

Christina Boul

### Trust Your Conscience

*Do you feel like you have trouble making the right decision? Is it hard for you to distinguish between right and wrong? Well, you aren't the only one. Today, most of the population has this problem because our natural consciences have stopped working. The consciences we were born with can't figure out what is right or wrong anymore, and we are left struggling to make decisions. That's why I, Astuto Lura, am here to help. Over the past 10 years, my team and I have developed an artificial conscience, called Arcon. This device attaches behind your ear and connects to the decision-making part of your brain. Then, whenever you are faced with a decision, Arcon will tell you the correct choice. You will still have the power to make the wrong choice, but why would you? Please, make life easier for yourself and everyone around you and get Arcon when it releases to the public tomorrow.*

When the advertisement finishes, there's a knock on my bedroom door. "Hey sweetie, can I come in?" My dad's muffled voice asks.

"Yeah, sure." I swivel around in my desk chair so I'm facing the door.

My dad walks in and glances at my computer screen. "Oh, I see you're watching Mr. Lura's new commercial for Arcon. I can't believe he and I started working on that 10 years ago." My dad runs his hand through his hair and scrunches his eyebrows.

"Yeah." I say. "Are we going to get them when they come out?" I raise my eyebrows.

"Absolutely not." My dad says without hesitation. Then he quickly continues. "I mean, I just don't think we need them. Arcon is for people who have difficulty making decisions. You and I don't really have that problem."

“Well, good. Because I don’t think I want one. It just seems weird to have a mechanical voice talking in my head.” I pause. “Anyway, is there something you needed?”

My dad takes a seat on my bed and sighs. “Yes, I need to talk to you more about Arcon. I have a feeling that Mr. Lura is hiding something about Arcon from me, but I can’t figure out what it is. He won’t let me see all of the things he’s been working on for it. Says he’ll show me when it’s finished, but I think he’s hiding something.”

“Why are you telling me this dad? I’m sure you can figure it out.” I squint my eyes at him.

“I’m telling you because I want you to be able to protect yourself if there is something bad going on.”

“Okay, how will I do that?”

“Well, without Mr. Lura knowing, I managed to put a small bug in the program for Arcon.” My dad pulls something out of his pocket. “This is Arcon.”

He gives the small device to me, and I turn it around in my hands. It’s about the size of a penny, and it has small rivets on the side that touches your skin. The outside is a sleek silver, but I heard in one commercial that you’ll be able to customize the color and pattern on it.

“Aila,” My dad says, “You remember how to hack, right?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, dad. You didn’t teach me that long ago.”

“Okay, just checking.” He glances at my hands. “How would you hack Arcon?”

“You want me to hack into a machine you helped build? Dad, I’m good, but I don’t know if I’m that good.”

“You should have no problem if you remember what I taught you.” He says.

“Okay, sure.” I pull my laptop closer to me. I start typing in a bunch of commands and several windows open up. I rack my brain to remember exactly what I need to type in and in what order. It’s also a little different hacking a device versus hacking a website or something. After a few more commands, I hit a point where I can’t break through.

I sigh. “Dang it. What happened? I thought I had it.”

My dad laughs. “You did everything right. I knew you’d get stuck here because now you have to take into account the bug I placed in the system. Without that, there’s no way to break through.”

My dad pulls my laptop in between us and shows me the special commands that he created to break into Arcon. I haven’t seen these commands before, and I know I never would have figured them out. I have a feeling my dad is counting on Mr. Lura never being able to figure them out too.

My dad finishes up the last command and presses enter. A window pops up on my laptop that has a list of about 1000 basic choices, and I see a way to search for more specific decisions. At the top of the window, it says, “No human connected.”

“Cool. So, you want to be able to hack into Arcon in case there’s something dangerous about it?”

“Yes, this way, we’ll have the upper hand against Lura in case my suspicions are right.”

