was this, it seems to me, that helped me look beyond management schemes, into that zone where a decision is born not in an Excel spreadsheet, but at the intersection of logic, intuition, duty, and guilt.

The genre of the "business novel" (following the model of Arthur Hailey³ or Eliyahu Goldratt⁴) became a convenient form for this idea. It allowed me to enact a complex management case in real-time, to show how theory collides with living practice, with personalities, with the context of a specific plant in a specific city.

One of the book's central ideas is the scale of chaos. Imagine that all the situations in which we make decisions can be placed on a line between two extremes: absolute order (where everything is by the book) and absolute chaos (where there are no guidelines at all). Most of our lives, and especially the life of a manager, falls somewhere in between.

The main drama unfolds on the edge of chaos (following Rachya Arzumanyan⁵) – where the usual order has become too complex, old navigation methods fail, but it's not yet complete lawlessness where you can abandon logic entirely. It's here that adaptive strategies, flexibility, and a readiness to learn on the fly are needed. The book's hero, Alexey Orlov, spends most of his journey moving along this edge, starting in rationality and order and arriving by the end of his story in a situation of complete chaos, both external and internal.

But what to do when the system *does* collapse and total, absolute chaos sets in? When the very "point of reference" is lost and there's nothing to hold onto? In that case – and such moments exist in the book as well – the Russian literary tradition leaves one final, fundamental support. It's shown through a personal, quiet turning to God. Let this not disturb atheists – see it as a tribute to our classics,

¹ See: Decision Quality: Value Creation from Better Business Decisions / Carl Spetzler, Hannah Winter, Jennifer Meyer; – Wiley, 2016.

² Thinking, Fast and Slow / D. Kahneman; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

³ For example, Airport / Arthur Hailey; Open Road Media, 2014.

⁴ For example, The Goal: A Process of Ongoing Improvement / E. Goldratt, J. Cox; North River Press, 2012.

⁵ The Edge of Chaos. Complex Thinking and the Network: The Nonlinearity Paradigm and the 21st Century Security Environment / Rachya Arzumanyan – Moscow: Regnum Publishing House, 2012.

whose entire metaphysics grew out of the Gospel. For everyone else, it's an attempt to artistically depict a line of behavior when rational methods are exhausted, but action is still necessary.

Who might find this book useful? Honestly, I wrote it for myself, so the book might be interesting to people who are at least somewhat like me:

- Practicing managers and executives who will recognize familiar pains in this story and, perhaps, find useful algorithms for themselves in the hero's tools. The use of management jargon and Anglicisms (moderately), deeply embedded in the fabric of modern Russian business, is intended for them.

- Students in management and economics programs who are tired of dry case studies and want to see how theories work (or don't work) in "field" conditions, filled with the human factor.

- Anyone interested in how thinking works in complex situations and where the boundary lies between cold calculation and the necessity of making a decision based on something greater.

This is not a textbook or a collection of ready-made recipes. It's a *fictional exploration* of what goes on in the head and soul of the person on whom everything depends. I hope it makes you think not only about the quality of decisions but also about their price.

One last thing. All coincidences with real persons and organizations are accidental; all stories and situations are fictional.

Mikhail Fedorov
St. Petersburg, 2025

Introduction

Uncle Misha's shift was from ten to six. Eight hours of silence, the scratch of mice under the floorboards, and that steady hum that came from the night-shift plant. Not even from the workshops, but from somewhere underground, as if the very foundation was humming. He sat in his booth by the reserve gates, chain-smoking roll-ups. There was nothing much to guard – these gates were opened once a month, maybe less, for some oversized piece of equipment. But it was a good spot, with a view. The whole main building was right there, along with the path from the parking lot and a stretch leading to the checkpoint.

The plant had changed over his lifetime. Uncle Misha remembered when they built it – not these glass things where you couldn't even see your own reflection now, but the first ones, the brick ones, post-war. He was just a kid back then, helping his father, a bricklayer. He remembered when they brought in the first machine tool from Chelyabinsk – traffic was blocked all day, people crowded around, watching it like it was a miracle. The plant was officially listed as “No. 234” back then. They were proud of it, yeah. Later it became “Progress,” sprouted additions, learned to make things that weren't even in the original plans. And now.. Now for Uncle Misha, it was just a collection of lights in the night. The living soul was slowly draining out of it, like oil from an old bearing.

First to arrive, like clockwork, was Alexey Orlov. At five to six, you'd hear not the engine of his foreign car (quiet as it was), but the click of the door and then those steps – sharp, abrupt, like he was hammering nails into the floor. A nod to Uncle Misha – not superior, not even human, really. Just a ritual: “I'm here. System's working”. Uncle Misha would nod back, barely perceptible. He remembered him differently. Young, passionate, with a fire in his eyes. Back then, he almost got into a fight with Bocharov, the old foreman – yelling about some kind of “optimization”. Bocharov, red as a lobster, yelled back: “Your optimization will chew people up and spit them out!” Turned out, they were both right. Bitter truth.

Next came Anna Sokolova. She walked without looking around, her gaze fixed on something internal, something of her own. A woman-function. Uncle Misha had heard she was raising a son on her own. Her stubbornness came not from ideas, but from exhaustion. From having no room to retreat.

Then Semyonov, Orlov's friend, it seemed. He walked, glued to his phone, laughing unnaturally, that official kind of laugh. But his eyes were empty, tired. The eternal peacemaker. The eternal go-between for “must” and “can't”.

And then the general movement would hit. People. Voices, the crunch of snow under boots, the smell of frost and cheap tobacco. Uncle Misha would peer into their faces. What did they care? For them, these walls were just a place to get paid. Not destiny. Not memory.

His whole destiny was right here. He married Katya, an assembler, met her right here. His son was born, went to the same plant – but couldn't handle it, fell into drinking. Katya died; her funeral was in the plant's clubhouse, packed with people. Now there was the booth, silence, and an icon in the corner, dark, covered in cobwebs. He'd cross himself in front of it automatically when his heart felt heavy with sorrow. To keep the connection from breaking with that world where they were all still alive.

The shift was in full swing when the electrician, Petka, poked his head into the booth, knocking boyishly on the doorframe.

“Uncle Misha! Hey! Got any tea?”

“Help yourself, it's in the thermos. Just don't burn yourself”.

Petka poured some into the cup lid, sipped it noisily, perched on a wobbly stool.

“Their lights have been on since five again. I can smell trouble. The supply guys were running around like cockroaches yesterday”.

Uncle Misha glanced silently at the office windows. Shrugged.

“The plant’s alive. In anything alive, something’s always straining, something’s always aching”.

“It aches for it, but *we’re* the ones groaning,” Petka snorted. “The plan, reworks.. But you, Uncle Misha, you’ve seen them all. This Orlov.. what’s he like? Will he hold up, if something happens?”

Uncle Misha took a long time lighting his dead cigarette. “Hold up”. That word, like you’re talking about a sack of cement.

“Back in the day, Petka,” his voice grew deeper, “the overhead crane in workshop nine would just.. stop. You didn’t ‘hold up’ against it. You fixed it. Together. Everyone would gather, each with whatever they could bring. Old-timers, youngsters. Took three days, at least. Because that crane – it was like a heart. It stops – everything stops. Not for some report. For the work”.

He took a drag, blew a stream of smoke into the sunbeam coming through the window.

“And now a crane is just a line item on a balance sheet. An asset. It breaks – they look for whose fault it was. How to write it off cheaper. They’ve forgotten, Petka. They’ve forgotten that behind each one of these.. assets.. there are people. People who could also pull together for three days. Or they could just hide in the smoking room and laugh: ‘Not my problem.’ Because to them – asset, liability – who gives a damn?”

Petka listened, having stopped fiddling with his cup.

“So, about Orlov”.

Uncle Misha grunted, stretching his back.

“It depends on one thing. Whether he *feels* the plant or not. If he feels it – that it’s made of people, not just iron and numbers – then maybe he’ll make it. But if not.. Then no matter what numbers he pulls up on his screen. The main thing doesn’t live between the numbers. It lives in the people. In that ‘togetherness.’ That’s not something they teach in offices. Only life can teach you that. Or maybe it won’t”.

Petka was quiet for a moment, then drained his cup.

“You’re overthinking it, Uncle Misha”.

“Nah, I’m not overthinking,” the old man waved him off. “Just old. Seen a lot”.

Petka rushed off to his own business. Uncle Misha was alone again. The sun was warming the windowpane. He looked at the main building. The light in Orlov’s office window glowed steadily, a steady, unblinking eye.

“Will you understand?” Uncle Misha thought, without malice, but with a kind of weary pity. “Or will you just keep feeding your reports?”

Down by the checkpoint, visitors were already gathering – in strict, uniform-like suits, with briefcases instead of folders. From the city, from headquarters. Smooth, preoccupied faces. They always showed up before a storm. Either an inspection, or just to fray everyone’s nerves.

Uncle Misha turned away and started gathering his things into his worn-out bag. His shift was ending.

