

# HOW TO CHOOSE

*Physics and maths.*

BY MICHAEL HAYNES

“Rock. Paper. Scissors. Shoot!”  
Two fists turn to sheets of paper.

“Rock. Paper. Scissors. Shoot!” Two fists stay hard rocks.

“Rock. Paper. Scissors. Shoot!” Paper covers rock.

“Two out of three?” Anna asks, her hand wrapped around her husband Liam’s fist.

“Sure,” he says. She always asks for two out of three, three out of five. No one ever wins, no one ever loses, and more time trickles past.

In the sleeping quarters, Maribel coughs. There’s silence for just a moment and then she coughs again and again and again.

Anna bolts from her seat. The medbot, Liam calls him Buster, wakes and walks to Maribel’s side. Buster checks her vitals as Anna paces behind him, then gives Maribel an injection. When he withdraws, Anna goes to Maribel and holds her close, humming a lullaby.

Liam approaches slowly. “This can’t go on forever,” he says. Anna keeps humming, stroking Maribel’s hair. “We have to make a choice.”

He waits, but she doesn’t reply. As he’s walking away, he thinks he hears her say: “It isn’t fair.”

“Heads. Heads. Heads.” Anna flips the coin a fourth time. “Another f—” She looks at Maribel, who’s reading in a chair, cuts herself off, flips the coin again. “Heads. Heads.”

“That’s six, Anna,” Liam says. “You win.”

“There must be something wrong with the coin.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the coin.” He puts his hand on hers. “You go. I’ll stay.”

This research assignment was supposed to be a second chance for them, an escape from the ruin that Earth had become, but now it feels like a prison.

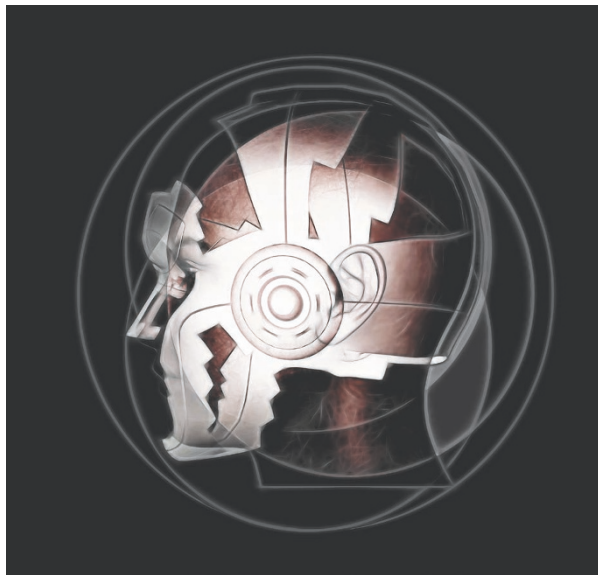
Anna shakes her head. “No. We’ll play again tomorrow. Try updating the medbot again.”

“There won’t be anything new —”

“Just try the damned update!”

Maribel starts to cry and Liam scoops her up.

“It’s okay, baby,” he whispers. “It’s okay.”



“But Mummy’s sad.”

He has no words and just holds her tight.

Anna’s crying too, quiet tears trickling down her face. Liam hands Maribel to her. “I’ll try the update,” he says.

He goes to a corner of their habitat and turns on the ansible. Buster stands silently nearby, ready to receive new knowledge, memories and skills, if any are to be found. He’s already been loaded up from the minds of half a dozen doctors from Earth and the colonies. None of them had a cure.

Liam searches, but finds nothing new.

He looks out the window at the ship. The one they can use to get Maribel away from here, but at a cost.

How to decide? But they have to decide. Maribel is running out of time.

Two circles drawn on paper, two hands full of rice. Anna drops hers and watches it scatter, he does the same. Then they count.

183 grains in the circle labelled Liam, 162 in Anna’s.

“Two out of three,” she says, gathering up the rice.

In the distance, Maribel whimpers. Anna goes to her, leaving Liam to sit and think.

It comes down to physics and maths.

43 days in the ship at near-light speeds means 61 years.

61 years means more possible treatments for Maribel, that’s good.

But the ship can carry only three, and without Buster, Maribel won’t survive those 43 days. So someone must stay behind and

hope for a rescue that seems quite unlikely ever to come.

61 years means whoever stays behind will probably never see their family again.

They have to choose, but no list of pros and cons has helped them decide who stays and who goes, no game has made the choice for them. But maybe there are more than two options.

Maribel and Anna are both asleep as Liam walks across the outpost and activates Buster. He fires up the ansible, too, checking it again. There’s nothing new.

Liam sits by Buster and enters some commands. He puts on a headset, plugs it into the medbot and closes his eyes. Blackness closes in and then there’s a soft chime. It’s done.

He stands and goes to the window, looks out at the ship again. It’s Maribel’s only hope. This — what he’s doing — it’s their family’s only hope.

In the canteen there’s a bottle of his favourite whisky. He pours a glass, drinks it, pours another.

When the bottle’s empty, he shakily walks to the outpost’s airlock. As he touches the controls, all the shakiness disappears. He opens the inner door, steps inside, closes it and reaches for the second set of controls.

Anna wakes, Maribel sleeping in her arms. She never wakes after Liam. She knows right away that something is wrong.

She slides out of their bed, careful not to rouse Maribel.

“Liam?” she calls out quietly as she enters the main living area. She doesn’t see him, but finds the empty whisky bottle, the empty glass.

“Liam!” She isn’t quiet any more. Maribel starts to cry and her cry turns to a cough.

Buster wakes in response to her coughing and walks towards the sleeping quarters.

“Liam!”

Buster stops and looks at Anna.

“It’s okay, Anna,” he says in his level, neutral voice. “I’m here. I’ll always be here.” Then he turns away and goes to take care of his daughter. ■

*Michael Haynes is an ardent short-story reader and writer with multiple professional publication credits. He tweets at @mohio73 and his website is <http://michaelhaynes.info>*

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY