

# Futures

## The audit

Playing the long game. **By Matt Thompson**

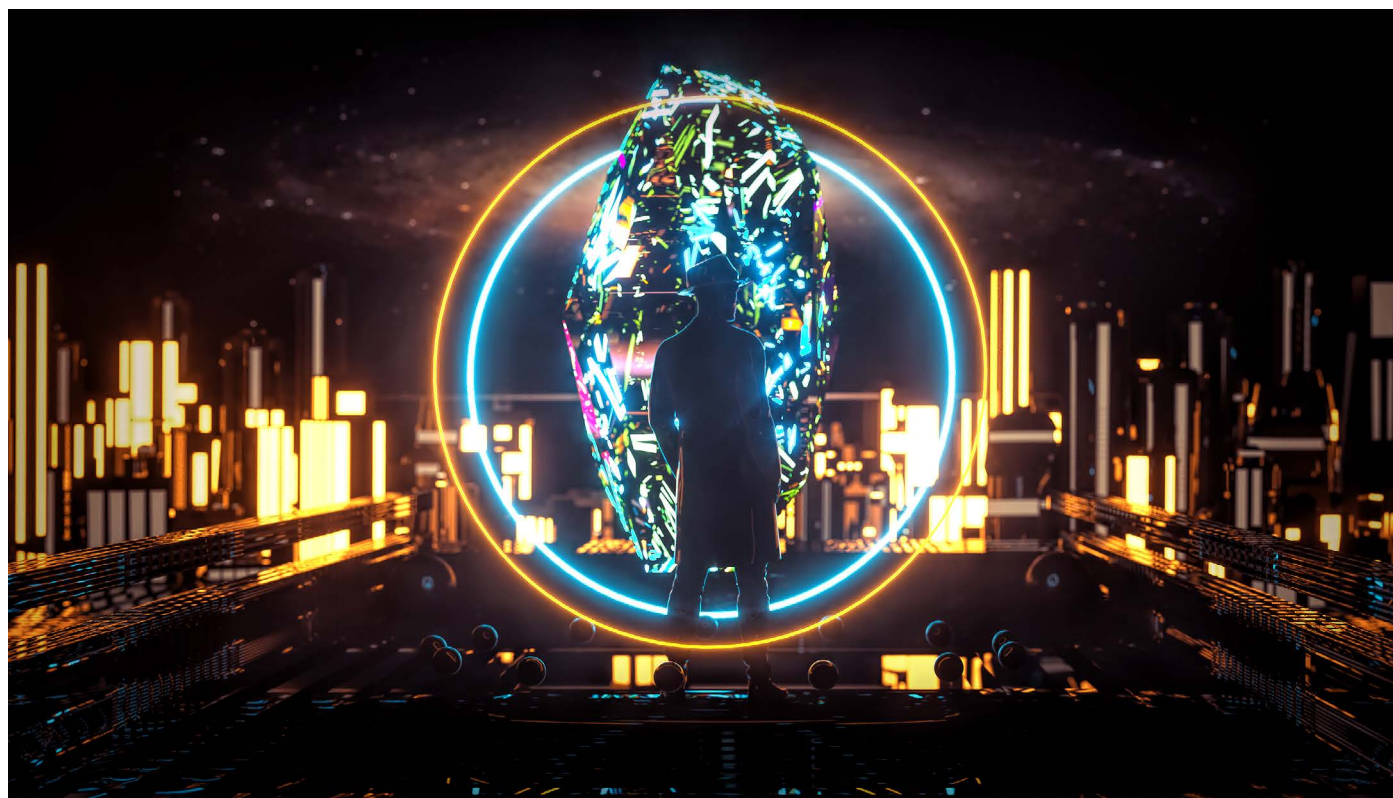


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**U**p above Argon City it's cold enough to freeze your bones. Prisa's alone on the balcony, huddled against the winds whipping through the skyscraper columns. From here she can take a helo out beyond the city to the launching grounds. Timing her escape so tightly wasn't her first choice. On New Earth, though, you take what you can get.

And taking is something she knows all about. She fingers the bracelet encircling her wrist. Data stream into her, molecular realignments coursing through her bloodstream. An alien presence lurks at her core, soft tendrils seeping and burrowing through her flesh. She resists the urge to tense against the sensation, as she was taught to do. Soon the bracelet will have fulfilled its function. Soon she can leave this city, this planet, and forget.