The plant hummed, lived. What would happen there today was known only to those behind the glass. He, Uncle Misha, was already stepping aside, into his silent lot. He had stood his watch. Now it was their turn.

And how they would stand it – “together” or each man for himself – he’d see tomorrow morning. By the way they trudged through those gates. Or didn’t trudge, but walked with some new, incomprehensible anger.

PART I: THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Chapter 1: Algorithm Malfunction

Alexey Orlov loved the silence of his office exactly until seven in the morning. In that half-hour, between his arrival and the first meeting, the world was clear. Outside the window, by the old gates, the dim light in the guard booth went out – the night shift ending, the day shift not yet begun. A gap. His gap.

Left panel – actual workshop performance indicators. Central panel – KPI trends. Right panel – “pulse”: energy consumption, material flow. Green numbers, black background. This was his plant. Not by right of ownership, but by right of twenty years given to this place. He remembered in the nineties, stealing non-ferrous metal here and warming themselves by makeshift stoves, and in the two-thousands, implementing the first SCADA systems that the old foremen laughed at. Now it was a finely tuned mechanism. Almost.

“Progress” was the main project of his life. Every sensor here was the embodiment of his stubbornness, his sleepless nights. His creation. His only one, if he was honest.

“Optimization of flow No. 17 yielded a 0.8% gain,” he muttered to himself, looking at yesterday’s report. “But the load on the preceding operation increased by three percent. Damn”.

He reached for his cold coffee when a notification popped up on the central screen: “Product ‘Etalon.’ Order No. 4471. Deviation in supply of raw material ‘Block-K7’ from LLC ‘Tekhnolit.’ Risk of schedule disruption: 15%”.

“Tekhnolit”? Reliable as a Swiss watch. Alexey pulled up the record. Reason: “Untimely customs documentation”. Standard. No need to engage the brain – a well-worn algorithm: put pressure on procurement, they put pressure on the supplier, reshuffle the queue on the lines, use the safety stock. His hand automatically reached for the phone.

But his finger hovered over the receiver. His gaze fixed on the right monitor. “Warehouse stock level: 8.2 days”. Target was 7. Moscow had already sent warnings. Using the safety stock meant dropping the indicator again, more explanations. Another battle over a number in a report, not over the real work.

He leaned back in his chair. Leather, bought about five years ago, already worn on the back. The smell of dust, mixed with the smell of old plastic from the monitors, tickled his nose. The office was stuffy. Something was bothering him – not logic, but something under his ribs, vague and unpleasant. Like a mechanism had malfunctioned, but it wasn’t visible on the schematics.

There was a knock at the door, and without waiting for an answer, Anna Sokolova entered. Head of Production. In her hand – a tablet; on her face – not an expression of “more problems,” but her usual, ironed-flat fatigue.

“Alexey Sergeevich, good morning. Saw the thing about ‘Etalon’?”

“Saw it. Sit down. What are your thoughts?”

“I think ‘Tekhnolit’ is in a tight spot,” she said simply, sitting down. “Pressure on procurement. If they don’t give guarantees within 24 hours – look for an alternative. And.. the safety stock. Let’s risk the stock. The plan is more important”.

He listened to her even, unwavering voice. This was his own voice from five years ago. Tough, clear, unsentimental. And for some reason, it irritated him.

“What if we don’t apply pressure?” Alexey asked, surprising himself.

Anna slowly raised her eyes to him.

“Excuse me?”

“They’re not idiots. A failure happened. Maybe they had a fire, the director’s on a bender, or.. I don’t know. Maybe if we push now, next time they’ll just refuse our order?”

“That’s their problem,” Anna countered, but a flicker of bewilderment crossed her eyes. Not anger, but precisely bewilderment. She didn’t understand where he was going.

At that moment, the door swung open. Igor Semyonov, Head of Logistics, walked in.

“Lyokha, are you aware.. Anna, hello. There’s trouble with ‘Tekhnolit’”.

“What kind?” Alexey felt everything inside him tighten. The intuition he’d been drowning in numbers for years proved right.

“Their warehouse caught fire. Not the whole thing, but the section where they were assembling our batch. They’re panicking, don’t even know the timeline themselves”.

The silence became physically palpable. Anna broke it first, and her voice held not an “I told you so” gloat, but cold, professional despair.

“That’s it. Supplier reliability is zero. Emergency tender, revise the whole chain. We’ve got a disaster”.

“Wait,” Alexey interrupted. He stood and walked to the window. Morning mist was swirling beyond the gates. “Igor, did they ask for anything? Not make excuses, but *ask* for anything?”

Igor hesitated, glanced at Anna, then at Alexey.

“They asked.. not to bury them right away. To give them until evening to assess the damage. Promised an honest answer by six”.

“Until evening!” Anna snorted. “That’s another day’s delay!”

“And we’ll use it,” Alexey said sharply, turning around. His thoughts, previously sluggish, suddenly crystallized into a clear, albeit risky, scheme. “Anna, your job: squeeze everything you can out of line rescheduling, but without the safety stock. Calculate exactly how many days we can stretch this window. Not ‘if we can,’ but ‘for how many.’ Igor, call ‘Tekhnolit’ back. Tell them: we’re giving them until six. In return – total transparency. We need access to their recovery schedule, we want to see it online. And in parallel, quietly, search the market for even a couple of these blocks. Not as a replacement, but for backup. So we have some kind of leverage in our hands”.

“Alexey Sergeevich, the inventory KPI?” Anna asked, but without her previous certainty.

“It’s just a number now,” he said quietly, but firmly. “People were putting out a fire. Their chaos is worse than ours. We can finish them off, or we can try to help them out. The second option is cheaper in the long run”.

When they left, the office fell silent again. But now it was different – tense, charged with the decision just made, a decision that could just as easily turn into catastrophe.

He sat down and pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk. The smell of paper dust wafted out. There, under folders with old reports, lay his personal phone. One message, from five in the morning: “Dad, are you definitely coming today? I only have like three lines, but without you.. Mom says you’re probably going to be late again. It’s okay. Don’t bother. Good luck at work”.

He closed his eyes. A stupid school play. And his three lines, which, he knew, there would be none for.

He picked up a notepad, not a digital one, a regular, battered one. Wrote, pressing hard on the pen: “Warehouse fire. Don’t push. Diagnose. Reconfigure”. And below, for himself: “Evening. Point”.

He didn’t reach for the phone. First – do. Then – call.

On the monitor, the 15% risk still blinked. Alexey tapped the screen, brought up a manual entry window, and in the “action” field wrote: “In progress. Awaiting partner data. Backup – Plan B”.

For the first time in a long while, he wasn’t trying to kill the risk. He was trying to manage it.

Chapter 2: The Map and the Territory

The incident with “Tekhnolit” gave no respite. Not even four hours had passed before Anna Sokolova entered his office again. Not even entered – she squeezed in, holding a thick folder that smelled of fresh printouts.

“Time’s running out, Alexey Sergeevich,” she said, not sitting down. “Every hour is a loss. Here’s the plan. Three replacement suppliers, logistics calculations, draft contract termination. Approve it – I’ll launch it”.

Alexey glanced at the folder but didn’t take it. A lump of morning coffee sat in his throat.

“Gather the group in the small conference room,” he told Igor on the intercom. “Anna, financial director Viktor Petrovich, lawyer Elena. And.. call Olga from the key accounts department”.

“Olga?” Anna frowned. “Is this a client sandwich-hour? We have a production line on fire, not a social club”.

“The line on fire belongs to ‘Neftegazmontazh,’” Alexey corrected, standing up. “If we forget that, we’ll put out our fire, but their house will burn to the ground. And we’ll go down with it”.

The conference room smelled of old carpet and a recent meeting. Alexey stood by the flip chart, picked up a marker. The marker squeaked, smudging his finger.

“Colleagues,” he began, looking at their tense faces. “Before we act – one question. What problem are we *actually* solving?”

Viktor Petrovich, squinting behind his glasses, sighed audibly.

“Alexey Sergeevich, forgive me, but this sounds like an exercise for trainee managers. We have a schedule on fire. Money on fire. We need solutions, not questions”.

“The most expensive solutions are the wrong ones,” Alexey said, a rasp of fatigue creeping into his voice. “The ones that solve the wrong problem. We’ll put out a fire here and cause a flood in the next workshop”.

“And what is this.. certainty based on?” the financial director persisted, tapping his pen on his notepad. “The protocols weren’t pulled from thin air. They’ve been tested”.

Alexey fell silent. He wasn’t looking at Viktor Petrovich, but out the window, at the gray sky over the boiler house chimney. The question was fair.

“Tested,” he agreed quietly. “And they work, as long as the system is a simple machine. As long as a failure is just a bolt you can tighten. But when there’s a *fire* in the system.. you tighten the bolt, and the vibration causes your neighbor’s foundation to crumble”.

He turned to them, leaning on the edge of the table. The plastic gave slightly under his elbow.