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My dad taught me how to hack Arcon a month ago, and so far, there’s been nothing suspicious. People have gone crazy for it though. On the first day Arcon was available, millions of people around the world went out and got one installed. I guess people really hate having to make their own decisions.

A notification on my laptop grabs my attention and I grin. Someone with Arcon is nearby. My dad told me that I should practice hacking into Arcon as much as possible. He wants me to get as quick at it as possible in case I'm ever in a situation where I would need that skill.

My dad probably wouldn't always approve of what I do when I hack Arcon, but he's at work right now and doesn't need to know about it.

I look out my window and see a beer-gutted middle-aged man waddling by. This will be a good one. I whip back to my laptop and click on the notification. It takes me to a screen with all of the information about this man's artificial conscience. A few lines of code and a click here and there and I've broken into this man's mind.

The decisions this man has made throughout the day flood my screen. The most recent one being whether or not to exercise. That must be why he's so sweaty, he's trying to lose that beer gut.

I create his next decision. I type that he has the choice either to keep walking or to stop. Normally the conscience would tell him the correct decision, but I'm in control now. I type in that he should stop walking and face my house. Then I tell him to do the chicken dance and sing the tune.

I look out my window and let out a huge belly laugh. This man, in the middle of the street, is dancing like an idiot. I open my window, and I can hear him singing the tune. Other people walking by are laughing at him, and one kid is taking a video. As soon as tears start coming out of my eyes, I decide to give him a break. I type in that he should stop dancing and continue his walk. Then I release my control on his conscience.

That man really trusts Arcon. It amazes me that he could have chosen to ignore what it was telling him to do and just go on with his walk, but instead he really thought that listening to

Arcon and doing the chicken dance was the right decision. He's not the only one like that either. Most of the time when I hack into someone's Arcon, they listen to whatever I tell them to do. Sometimes it seems like they can't ignore it, but I know that's not how Arcon works. Every decision it tells you to make you can ignore. I just think people like being told what to do.

The doorbell rings, and I go to answer it. "Oh, hi Faron."

"That wasn't very nice." He tells me.

I grin. "What, were you spying on me?"

"Aila, I live across the street. It's not spying if I just happen to look out my window."

"What are you so worried about? I'm just doing what my dad told me to do."

"You know as well as I do that your dad just wants you to hack Arcon, he never said you had to embarrass people."

"Oh, whatever. They don't have to listen to Arcon. It's still their choice if they want to make fools of themselves."

Faron rolls his eyes and pushes past me into my house. "Okay, guess we're hanging out." I mutter.

Faron walks into my living room and plops down on the couch. "Does it seem weird to you that Lura Tech is basically giving away Arcon?" He asks.

"What do you mean?" I sit next to him.

"This morning I saw an ad for Arcon that listed a bunch of ways for people to get Arcon without paying for it. One way was to let Lura Tech monitor you while you use Arcon for the first month so that they can gather data to help them make Arcon better. Another way was to share an Arcon ad online 25 times. If you did that and tagged Lura Tech in your posts, you get a

free Arcon. It's weird. They're basically saying that if you can't afford it, we'll come up with a way to just give you one."

I scrunch my eyebrows. "I wonder why my dad didn't mention that." I raise my eyebrows. "Maybe he didn't know. How did I not see that?"

"Does that really matter?" Faron says.

"No, you're right, it doesn't. Maybe this is what my dad's been looking out for. It's not really bad that they're basically giving away Arcon, but it is weird."

My phone starts ringing, interrupting our conversation. I see that my dad is calling, and I answer it. I put my phone on speaker so that Faron can hear the conversation.

"Hey dad." I say.

"Hello Aila. I won't be home for a few days. Work is very busy right now, and Mr. Lura and I are working on some very important things." My dad says.

"What? Why can't you come home?"

"This is very important work. We need to finish it."

I glance at Faron, and he shrugs his shoulders. "Dad, is everything okay?"

"Yes, Aila, everything is fine.

I know that's not true, so I say something to test my dad. "Hey dad, when am I going to get Arcon?"

"You should go to the store and get one now." My dad says.

"Okay, thanks dad." I say, my suspicions confirmed. "Good luck with work."

"Bye Aila." My dad hangs up.

I turn to Faron. "We need to go to Lura Tech right now."

Faron nods his head and says. “I was thinking the same thing. Your dad would never tell you to get Arcon.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

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An hour later we arrive at Lura Tech. We look up at the skyscraper in front of us, glistening in the sun, and Lura Tech almost seems inviting.

We walk through the sliding doors into a massive lobby. At a desk straight ahead is a receptionist, and he waves us over to him.

“Hello, welcome to Lura Tech. How may I help you today?”

“Hi, I’m Aila Noreki. My dad, Callan Noreki works here. He told me I should come by today and visit him. I’m just so interested in Arcon, and he was going to show me how it works.” I give the receptionist my biggest smile.

The man looks me in the eyes and says, “There is no one named Callan Noreki that works here. Have a nice day.”

I stare right back at him. “Of course, my mistake.” I glance at the man’s nametag. “Have a good day Mr. Bramble.”

I grab Faron’s arm and pull him toward the door. We find a bench outside, and I pull my laptop out of my bag. I connect to Lura Tech’s free wifi, and as soon as I do I get a notification that there are 437 possible consciences to connect to nearby.

“It must be a requirement that you have Arcon to work here.” Faron mutters.

I look through the list of names on my screen until I come upon an Albin Bramble. I click on his name, and in a matter of seconds I’ve hacked his Arcon.

I implant a decision in his brain. He can either stay at his desk or go to the bathroom for a very long time. I tell him to go to the bathroom, and Faron and I watch through a window as Mr. Bramble leaves the reception desk. We step back through the sliding doors and into the lobby. Luckily, there isn't anyone else in the room.

"Do you know where your dad's office is?" Faron asks as we step into the elevator.

"No, but it shouldn't be too hard to find." I press the elevator button to take us to the fifth floor. "We need to start somewhere I guess."

The elevator starts taking us up and stops at the fifth floor. It opens as we step out to a group of people walking towards us. When they notice us, a woman scrunches her eyebrows and says, "Hey, what are you doing here? How did you get in here?" She and her group start running toward us, and Faron yanks me back into the elevator. I slam into a panel on the wall, and Faron rapidly presses the close door button. The doors close just in time.

"Okay, that was close. We'll need to be stealthier. People are probably going to be looking for us now." I say, rubbing my back.

"Hey, what's that?" Faron points behind me.

I turn around to see that the panel I slammed into has fallen off the wall. Behind it are more elevator buttons.

"I bet those lead somewhere that Lura Tech doesn't want us to know about." Faron says.

"I bet you're right." I say, pressing one of the buttons. The elevator takes us down far below floor one. I grab Faron's hand and squeeze it. He gives me a small smile, and the elevator doors open. We step into a cavernous room lined on each side by jail cells. Inside each cell is a human being. The first thing I notice is the screaming and cackling coming from some of the cells.



“What is this place?” I ask, horrified.

“Why are these people in cages?” Faron walks closer to them.

I pull out my laptop and open the page that tells me how many Arcon are nearby. I see that every person in this room apart from Faron and me have Arcon, and the pieces start to come together.

I walk over to a table and see a file that says “Test Subjects” on it. I wave Faron over to me, and we open it up. The first page has a man’s picture in the upper left corner, and a bunch of information about him on the rest of the page. I skim over all of it until I get near the bottom.

“Faron, look at this.” I point out a paragraph that says:

*Mr. Lexome was taken from the streets in order to take part in these experiments. He struggled against us but stood no chance in escaping. So far, he has helped us to learn much about how to make Arcon stronger. He may not live much longer. There were recently complications when testing a new version of Arcon on him. Some of his brain functions have been impaired. He no longer remembers how to walk or talk. However, his contributions to this experiment will change the world.*

“Oh my gosh.” Faron covers his mouth. “Lura Tech tests Arcon on people.”

I flip to another person’s page and see similar things written at the bottom of the page. This woman was a criminal and Lura Tech brought her here from prison to test Arcon on her. I flip to a few more pages and see the same things for each person.

My stomach twists, and I feel bile rising into my throat. Mr. Lura is a monster. He took all these people and forced them to test Arcon. He’s destroyed their minds.

“Do you think my dad is down here?” I swallow the bile.

“Let’s look.” Faron grabs my hand and we start walking down the line of cages. I force myself to look in each of them, dreading what new horror I’ll see with each one. Some people are crying. Some are curled up. Some are rocking back and forth, muttering to themselves. Others aren’t moving at all.

“Aila?” I whip around and rush up to the cage I’m standing next to.

“Dad!” I say.

“I will have to alert Ms. Paxon that you are here.”

“Who? Dad what are you talking about?” I get close to the bars of the cage and notice a glint behind my dad’s ear. I jump back and pull my laptop out of my bag.

“What are you doing?” Faron asks.

“My dad has Arcon. I’m going to turn it off.”

I quickly hack into my dad’s Arcon with a few commands and a click here and there. I’ve never tried turning Arcon off before, but it shouldn’t be hard. According to my dad, there’s a way for the user to switch off the machine. All the user has to do is say “Arcon, deactivate” and that should do the trick. I type this phrase into the system and tell Arcon to tell my dad to say it. I press enter, and a few seconds later, my dad says the phrase. Then, all of the information about my dad’s decisions from the day disappears.

My dad looks dazed for a few moments before he comes to his senses and rips Arcon off of his head. He throws it at the floor, and it breaks in two.

“Dad! Are you okay?”

My dad looks up at me and his eyes widen. “Aila, what are you doing here?”

“We came to save you. We knew something was wrong when you called and said you weren’t coming home.”

“You need to get out of here. Arcon is much more dangerous than I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“Aila, Faron, Arcon doesn’t just suggest the right choice for someone to make, it forces you to make that choice. Arcon takes away a person’s free will.”

“Oh my gosh. So, when you made that call...”

“I had no choice but to say that. Arcon forced me to.” My dad says.

“Okay, we need to get out of here. How do I open this?” I point to my dad’s cage.

“You can hack into it. Shouldn’t be hard.”

I do as my dad says and quickly hack into the prison system. I choose his cell number and press enter to open it. The bars slide to the side, and my dad steps out.

“I had no idea this was all down here. Lura found out about the bug I put in the system and forced me to get Arcon. Then he locked me up as an experiment.” My dad says. Then his face drops. “I really didn’t think Lura would go this far. We’ve been working on this project together for years. I thought he wanted the same thing I did.”

We walk back toward the elevator, but when we get close, it opens to reveal several guards. Before we can turn and run, three guards jump out and grab my dad, Faron, and me. Once we’re unable to get away, a man and a woman step out from behind three more guards.

The woman says, “Guards, please take Aila’s laptop.” A guard walks to me and snatches my bag off my shoulder.

“Hey!” I grab at my bag, but the guard next to me holds me back. “Who are you?”

The woman smiles. “I’m Rona Paxon.” She gestures at the man. “This is Astuto Lura, the face of the company.”

“Yes, but who are you? Why are you here?” Faron asks.

“Oh, yes. I’m the one in charge around here. I control everything that happens at Lura Tech. I make all the rules. I approve everything. Nothing here happens without me knowing.”

“I though Mr. Lura was in charge.” Faron says.

“That’s what we want you to think. But Mr. Lura hasn’t had control in a long time. See, I’m the one who turned Arcon into a machine that forces people to make the right decision. Once I did that, I forced Lura to get one, and now he does whatever I say. Everyone here thinks he’s still in charge, but I’m the one pulling all the strings.” Miss Paxon says.