“Five years ago. ‘Sibirgaz.’ Similar story. I acted by the book: pressure, ultimatum, emergency replacement. Formally, we met the deadline. But the client.. left. For good. Because our ‘success’ cost them so much stress and hidden costs that they preferred never to deal with us again. The plant lost over 80% of the profit from that contract in the long term. Only we don’t talk about it. We forgot”.

The room went quiet. Even Anna stopped flipping through her folder. No one mentioned that failure.

“Since then,” Alexey sighed, “I’ve been obsessed with one question. How to make decisions that don’t create new, bigger problems? I looked everywhere. Even at that stupid seminar Moscow sent us to six months ago. Remember that guy in the cardigan?”

Igor chuckled.

“The one talking about ‘the edge of chaos’ and ‘mental models’? Everyone thought he was from some cult”.

“That’s the one,” Alexey nodded. “He said one thing then. In a complex system, the problem rarely hurts where you think it does. It’s in the *connections* between the parts. And before you break anything, you need to understand the architecture of those connections. Draw a map. Back then, it

seemed like nonsense. Now.. now we have a chance to test it. Or we'll just put out one fire while starting another”.

Anna looked at him. Not with defiance now, but with heavy, weary interest. Like you'd look at someone who started digging a tunnel in an unknown direction.

“Fine,” she said. “Draw your map. But fast. We don't have a day and a half for lectures”.

Round One: How We See It.

“Schedule disruption,” Anna blurted out immediately. “Hits the planned target. My bonus”.

“Increased operating costs,” Viktor Petrovich added, running his finger over the calculator on his phone. “Emergency procurement, overtime, potential fines. Hits quarterly margin. My bonus”.

“Legal risks,” Elena said quietly. “Penalties from ‘Neftegazmontazh’ per the contract. But also, terminating with ‘Tekhnolit’ without proper grounds – a lawsuit. My headache”.

“Shortage of ‘Block-K7,’” Igor summarized, looking at the ceiling. “It's not there. Period”.

Alexey wrote on the board. It was a boring, predictable list. Disruption → Costs → Risks → No part.

“That's the view from our bunker,” he said. “But the world is wider. Olga?”

Round Two: How They See It.

Olga put down her pen. She spoke slowly, as if weighing each word.

“For ‘Neftegazmontazh,’ the problem sounds like this: ‘Rig assembly delayed due to delayed supply from ‘Etalon.’ For them, ‘Etalon’ isn't just an order. It's the cork in the bottle that's about to pop right in their face. Their penalties from *their* customer are an order of magnitude higher than ours. Their reputation as a reliable contractor is on the line. Their losses aren't our millions, but *their* tens of millions”.

The air in the room grew thicker. Anna stopped breathing for a second.

“But.. we can't be responsible for their schedules. We're not”.

“We are,” Olga interrupted, but without harshness. “Indirectly – per the contract. Directly – for the future. If we let them down, they won't even let us past the door at the next tender. ‘Etalon’ provides 12% of revenue. Losing that channel isn't a quarterly dip, Anna. It's a hole in the budget for a year”.

Alexey added to the board: “Client project delay → Loss of client → Hole in revenue”.

“And ‘Tekhnolit’?” Igor asked, a strange sympathy in his voice. “For them, the problem is ‘twenty years of reputation down the drain, and now it's burned up along with the warehouse.’”

Round Three: What We Can Change, and What We Can't.

The board had turned into a web of words and arrows. Chaos.

“We're drowning,” Alexey said. “Let's separate things. What of this is a given, a rock we've hit? What can't we do anything about?”

The first to speak, unexpectedly, was Viktor Petrovich.

“The fire is a given. Can't undo it. ‘Tekhnolit's’ losses are, too”.

“Seasonality for ‘Neftegazmontazh’ is a given,” Olga added. “They can't move winter”.

“So what *can* we change?” Alexey ran his hand over his face. His skin was greasy, sleep-deprived.

They argued, shouted, wiped the wet marker scribbles with their palms, drew again. Gradually, something resembling a structure emerged.

Immutable (The Rock): – ‘Tekhnolit's’ destroyed warehouse. (10+ days downtime) – ‘Neftegazmontazh's’ ironclad deadline (season = money) – Contract signatures (penalties)

Within Our Power (Room to Maneuver): – How we communicate with ‘Tekhnolit’ now. (Kick them or help them up?) – What we tell the client. (Stay silent or show our cards?) – How we reshuffle

the schedule for the next week. (Bust our guts or look for loopholes?) – What we choose: immediate savings or a chance to emerge from the crisis with stronger allies?

“So,” Alexey’s voice was hoarse. He circled a block on the board. “If we ignore the rock.. what is the *key problem* we’re solving, so that we not just survive, but come out of this stronger?”

The silence changed – not tense, but focused. Elena, the lawyer, spoke first.

“The problem.. is the *vulnerability* of our chain. It’s over-optimized for ideal conditions. But the world isn’t ideal”.

Viktor Petrovich nodded, taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“And the conflict. Between ‘save every ruble now’ and ‘don’t lose millions later.’”

“And,” Olga said quietly, “that we see the client and supplier as strangers. In a storm, strangers get thrown overboard first”.

Alexey wrote down the conclusion. Lines far removed from the simple formulation “supply disruption”.

“The risk of long-term losses (money, reputation, allies) due to the fragility of the chain at the intersection of three systems: ours (a coiled spring), supplier’s (catastrophe), client’s (ironclad obligations). The key shortage is not ‘Block-K7.’ The shortage is TIME and TRUST”.

He stepped back. Let them read it.

“Here are the *Frames*,” he exhaled. “The map of the territory. We’re not solving ‘how to punish Tekhnolit.’ We’re solving ‘how to save a common cause and our own skins when everything goes to hell, and admit that we created this fragility ourselves.’”

Anna looked at the board. Her folder with the plan lay on the table, and now it seemed less like a strategy and more like a child’s note saying “Mom, I did my homework”. It solved a headache, ignoring the cancer.

“This.. is uncomfortable,” she finally said. “It changes everything I’ve done for the last five years”.

“Yes,” Alexey said simply. “That’s why we don’t run. First, we figure out where to run *to*. Otherwise, we’ll run to a cliff”.

When everyone had left, Alexey was alone. The smell of the marker stung his eyes. He photographed the board. In his pocket, his phone vibrated persistently, like a toothache.

He knew what it was. Without reading. A chain from Katya: “Dad?”, “Will you even watch”. , “..don’t bother”. And one from Marina, sent while they were arguing about the “givens”: “She’s crying in her room. Says if the play is trivial to you, then it’s trivial to her too. I don’t know what to do, Lyosha. My patience is running out”.

He leaned his forehead against the cool surface of the flip chart. There on the board, he and his team had just drawn a map to save one world. And in his phone, another world was collapsing. And for that world, he had no markers, no frames. Only the feeling that the train was leaving, and he was standing on the platform solving a problem about the train’s optimal speed.

He sent the photo of the board to Marina. No caption. Then, looking into the gathering dusk outside the window, he typed a second message: “Tell her it’s not trivial. That I’m trying.. to clear the rubble. So that things like her play are even possible. Sounds like an excuse. But it’s the truth”.

He left the room, feeling not clarity, but weight. The weight of understanding how much was built on thin ice. They hadn’t taken a single step yet, but they had already wrested from chaos the main thing – knowing where they were. Now the hardest part lay ahead – finding the path. And learning to draw such maps for everything else. Before it was too late.

Chapter 3: Reflection in a Funhouse Mirror

That same evening, while Alexey and his team labored over redefining the problem in the conference room, at the other end of the plant, in the old administrative building, a different kind of work was in full swing. Without any frames or criteria.

The office of Vasily Kuzmich Bocharov, manager of Assembly Production No. 2, was his fortress. Not in a glass-and-steel way, but in a solid, Soviet-era sense: an oak desk you could use to hammer out the truth or sign work orders; walls covered in certificates of merit, yellowed photographs of work crews, and workshop schematics from 1987; a persistent smell – a stable cocktail of cheap tobacco, old wood, and metal shavings. On the desk, under thick glass, lay not a quote from a management textbook, but a clipping from the factory newsletter from 1998: “Workshop No. 2 exceeded quarterly plan by 127%. Personal contribution of foreman V.K. Bocharov”. The frame was scratched. It wasn’t boasting. It was an *artifact of faith*. Faith that if you gave your all and squeezed everything out of your people, the system – no matter how much it creaked at the seams – wouldn’t let you down. Or at least, you’d know you’d done everything you could.

Vasily Kuzmich hadn’t learned about the “Tekhnolit” problem from a report or at a meeting. That afternoon, his “man on the inside,” a supply officer named Stepan – someone he’d shared vodka with in the nineties while scrounging spare parts from speculators – had called him. The conversation was short: “Vasilich, ‘Tekhnolit’ is on fire. Our schedule for the G-42 unit for ‘Agrotechmash’ is under threat. That same damn ‘Block-K7’ is involved”.

Bocharov didn’t call Orlov. Didn’t call an emergency meeting. He summoned two people: Sergei, the young, ambitious section chief hungry for a promotion, and Pyotr Ilyich, a grizzled, silent foreman who’d started in the workshop under Bocharov’s own father.

He didn’t offer them a seat. He stood by the window himself, looking out at his workshop. Not at schematics, but at the real machines, at the people in their coveralls.

“Tekhnolit’ burned,” he said without turning around. His voice was even, without panic. There’d been no room for panic here since ’96, when they’d worked three months without pay, just to keep the crew from scattering. “Our schedule for the G-42 unit for ‘Agrotechmash’ is in jeopardy. What are we going to do?”

Sergei, sensing a chance to show initiative, blurted out first:

“Find a replacement! I’ve already called three, one is ready to supply in three days, but at triple the price. Do we take it?”

“Expensive isn’t an argument when the plan is hanging by a thread,” Bocharov cut him off, finally turning to face them. His face, lined like a topographical map of the plant, was unreadable. “The plan isn’t a number in a report, Sergei. It’s our *word*. ‘Agrotechmash’ isn’t a Moscow holding company. They’re guys out in the fields. If we let them down right before planting season, they’ll curse us out for the next ten years. And we won’t find anyone to replace them. Negotiate. Take it”.

He shifted his gaze to Pyotr Ilyich.

“Your job: the moment it arrives, put your best people on it. The ones you know. The ones who won’t let us down. Overtime, three shifts. Squeeze everything out of that line. Anyone who doesn’t agree – their resignation on the table. No discussion”.

Pyotr Ilyich hesitated, then cautiously began:

“Vasily Kuzmich, what about ‘Tekhnolit’? We’ve been with them for twenty years.. Maybe we should find out if we can help them, negotiate? Maybe they have something left”.

“Help them?” Bocharov snorted, but the snort held not malice, but a bitter, hard-won conviction. “Did they help us? Let us down at the most critical moment! You, Pyotr, you’re older than me, you should remember. In ninety-three, our main partner, ‘Energomash,’ also ‘asked for help’ – a payment deferment. We gave it. And a month later, they went bankrupt. It threw us into a tailspin for six

months. We had to send people door-to-door with hat in hand, begging for parts. Untrustworthy – you cut off. Fast. Before it cuts you off. That’s not cruelty. It’s the hygiene of survival. Any questions?”

There were no questions. The order was as clear as the signal from a cutting tool: hard, irreversible. Within an hour, Sergei was yelling into the phone at the new supplier, agreeing to inflated prices and onerous payment terms – the price of keeping their “word”. Pyotr Ilyich, jaw clenched, announced the upcoming night shifts to his tried-and-true crew. He didn’t threaten them with firing – he looked them in the eye. And they, grumbling, nodded. Because they knew: Bocharov, bastard though he might be, wouldn’t abandon his own people in a crisis. He’d fight for their bonuses, their comp time. But first – they had to hold the line.

The air in Workshop No. 2 held that familiar, oppressive atmosphere of an emergency, but it wasn’t panic. It was *mobilization* according to the old, proven rules of survival warfare. Fear here wasn’t of the management; it was of shame. Of not holding up, not pulling through, letting your comrades down.

The next morning, as soon as the workday began, furious work was underway on the next stage in Alexey Orlov’s conference room.. On the board, next to the approved “Frames,” a new title appeared: “Creative Alternatives”.

“So,” Alexey said, trying to sound energetic, “we’re not ‘looking for a replacement supplier.’ We’re looking for ways to achieve our goal: preserve value for the client and strengthen the ecosystem, given that we have very little time and need trust. What are the different paths to achieve this?”

The first suggestions were cautious. Anna, still skeptical, proposed an option close to Bocharov’s method, but a bit softer: “Emergency procurement externally, with a parallel official warning to ‘Tekhnolit’ about penalties”.

Igor, inspired by the discussion of the “ecosystem,” put forward an idea that would have seemed heretical an hour ago.

“Option B: A joint crisis task force. We propose that ‘Tekhnolit’ and ‘Neftegazmontazh’ sit down at one table. Virtually. We lay all our cards on the table: our deadlines, our reserves. ‘Tekhnolit’ honestly tells us what and when they can deliver. ‘Neftegazmontazh’ tells us what minimal shift they could accept if we guarantee transparency. We look for a configuration that minimizes the total losses for all three”.

“That’s insane,” Anna said. “We’d be showing weakness!”

“We’d be showing maturity and a desire to solve the problem, not just pass the buck,” Igor countered. “It’s an investment in trust. The scarcest resource, as we’ve established”.

Olga from the key accounts department got excited:

“Option C: ‘Transparent dialogue and a loyalty premium.’ We approach ‘Neftegazmontazh’ first, alone, with full admission of the problem. We propose not just a deadline shift, but a package deal: the 50% of ‘Etalon’ that we *can* assemble with the first batch from ‘Tekhnolit’ gets priority shipment. For the rest – we offer an unprecedented discount on future contracts or additional service. We turn a problem into an opportunity to strengthen the relationship”.

Lawyer Elena added her own cautious option: “Finding a subcontractor to do the final processing of semi-finished goods from ‘Tekhnolit’ at our site” – to avoid severing the chain completely.

Even fantastical ideas were born: “What if we offer ‘Neftegazmontazh’ a more expensive analog from our demo stock as a temporary replacement?” or “Could we legally buy the needed component from.. our mutual competitor with ‘Neftegazmontazh’?”

Alexey just kept writing, encouraging even the craziest thoughts. The principle was simple: now was not the time for criticism, only for generation.

But inside, everything was tightening. Each new idea on the board was a step into the unknown. Bocharov’s logic had a terrifying but crystal-clear simplicity: there’s an enemy (the failure), there’s a tool (force, speed, pressure), there’s a goal (the plan). And there are twenty years of proof that

this tool, in extreme cases, works. In *his* logic, Alexey's, there was nothing proven. Only doubts born from an old failure and the theoretical "heresy" of a seminar speaker. The seven paths on the board seemed to him now not a wealth of choice, but seven doors into seven different dark rooms. And he had to choose one, with no idea what lay behind each.

In Workshop No. 2, by the end of the day, the situation was tense. The new supplier, sensing desperation, had doubled the price in the final stage of negotiations. Sergei had to call Bocharov for additional approval, getting a dressing-down for "incompetence". Foreman Pyotr Ilyich faced open sabotage from two experienced workers who refused to work the night shift without a written order and guaranteed double pay. Bocharov, upon hearing this, threatened to fire them for "disrupting the production process". The atmosphere was strained to the limit. The order for 'Agrotechmash' now depended not only on an external supplier but also on a shaky internal truce, bought with fear and threats. But the line, creaking at every seam, was working. Bocharov's tool was malfunctioning, but it was working. It was tangible.

In Alexey's conference room, the board now boasted *seven* fundamentally different alternatives. From harsh pragmatism to risky partnership. Not one was an obvious favorite.

"Tomorrow," Alexey concluded, looking at this spectrum of possibilities, "we move to criteria. We'll evaluate these paths not by 'like/don't like,' but against the goals and values we defined in the frames. Anna, Igor – please prepare preliminary estimates of timelines and costs for each option. Olga, think about how we might quantify 'trust' and 'reputational effect' in numbers, or at least in scores".

When the morning session dispersed, Alexey learned from Igor, who'd returned from Workshop No. 2.

"Bocharov hasn't slept, I think. He's already machining parts. At an exorbitant price, of course.. But he's *already producing*, and we're still *discussing*".

"Bocharov is taking a cleaver to it," Igor said. "He'll spend three times the money, exhaust his people, and if the new supplier also fails – he's finished. And the plant takes a second hit".

"He's solving it the only way he knows," Alexey answered quietly, looking at his board. "The way life taught him. A proven method. I'm proposing everyone sit down at a table and talk it out. Nicely". He smirked, and the smirk held more fatigue than irony. "It's too early to say which of us is the fool. His method is as clear as a sledgehammer. Mine is like a complicated instruction manual for something that hasn't been assembled yet. I wonder which will prove more reliable in the end: the sledgehammer or the manual?"

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He flinched – thought it was work again. But the screen showed Marina's name.

"Hello?" his voice came out hoarse with tension.

"You're still at the plant?" she asked without preamble. There was no reproach in her voice, only weary acknowledgment.

"Yes. Wrapping up".

"Katya went to bed. Didn't wait up. She said she understood everything".

The silence on the line was thicker than any criticism. "Understood everything" was worse than tears or yelling. It was a verdict.

"I'll.. stop by, even for a minute," he managed.

"Don't, Alexey. She's asleep. You'll just exhaust yourself for nothing. Do what you need to do. We'll talk tomorrow".

She hung up. He listened to the dial tone for a few more seconds, then slowly put the phone away. His "need to do" here, on the board with seven paths, suddenly seemed infinitely distant and abstract compared to the silence in his daughter's room, which he'd failed to enter once again.

He photographed the board with the seven paths. The contrast with Bocharov's method was stark: there – one path, dictated from above, chosen in panic. Here – a spectrum of possibilities, born

from dialogue. But in Bocharov's workshop, *something* was already being done. There was noise. Here, in the silence of the room, there were only words on a white surface. And the silence on the phone.