My dad’s eyes widen. “So, you took control and forced Lura to do bad things for you? You took away his and everyone else’s free will?”

“Taking away free will is such a harsh way to put it. All I did was make sure people would make the right decision. I’m making sure that no one can ever make a mistake again.”

“But why do you care so much?” I ask.

“Because people constantly make bad decisions that hurt others. And I’m tired of being hurt.” She says.

“But all you’re doing is hurting people. Look at all of these people you’ve forced to test Arcon.” Faron says.

“A minor setback for something that will make society better.” Miss Paxon crosses her arms.

“You’re a monster! Those are human beings.” My voice rises.

“Yes, but they are lesser. They’ve committed crimes. They sleep on the street. This is better for them.”

My stomach starts hurting, and I clench my jaw. I squeeze my hands into fists and without thinking, I lunge at Miss Paxon, catching my guard by surprise. He can’t grab me in time

to stop me from punching Miss Paxon in the gut and breaking her nose on my knee. Before I can pummel her anymore, the guards grab me and push me to my knees.

Miss Paxon glares at me with blood running into her mouth. “This is why we need Arcon. If you had one installed, you would have made the correct choice and not attacked me.”

“Where was your conscience when you started experimenting on these people? Any sane person knows that doing what you’ve done to these people is wrong. Your original conscience would tell you that.”

“Well in my world, the ends justify the means. If a decision can bring about peace and happiness in the long run, it’s the right choice. By experimenting on these people, I’ll create a better society.

“You’re insane.” My dad says. “Arcon was supposed to be a good product. It was supposed to help those people who had trouble making decisions. It was supposed to be something that people could use when they needed it. But you’ve turned it into something terrible.”

Miss Paxon ignores him. “Well, now that you know all this, I say you have a few choices. Allow us to install Arcon on you, leave here, and be unable to talk about what you found. Or,” Miss Paxon pauses, “you can become test subjects for Arcon.”

Faron stumbles back, and his face loses its color. My dad grinds his teeth, and I cry.

“So, either way we’ll have to get Arcon.” I mutter.

“Yes.” Miss Paxon crouches down and puts her hand on my shoulder. “Trust me Aila, it’s for the best. You think you’ll lose your freedom if you get Arcon, but it’s really quite the opposite. You’ll be freer than ever. You’ll never have to make a decision on your own again.”

I cry harder and turn to Faron and my dad. They're both trying to stay strong, but I can tell they're struggling. We all lock eyes, and I know we've made a decision.

"Okay, we'll get Arcon." I hang my head.

"Don't say it like it's such a bad thing. It's the best thing you could do."

The guards pick me up off the ground and lead the three of us into the elevator. We ride up to where we first got on, and they take us through a door that says "Installations" on it. I see a row of 4 operating tables separated by curtains. We are told to lay down on the tables. Three surgeons follow us into the room. I reach out to my dad and Faron and grab their hands. They tightly squeeze my hands.

"Aila, honey, we'll be okay. We'll find a way out of this."

"I know dad." I try to smile at him.

A moment later, the surgeon places Arcon behind my ear and turns it on. It starts to take control of my brain and says, "Hello Aila, I am Arcon. I will help you make all of your decisions."

Miss Paxon tells the three of us to get up and follow her, and my Arcon says, "Get up Aila. Follow Miss Paxon." My body starts to move on its own, even though I try to stop it. I can't control myself, and I see that neither can Faron or my dad. The three of us follow Miss Paxon out of the room and into the lobby.

Miss Paxon faces us and says, "Thank you so much for getting Arcon installed. I hope it's everything you hoped for." Then she walks away.

I try to say something back to her, but I can't move my mouth. Then my Arcon says, "Go home, Aila." I start walking out of Lura Tech, unable to control myself. One day I'll defeat this. One day I'll figure out how to break Arcon.