Alexey sent the photo to Marina without a caption. What "lessons" could there be, when the main lesson – about how to lose your loved ones while saving abstractions – he was failing spectacularly?

Complexity was mounting, but not as a threat anymore – as a heavy, cold burden of responsibility for a choice he hadn't even made yet. Tomorrow, they had to learn to weigh these seven paths on scales they themselves would have to create. And today, he had to drive to an empty house, where only silence awaited him – the silence he himself had created by choosing between the plant and his family, without even realizing the choice had already been made for him.

Chapter 4: Scales for Seven Paths

The third day of the crisis began not with renewed energy, but with two pieces of news that hit like a hammer blow.

The first came from Igor before nine AM: ‘Tekhnolit’ had given an official answer. The first, “handmade” batch of ‘Block-K7’ would be ready *tomorrow by noon*. Instead of the promised 50%, only 30% of the required volume. Quality – “at the tolerance limits, requires additional selective inspection”.

The second piece of news came from Olga the moment she turned on her computer: her direct contact at ‘Neftegazmontazh,’ on “strictly between us” terms, informed her that their technical director, Saveliev, was gathering information on alternative manufacturers. “If we don’t receive a clear plan with firm deadlines from you by the end of tomorrow, we’ll have to initiate protective measures per the contract”.

The two and a half days given for assessment were up. Time wasn’t just melting away – it was turning into a bullet headed straight for them. In the conference room, smelling of yesterday’s coffee and tension, there was no panic. There was the board with seven paths and a hoarse, hard-won understanding: a choice had to be made *today. Now*. There was nowhere left to retreat.

“Colleagues,” Alexey began, his voice low from lack of sleep but clear, “we have seven cards on the table. Now we need not just a compass, but a selection algorithm. By what signs will we know one card is better than another? Let’s pull *metrics* from our ‘Frames.’ Concrete ones. Brutal ones”.

Round One: “Pulling out Metrics”.

Anna, with dark circles under her eyes, started with what she knew best:

“Cost. Direct expenses. Emergency procurement, overtime, logistics, penalties. In rubles”.

“Time. Maximum and minimum delay in shipping ‘Etalon.’ In hours,” Igor added. “Not in days. In hours”.

Viktor Petrovich gave a skeptical snort:

“Impact on quarterly margin. Your ‘direct expenses’ are the small stuff. The real story is the margin drop if we have to give discounts, and the risk of tanking the holding company’s stock price if we blow a major contract”.

“Preserving the relationship with ‘Tekhnolit,’” Igor put in. “How do you turn that into numbers? The cost of finding and certifying a new monopoly supplier? Six months of downtime?”

Olga cut him off:

“Reputational damage (or gain) in the eyes of ‘Neftegazmontazh.’ Retaining or losing a strategic client. That can be estimated via the NPV of future contracts or the cost of acquiring a new client of the same caliber”.

Elena, the lawyer, raised a finger:

“Legal and contractual risks. Probability and magnitude of fines, legal costs”.

Alexey, summarizing, added the last one:

“Long-term chain resilience. Does this solution make the system stronger? Or do we patch a hole that will rip open again at the first impact? How do we assess the *cost of a future failure* that we prevent (or provoke) today?”

On the board, a list of seven criteria had formed. It wasn’t an exercise in theology. It was an attempt to stretch a measuring grid over a living, breathing catastrophe.

Round Two: “Criteria Clash”.

Anna jabbed a finger at the list, her voice almost desperate:

“Do you see? These are mutually exclusive paragraphs! Minimize cost *and* maximize reputation? Helping ‘Tekhnolit’ costs money. Generous client compensation costs money. Where’s the optimum? There isn’t one!”

“And there shouldn’t be,” Igor said quietly but firmly. “This isn’t an optimization problem. It’s a *trade-off* problem. A prioritization problem. We’re not going to find a path where everyone comes out smelling like roses for free. We have to understand what we’re willing to pay for and with what. What we can sacrifice, and what we absolutely cannot”.

A heavy, acknowledging silence filled the room. They’d reached the edge. The moment when beautiful theories about “joint problem-solving” collided with the need to *bloody* prioritize.

“Then we need *weights*,” Alexey said, looking not at them, but at the board. “A numerical hierarchy of our values. Right now. Each of you gets five points on a piece of paper. Distribute them among the seven criteria. The most important criterion gets the most points, the least important gets the least. You have three minutes. Anonymous”.

He handed out scraps of paper. Silence, broken only by the scratch of markers and heavy breathing, lasted exactly three minutes. When he compiled the results on the board, the picture emerged like a photograph in developer.

Final Weights (arithmetic mean):

Time: 1.4

Client Reputation: 1.1

Long-Term Resilience: 0.9

Cost: 0.8

Relationship with ‘Tekhnolit’: 0.5

Impact on Margin: 0.2

Legal Risks: 0.1

Anna stared at the numbers as if they were code from the afterlife.

“Cost is in *fourth* place? Margin is at the *bottom*? This is.. financial suicide!”

“This is financial *surgery*, Anna,” Olga corrected her. Her voice trembled with fatigue, but not doubt. “We weren’t voting for what’s cheapest. We were voting for what *preserves the business*. If we lose ‘Neftegazmontazh’ (reputation), if we blow their project (time), no amount of saving on this one supply run will save us. We’ll lose ten times more. We voted for a survival strategy, not tactical savings”.

Alexey watched this breakthrough. The team, without meaning to, had just dethroned the idol of short-term profit. The weights screamed it: the main thing was to keep the client and meet their critical, unforgiving window. Everything else, including money, were variables in that equation.

But his own soul tightened into a knot. Time – 1.4. For this number, he’d missed his daughter for the second night running. For this abstract “client reputation,” he was losing trust in the only eyes where it truly mattered. It seemed his personal value system had malfunctioned. Or he just hadn’t found the right criteria for it?

Round Three: “Common Currency for the Incomparable”.

“Fine,” Anna gave in, slumping. “Priorities are set. But how do we compare ‘Time’ at 1.4 and ‘Reputation’ at 1.1? How do you add hours and trust?”

“Through *relative scoring*,” Alexey went to the flip chart and drew a large, empty matrix. Seven rows (alternatives) by seven columns (criteria with weights). “Tomorrow, at the final assault, we’ll fill each cell. Not with absolute numbers, but with scores from -2 to +2. The fastest option by time gets +2, the slowest -2. The option that best strengthens reputation gets +2, the one that trashes it gets -2. Then the score is multiplied by the criterion’s weight and summed across the row. The final weighted sum – that’s our best, least-worst choice. It won’t be ideal. It will be the best from the perspective of *our own*, just-established priorities”.

“But this is pure subjectivity!” Anna exclaimed.

“It’s structured, collective subjectivity, based on the data you’ll all bring tomorrow,” Alexey cut her off. “Supplier prices. Legal opinions. Risk assessments from sales. We’ll turn our fear and uncertainty into a table. And the table into a decision. Tomorrow at nine AM, final session. War for every cell. Don’t come without your data ready”.

He dismissed them. The room was left with heavy, exhausted silence and a board covered in numbers that now meant more than just numbers. They were a cast of the collective will, manifested in a moment of extreme stress.

Alexey received a message from Igor, who, after leaving the room, had gone straight to Workshop No. 2. The text was laconic: “Bocharov didn’t sleep. First batch of parts from the new supplier by midnight. Price – 2.8x. Two old milling machine operators quit, couldn’t handle the pace. But the line for ‘Agrotechmash’ is humming. Parts are being machined. The schedule is alive”.

The result of the second day of crisis was clear. The price of the emergency and the authoritarian decision was concrete: money, broken lives, bitterness. But the result was also tangible: machines worked, metal was cut, the plan was being met. Bocharov was paying with his own and others’ blood, but he was *already producing*. Alexey, at the end of the second day, had only numbers on a board, an exhausted team, and the need, on the third, decisive day, to make a decision. A decision that had to be not just different, but demonstrably better. Otherwise, this whole intellectual marathon would be just a beautiful self-deception by managers afraid to take responsibility for a tough, bloody, but effective choice.

He reached for his phone to text Marina, but his fingers froze. What would he say? “We learned to weigh the incomparable”? It would sound like mockery after her chilling “Understood” yesterday. Instead, he wrote shortly and directly, like a report: “Making the decision tomorrow morning. Tonight will be very late. Don’t wait. Love you”.

The reply came almost instantly. The word he’d come to hate: “Understood”.

It burned worse than any hysterics. It was the same “understood everything” from his daughter, but from an adult, intelligent person. The end. A verdict carried out without malice, without tears – with weary, irrevocable clarity.

He sent the photo of the board with criteria and weights to the work chat, with a caption he could no longer send his wife: “Lesson #4. When apples and oranges argue on the scales, the winner isn’t the prettiest fruit, but the one whose ‘importance’ was acknowledged beforehand. Criteria are our constitution in chaos. Weights are amendments to it, written in the blood of conscious priorities. Tomorrow – war for every cell of the matrix. It won’t be pretty. But it will be honest”.

He left the room for the empty, dark corridor. The clear, cold calculation of the work algorithm and the soft, warm haze of personal failure intertwined into one inseparable knot. Tomorrow – the matrix, the numbers, the choice that would determine the plant’s fate.

And today, he had to drive again to a quiet house where he was no longer expected. Where his “war for cells” and “priority weights” would be understood about as well as an instruction manual in ancient Chinese. Where the main resource – trust – he had already irrevocably spent, while building a system to save something else.

Chapter 5: War for the Matrix and the Price of Certainty

On the third day of the crisis, the conference room resembled a headquarters after a sleepless night: tables piled with printouts, laptops, empty coffee cups from yesterday. In the center, on a huge whiteboard, reigned the *Criteria Matrix*. Seven rows of alternatives. Seven columns of criteria with their weights. Empty cells awaited their numbers, and Alexey's team awaited their last reserves of strength for the decisive assault.

The “War for the Matrix” began not with shouts, but with Alexey's chilling question:

“Before you assign a score, confirm: what *data* is your judgment based on? If there is no data – say so. An empty cell is better than a cell filled with a guess”.

Round One: “Cost. Solid Ground and Quicksand”.

Anna, armed with initial calculations, started with Option A – “Harsh Supplier Replacement”.

“Direct costs: purchase from ‘Metal-Impex’ at inflated price, emergency logistics, overtime. Total: +14.7 million over planned cost. Score on ‘Cost’ criterion: -2 (worst of all)”.

“And hidden costs?” Viktor Petrovich asked, adjusting his glasses. “Loss of volume discount from ‘Tekhnolit’ in the future? The risk that ‘Metal-Impex,’ sensing our dependence, jacks up prices next time? The cost of finding and certifying a new permanent supplier to replace ‘Tekhnolit’? That’s not millions, it’s tens of millions”.

“That can’t be accurately estimated,” Anna cut him off, but her voice had lost its former iron certainty.

“Then we have to *record that as a risk*,” Alexey said, and added to the description of Option A in the margins of the board in red marker: “Risk of hidden and future costs: medium probability, high impact. Estimated +15—25 million rubles”.

Option B – “Joint Crisis Task Force” – turned out to be an enigma.

“Direct costs are minimal,” Igor reported. “But we could offer ‘Tekhnolit’ financial aid for recovery. Amount? From 5 to 20 million, depending on agreements. And ‘Neftegazmontazh’ compensation for inconvenience. Another minus 3—10 million”.

“So the cost range is from -3 to -30 million?” Anna clarified. “That’s not data, it’s an interval! How do we score that?”

“We score it neutral ‘0,’” Alexey proposed, “but with a note: *Key uncertainty – final amount of mutual compensation. Depends on negotiations.*’ That’s not weakness. It’s an honest acknowledgment of *measurable uncertainty*. We know what we don’t know”.

Round Two: “Timelines. Delays and Probabilities”.

Timelines were even more complicated. Anna's option (“Harsh Replacement”) gave a conditional +3 days to the plan – *if* the new supplier didn't fail. But Igor immediately presented data from the database: ‘Metal-Impex’ had an 18% rate of missed deadlines on emergency orders last year.

“So we don't have '+3 days,’ we have '+3 days with 82% probability and 8 days with 18% probability,” Alexey stated. He drew a simple *decision tree* on a separate flip chart, clearly showing how one probability created two different futures. “Anna, are you willing to put '+3 days’ in the matrix and ignore this tail risk?”

Anna was silent. For the first time, her “hard” numbers turned out to be deceptive, hiding an abyss of probable failure beneath them.

Round Three: “Reputation and Resilience. The Alchemy of Turning Feelings into Scores”.

Here, the real battle of interpretations began. How do you score “strengthening trust”?

Olga brought indirect data: the history of negotiations with 'Neftegazmontazh.' It turned out that three years ago, a similar incident with their former supplier had led to 70% of volumes shifting to a competitor within a year.

"We can assess not the reputation itself, but the *risk of losing it*," she proposed. "For the 'Transparent Dialogue' option, the risk of losing the client is low (score +1). For the 'Hiding the Problem Until the Last Minute' option, it's high (-2). But for the 'Joint Task Force' option". she hesitated, "it's either a breakthrough (+2) or a display of weakness (-2). Depends on how it's presented".

"So the score depends not on the action, but on PR skills?" Viktor Petrovich asked skeptically.

"On the skill of *honesty*," Igor corrected. "If we play openly and propose a joint solution – that's strength. If we just panic and call them for help – weakness. It's a fine line".

The argument dragged on. Elena, the lawyer, added her assessments of legal risks, based on precedents from the holding company's court cases.

Each cell of the matrix was filled painfully. Each number was tagged with a label: "supplier data," "historical statistics," "sales department expert assessment," "financial department calculation," "uncertainty: high".

The matrix was turning not into a table of answers, but into a *map of the team's knowledge and ignorance*. It was a sobering experience. They saw how few solid facts there really were, and how many shaky assumptions, fears, and hopes governed what seemed like a rational choice.

It was at this moment, when Anna and Igor were arguing about the score for "long-term resilience" for Option C, that Vasily Kuzmich Bocharov burst into the conference room without knocking. His face was crimson, his hand gripping his radio so tightly his knuckles were white.

"Orlov! Your brainchildren have done it!"

Shocked silence filled the room. Everyone froze.

"Metal-Impex' just refused me!" his voice cut through the air like a rusty saw. "Dumped the batch to some Chinese trader! The workshop has stopped! Because of your 'analyses' and 'requests for commercial proposals,' you jacked up their prices, and they just chose whoever pays more! Where's your 'intellectual choice' now, huh? My people are sitting idle! And 'Agrotechmash' starts installation in two days!"

Alexey slowly stood up. The weights from the matrix flashed through his mind. "Time" – 1.4. "Cost" – 0.8. Bocharov's decision, made in a vacuum, was not only destroying his workshop but also confirming the worst risks of their analysis: the market was reacting ruthlessly to panic.

"Your request, Vasily Kuzmich," he said, extremely calmly, hiding the rising anger at the situation, not at the man, "increased the cost for the entire plant and created competition within our own walls. We won't withdraw the request. But we're ready to consolidate our needs and approach 'Metal-Impex' or any other supplier with a combined volume from all of 'Progress.' That would give us negotiating power and might lower the price. But on one condition: you provide all the data on your contract with 'Agrotechmash' – exact deadlines, penalties – so we can incorporate your project into the overall priority matrix".

Bocharov stared at him as if he were a madman speaking alien. "Overall priority matrix"? To him, these were empty, dead words.

"I solve problems, I don't play with tables!" he rasped, his eyes a mixture of fury, fear, and utter incomprehension. "My problem is *here and now*! Does your matrix produce parts? Feed people? No!"

He spun around and stormed out, slamming the door so hard the glass in the cabinet rattled.

Silence. In that silence, a crucial, bitter realization was born. Complexity is not linear. Decisions made in isolation intersect and strike those who didn't even know about them. Bocharov's isolated emergency had hit their analysis. Their analytical request had killed Bocharov's operational work. They were parts of one system, which, in panic, had started tearing itself apart.

“What do we do?” Anna asked. There was no challenge in her voice, only weary, almost apathetic curiosity.

“We account for this new risk,” Alexey said, approaching the board. His hands didn’t shake. “For Option ‘A’ and all options involving emergency external procurement, we add a note: *Risk of resource conflict with internal divisions and market price inflation. Probability – high, impact – critical.*’ And we continue. Because now we’ve seen firsthand the alternative to our path: the chaos of mutual sabotage. Our slow, difficult path is an attempt to create not an ideal answer, but *coordination*. Even if it has to be built on the ruins of mutual misunderstanding”.

The matrix was almost filled by seven in the evening. The numbers in the cells no longer seemed abstract. Behind each stood hours of argument, data found or not found, acknowledged risks, personal ambitions, and fatigue. This was a *living, breathing, painful map of reality*, with all its cracks and abysses of ignorance.

He dismissed the team. They left without looking at each other, emptied to the very bottom. Alexey remained alone in the silence of the room, lit by the flickering screen of his laptop.

He picked up his personal phone. No new messages, no missed calls. Silence. The same silence, he knew, reigned at home. He didn’t text anyone. Words, every last one, seemed spent for the day. He just sat, looking at the matrix, feeling fatigue give way to a strange, cold, stony clarity. Not certainty. Clarity of *price*.

They had gone through the “war”. They had seen how their decisions hit their own. Learned the price of both his slowness and another’s haste. Understood that every cell in the matrix was a bet. A bet with money, time, relationships, fates like those of Bocharov’s two milling machine operators who had quit today.

Alexey sent one last message that day. To himself, in his notes:

“Lesson #5. Certainty is a luxury for simple worlds. In a complex one, there is only *price*. The price of your haste. The price of your slowness. The price of not accounting for the fact that your neighbor in the system is solving their own problem with the same scarce resource. Tomorrow, we need to sum all these prices. And choose the smallest one. Even if it’s huge. And even if it has to be paid not only with money”.

He turned off the light in the room and walked into the corridor. Outside the windows, in the workshop buildings, lights were burning – both in Bocharov’s workshop and in his. Two different rhythms, two different pains, one system creaking at the seams. And tomorrow, as chief engineer, he would have not just to choose an option from the matrix. He would have to *set the price of survival* for one of those rhythms. A price that would be measured not in scores, but in concrete fates, contracts, and perhaps, in the silence of his own home, which had become habitual and unbearable at the same time.

Chapter 6: The Sum of All Fears

On the fourth morning, the conference room resembled an alchemist's lab after a series of explosions. On one flip chart, the completed *Criteria Matrix* dominated, each number hard-won. On another – scraps of *decision trees* and ominous notes about risks, like medical diagnoses. In the center of the table stood Igor's laptop, where the final sums were being tallied.

"You can't just add these scores!" Anna jabbed a finger at the screen where the numbers in the "Total" column were appearing. "Look: for Option B ('Joint Task Force'), 'Cost' is scored '0,' but with a note 'high uncertainty.' For Option A ('Harsh Replacement'), it's '-2,' but that's a solid, albeit bad, number. How do you compare them? Adding zero and minus two is a travesty of mathematics!"

"We're not adding apples and oranges," Igor replied patiently, but with the same hoarse fatigue. "We're adding *weighted relative scores*. It's the mathematics of comparative judgment. And uncertainty is part of it. We're not ignoring it, we're visualizing it".

He highlighted the cells with high uncertainty in yellow, and those with extreme risks in red. The matrix ceased being a table and turned into a *heat map of reliability and threats*. Bocharov's option (entered under the code "Option 0: Autonomous Emergency") blazed solid scarlet and crimson – maximum negative consequences, maximum uncalculated but already materializing risks.

"Let's go through the final numbers," Alexey proposed, standing by the board. His voice sounded detachedly calm, like a surgeon before a complex operation. "Igor, announce the final weighted sums for the top three. But don't just say the number. Say the *story* behind it".

"Option A ('Harsh Replacement'). Total: -5.1 points. High direct costs (-2), conditional timeline (0), but catastrophe on reputation and long-term relationships (-2 each)," Igor commented, pointing along the row. "Plus, as we saw yesterday, high risks of internal conflicts and market price inflation. The -5.1 figure is still an optimistic scenario, assuming the new supplier doesn't fail. If they fail – it's collapse".

"Option B ('Joint Crisis Task Force'). Total: +1.9 points. Direct costs unclear, possible aid to 'Tekhnolit' (0), timeline potentially better than A due to cooperation (+1), maximum scores on reputation and long-term resilience (+2, +2). But," Igor pointed to the yellow cells, "there's a huge zone of uncertainty here: success depends 70% on the willingness of 'Tekhnolit' and 'Neftegazmontazh' to play openly. If they don't agree – the option collapses, and we end up in a worse position than we started. We're betting on trust".

"Option C ('Transparent Dialogue + Client Premium'). Total: +3.4 points. Clear, controllable costs for client compensation (-1), good timeline (+1), very high scores on reputation (+2) and preserving 'Tekhnolit' as a partner (+1). Uncertainty is medium – depends mainly on the client's reaction, which we can predict. A reliable, cautious, strategically sound path. Practically no surprises".

Everyone looked at the three numbers glowing on the screen: -5.1, +1.9, +3.4. The mathematics, crude and battered as it was, pointed to a clear leader. Option C. But there was no jubilation in the room. There was a heaviness, like the feeling after reading a terminal diagnosis, when all treatment options are bad, but one is slightly less so.

"The matrix doesn't make the decision for us," Alexey said loudly, breaking the silence. "It shows the *consequences of our priorities*. We said reputation, time, and resilience are more important than short-term savings. The matrix has shown us that clearly. Now the question to me as the decision-maker is: am I willing to take on the risk of Option B? Or choose the more predictable, conservative Option C? Option C guarantees. Option B offers a *chance*. A chance not just to survive, but to become stronger. But the price of failure – is the destruction of everything we're trying to save".

He scanned the team: Anna, her lips pressed into a thin white line; Igor, frozen by his laptop; Olga, looking at him with a silent question; Viktor Petrovich, helplessly spreading his hands before the face of non-financial risks.

This was the moment of maximum clarity and maximum solitude. The tools had done their job – clarified the choice. But the weight of the final step now rested entirely on him.

Alexey stared at the heat map for a long time. Then he slowly walked to the window. Beyond the glass lay his plant. His creation. The system that, just now, in the person of Bocharov, had shown him how it could devour itself.

He turned around.

“I choose Option B. ‘Joint Crisis Task Force,’” he said. Clearly. Without pathos.

Anna gasped. Igor let out a whistling breath.

“Why?” Anna almost whispered. “Option C is more reliable, the number is higher!”

“Because Option C is the tactic of a brilliant retreat,” Alexey explained, returning to the board. “We’ll save face, pay money, buy our way out. But the system will remain fragile. ‘Tekhnolit’ will be offended and weakened. ‘Neftegazmontazh’ will get compensation, but see us as just a calculating supplier who buys their way out of mistakes. Option B is a *strategy of system reassembly*. If we can pull this off, we create a precedent: we’re not just a link in a chain, we’re its *active builder*. We’ll try to turn a shared disaster into a shared victory. The risk is extreme. But the long-term payoff – creating a *resilient ecosystem* – is worth it. As the decision-maker, I take on that risk”.

He walked to the board and wrote under the final matrix in red marker: “DECISION: Option B. Rationale: strategic priority of long-term resilience and cooperation over tactical predictability and forceful solution. Risk accepted consciously”.

“Now,” he turned to the team, and for the first time in many days, a living, intense energy broke through in his voice, “step six: *Commitment to Action*. Igor, you’re responsible for the protocol. We have *two hours* to draft a detailed first contact plan: who calls whom, when, what they say, what documents they prepare. Anna, in parallel, prepare a Plan B in case ‘Tekhnolit’ or the client refuses – not a forceful one, but for damage minimization. Olga, think through all the nuances of communication with ‘Neftegazmontazh.’ We launch Operation Bridge today at 14:00”.

The room erupted, not in analytical work, but operational. Fear and fatigue gave way to feverish adrenaline. They finally had a course.

It was at this moment that the out-of-breath foreman Pyotr Ilyich from Bocharov’s workshop burst into the room without knocking. His face was ashen.

“Alexey Sergeevich! Disaster! That Chinese trader who outbid our batch.. his truck got into an accident leaving the city. The cargo – destroyed. ‘Metal-Impex’ says the next batch – not for another week, and the price – already *four times higher*! Workshop No. 2 has ground to a halt! And ‘Agrotechmash’ just sent a fax: if the parts aren’t at their site by 10 AM tomorrow, they’re imposing a penalty equal to the *full contract value* and terminating it!”

The price of the “autonomous emergency” was presented immediately, in the harshest, almost grotesquely cruel form. Bocharov, trying to act quickly and forcefully in a vacuum, had become a pawn in a market that reacted to his desperate request even more harshly and cynically, and blind chance had finished off the remaining hope.

Alexey looked at Pyotr Ilyich, then at his team, already immersed in planning “Bridge”.

“Pyotr Ilyich,” he said without a trace of gloating, “tell Vasily Kuzmich. We consider his problem part of the whole. If he provides us with all the data on his contract within an hour, we’ll include his need in the agenda of our crisis task force. ‘Tekhnolit’ might have something for his modification of ‘Block-K7’ too. Or we can jointly search the market for a solution, but not as competitors, as *one customer*. But the key word is ‘jointly.’ Alone, we’re all just targets. Together – we’re a party that can be negotiated with”.

He didn’t know if the proud, crushed Bocharov would agree. But he did what the logic of his choice dictated, not momentary revenge. He offered *coordination* instead of competition. A bridge thrown even to someone who might want to burn it.

While the team worked, Alexey stepped into the corridor to catch his breath. His phone vibrated in his pocket. Marina.

He answered, expecting an icy tone, reproach, or that same “understood”.

“Hi,” she said. Simply. Without preamble. There was fatigue in her voice, but not hostility.

“Hi,” he leaned against the cool wall.

“Katya’s at school. I.. read your ‘lessons.’ All the ones you sent”.

He didn’t know what to say.

“You’re trying to build some kind of bridge there, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he exhaled. “Right now, it seems the hardest part is deciding where to start laying the first plank”.

There was a pause on the other end.

“We have tea at home. Strong. And silence. When you’re done laying your plank – come. A bridge has to be built from both banks. I’ll.. try from ours”.

She hung up without waiting for an answer.

He stood there, phone pressed to his ear, no longer hearing the dial tone, but something else. A silence that held not despair, but an offer. A shaky, fragile, but real little bridge. From the other bank.

Two hours later, Operation Bridge launched. First calls, first tense pauses, first cautious “let’s discuss”. The numbers in the matrix came alive, turning into living voices, interests, mutual fears, and glimmers of understanding.

Alexey looked out the window at the illuminated workshops. The first part of the journey was complete. They had gone from chaos, through the pain of structuring, to a conscious, risky, but *their own* decision. They hadn’t avoided the crisis. They had embedded themselves in it, to try and manage it. And, it seemed, they had earned the right to try building one more bridge. The one that started at the doorstep of his own home.

He sent one last photo to Marina in this series: the completed matrix with the final sum and the decision on the board.

“Lesson #6. Tools don’t give answers. They make the question ring so loudly that it can no longer be ignored. The decision-maker isn’t the one who knows the answer. The decision-maker is the one who takes responsibility for a choice when all the answers are bad, but one is *theirs*. We’re launching ‘Bridge.’ Let’s see if it withstands the onslaught of reality. And.. thanks for the tea”.

For the first time in many days, he felt not weight, but a strange, timid, yet living hope. Not for success. That now they would try *together*. At the plant, and maybe, at home. Because otherwise – no bridges made any sense.

Chapter 7: The Bridge Breaks

Operation Bridge began with a virtual meeting. In ‘Progress’s’ conference room, under the watchful eyes of Alexey’s team, two windows appeared on the large screen: the tired but focused face of ‘Tekhnolit’s’ development director, and the wary face of the head of supply from ‘Neftegazmontazh’ – the same Saveliev.

Alexey led the meeting. He laid out the situation without embellishment: their shared disaster, their interdependence. He proposed a scheme: ‘Tekhnolit’ ships everything they can, even “at the tolerance limits,” immediately. ‘Progress’ puts it into production, simultaneously allocating engineers and funds to accelerate the recovery of the critical section. ‘Neftegazmontazh’ agrees to a phased delivery of ‘Etalon’ with a final shift of three days, receiving not only a discount but also priority access to the next product modification.

A pause. ‘Tekhnolit’s’ director sighed.

“Alexey Sergeevich, we’re grateful for the offer of a helping hand, not a knife in the back. We’re in. Ready to work in full transparency mode”.

The ‘Neftegazmontazh’ window was silent longer. Saveliev was looking off to the side, apparently checking with someone.

“This is.. unconventional,” he finally said. “But honest. And it accounts for our losses from downtime. Give me an hour, I’ll report to the CEO. But it seems we might accept these terms. With one condition – a daily consolidated progress report”.

In Alexey’s room, they exhaled. The first barrier was crossed. It seemed the fragile “Bridge” was beginning to take shape. Anna was already noting the start of the shipping schedule, Igor – the dispatch of engineers.

It was at that moment that the conference room door swung open, and the same foreman Pyotr Ilyich from Bocharov’s workshop appeared in the doorway. But this time his face wasn’t frightened – it was furious, etched with deep lines of powerless anger.

“He refused! Vasily Kuzmich!” he blurted out, ignoring the screen with the partners. “Said he wouldn’t ‘reach out to those who put sticks in his wheels’! And you know what he did? He just sent out requests not to three, but to *five* new suppliers, including the ones we were considering as reserves for ‘Etalon’! He’s going to churn up the market so bad that everyone will feel it! His people are scouring every small warehouse within a three-hundred-kilometer radius!”

An icy wave ran down Alexey’s spine. He looked at the screen where the fragile bridge of agreements with the outside world hung, and understood a terrible, obvious thing. They had done a titanic job of working out a solution *within their own logical system*. They had accounted for ‘Tekhnolit’ and ‘Neftegazmontazh’ as external entities. But they had not achieved shared understanding within their own plant. They had not turned Bocharov from a threat into an ally. They had offered him cooperation from above, as a favor, but hadn’t involved him in the process, hadn’t made him a *co-author* of the solution from the very beginning. “Commitment to Action” turned out to be a fiction. There was a plan. There were resources. Even external partners were almost agreed. But one disagreeing, offended person, acting within his own paradigm, *inside their own organization*, was capable of bringing it all down, exploding the market with requests and burying the trust of the newly-found partners.

“Colleagues,” Alexey said quietly but clearly into the microphone, “I apologize. We need an urgent internal break. We’ll get back to you within an hour”.

He turned off the sound and video, leaving a screensaver on the screen, and turned to his team. Their faces were pale. Anna was the first to voice what everyone was thinking:

“But we warned him! We offered help! He’s a fool himself, a stubborn retrograde!”

“No,” Alexey interrupted. His voice was tired but firm, without a hint of self-justification. “We failed. We thought ‘Commitment’ meant when *we* have a plan, KPIs, a matrix, and allocated resources. It doesn’t. ‘Commitment’ is when *everyone* whose actions are critical to success understands, accepts, and is ready to fulfill their role in that plan. We didn’t achieve that with Bocharov. We ignored him at the idea generation stage, then tried to buy his data, and when he rebelled, we offered him terms in an ultimatum. We treated him like an external supplier or a problem client. But he’s *part of our system*. And his disagreement isn’t sabotage. It’s a *systemic failure we didn’t anticipate*. Our failure”.

Heavy silence filled the room. The bitter realization of their own methodological blindness was far more valuable than any theoretical knowledge from books.

“What now?” Igor asked. “Cancel ‘Bridge’? Break the agreements?”

“No,” Alexey said, already standing. “Now we go to *fix the oversight*. But not to ‘convince’ him or ‘crush’ him. To understand: why is our, such a beautiful and correct plan, for him – a threat and an insult? What did we miss? Anna, Igor – with me. We’re going to Workshop No. 2. Right now”.

In the fortress.

Workshop No. 2 was indeed idle. Gloomy, embittered workers smoked by the silent machines. In Bocharov’s glassed-in office, a heated phone conversation was underway. Seeing Alexey with Anna and Igor, he slammed down the receiver.

“Come to gloat? See how your ‘sabotage’ worked?” his voice was hoarse with sleeplessness and bitterness.

“Vasily Kuzmich, I came to apologize,” Alexey said evenly.

Bocharov was taken aback. Anna and Igor exchanged glances.

“We created a solution that, it seemed to us, saved the plant,” Alexey continued, not looking away. “But we created it without asking the most experienced production manager about *his* problems. We offered you terms without explaining what benefit *for you personally*, for your workshop, for your people, this would bring. We acted like a headquarters sending orders to the trenches. That was our mistake. A gross one. Unprofessional”.

Bocharov was silent, studying his face, looking for a catch.

“What benefit?” he finally snorted. “From handing over my data so you can decide whether my ‘Agrotechmash’ or your ‘Etalon’ is more important? My people are sitting idle! My word to my people is burned! And you’re here talking about some ‘long-term ecosystems’”.

“The benefit is,” Anna suddenly, harshly, and without emotion interjected, “that if our ‘Bridge’ collapses and ‘Neftegazmontazh’ leaves, the holding company will start cutting budgets to the bone. First under the knife will be ‘non-core’ or problem assets. Like a workshop that has already shown it can’t solve its own problem without threatening the entire plant”. She paused, letting the words sink in. “But if the ‘Bridge’ holds, we show Moscow we can solve complex crises *systemically*. That gives us a credit of trust and resources. Including resources to solve *your* problem. We’re not competitors, Vasily Kuzmich. We’re one team in a besieged fortress. Either we break through together, or we get picked off one by one. Starting with the most vulnerable”.

She spoke not in the language of values, but in the harsh, stark language of survival. And it worked. Bocharov leaned back in his chair, his gaze losing its aggression, replaced by weary calculation.

“And what, you’re going to find me my ‘Block-K7’ right now?”

“We already have,” Igor said, pulling out his tablet. “While you were scouring the market, we contacted ‘Tekhnolit’ about your specs. They have a batch of castings rejected for the main order, but suitable for your modification. They didn’t meet the strict tolerances for ‘Etalon,’ but for your ‘Agrotechmash’ – they’re perfect. They’re ready to ship them at half price, today. But only within

the *framework of the overall agreement*. Only if we are *one party*. Their logic is simple: help those who help them”.

Bocharov looked from Alexey to Anna to the tablet. A battle raged in his eyes. Pride and the old principle “I’ll manage on my own” against the icy wind of reality and an unexpectedly offered, concrete lifeline.

“So what do I do?” he asked hoarsely.

“Sit down with us,” Alexey said. “Right now. Look at the big picture. And tell us, in your opinion, the best way to act so that your workshop gets running and the ‘Bridge’ doesn’t collapse. You’re not an executor. You’re an *advisor and co-author* of this plan. Because without you, it’s not worth a damn. Your experience – *this*,” Alexey jabbed a finger at a blueprint on the wall, “is more necessary to us now than any theory”.

This was an offer not of surrender, but of *shared power*. Of acknowledging his expertise and his role in the system. Of understanding that his “trench” wasn’t an obstacle, but a key defensive node.

Ten minutes later, Bocharov, muttering something about “making ends meet,” was walking back with them to the conference room. He didn’t become a friend. But he ceased being a mine. He became a *critical element*

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