Below her, a compression tube ascends, 300 floors upwards into the canyon of crystal towers. A door hisses open. A figure shuffles out onto the helo-port balcony, hat pulled

down low. Prisa steels herself. There's a million lowlifes in Argon – smoothed-out faces and iris enhancements, prefab nostalgia and implanted memories of Old Earth, of a world they've never seen.

But it's a different visage that looks upon her, yellow-speckled eyes and ancient, blemished skin. The interloper eases his hat off, revealing a dimpled skull coated in strands of fine white hair. An indented band of opal-streaked alloy circles his head. He leans on the rail, gazing out at the quartz-spur faces of the surrounding towers.

In a voice like wind-scoured sand he says, "On Old Earth, time was a defined thing. Here in the colonies you find that people are less aware of its implacable passage. But not you, Prisa. A person in your situation counts the seconds out one by one."

Far beyond the city a needle of light ascends to the heavens. The bracelet feels like an admission of guilt, a handcuff. Prisa's mouth tastes of copper and blood. The input stream bubbles

to a conclusion. She's sure the old man knows it as well as she does.

He flashes his ID, a grid display that hangs in the air for a frozen moment. There's no name, only a title: *Auditor*. "Strange, isn't it?" he says. "All this technology and still we find ourselves vulnerable to the scheming of a thief. Or should I say thieves? There must be more than just you with an interest in the secrets this planet harbours."

A small, snub-nosed weapon appears in his hand. He unclips the bracelet and examines it with curiosity. "Espionage will always twist itself into new forms. I have to admire whoever it was that designed your interface. Encoding data into blood corpuscles ... You know your employers weren't going to let you live?"

Prisa knows there's no point in subterfuge now. "It's 11 years back to Old Earth," she says. "I think they'd want to protect their investment. There are some who play the long game. But maybe you don't understand that."

"I am living proof of the long game," comes

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the reply. “As my colleagues at the Audit Commission are about to discover.” Numb, Prisa glances over the balustrade. The Auditor raises an eyebrow. “You’d rather jump than fail?” He lets out an arid chuckle. “Colonists are apt to see any interventions by their forebears as a provocation. Even the free exchange of information. But the knowledge your bloodstream now contains could, from a certain point of view, be said to belong to all. Not that my associates agree, unfortunately.”

“Are you blackmailing me?”

“In a sense.” He tosses the bracelet over the balcony. In the same flowing movement he fires. The metal vaporizes. Stunned, Prisa watches burning ash dissipate on the wind. The Auditor pockets his gun and says: “It’s not just Old Earth who wish to find out about this planet’s most singular properties. It pains me to act as an infiltrator. So deceitful, yet sometimes so necessary. And now, of course, the playing field really will be level.”

Prisa’s despair flickers to hope. “I was born

here,” she says. “But why should we hoard the Prisms? There are enough of them for everyone.”

“Oh, I fully agree.” The Auditor taps the band encircling his head. “I was there when they were discovered. Deep within the crystal fields along the equatorial band, glimmering like new-born stars, just waiting to be plucked from their seams. We still don’t fully understand their properties, despite what you may hear. Or who left them there. As for the dangers ... Some believe they can fold space and time, if you adjust them correctly. Isn’t that wonderful?” His old eyes shine for an instant. “The data you hold should give anyone the knowledge to synthesize them. It was my job to make sure that information remained on this planet. To New Earth I’m a traitor. But my allegiance isn’t constrained by borders.”

She has to know. “What will happen to you once I’m gone?”

The Auditor jams the hat back onto his head. “Neither know nor care. The audit is complete.

You still have time to get to the shipyards. And your voyage to Old Earth should give us colonists ample opportunity to prepare for whatever comes next.” His gaze is a mask once more. “Some that believe themselves custodians are really thieves. And some that believe themselves thieves are liberators. Even if they don’t know it.”

He leads her to the compression tubes. Up on the roof the city lights wink on and off, on and off. From the safety of the rising helo, Prisa watches his figure blur into nothingness, one more tiny dot of radiance in an endless seam of gold.

**Matt Thompson** is a London-based experimental musician and writer of strange fictions. He has been published at *Interzone*, *PseudoPod*, *Nature* and many more, worthy venues. Find him online at <http://matt-thompson.com>.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**Matt Thompson reveals the inspiration behind *The audit*.**

This story began as a mood — a person who may be either a criminal or a hero, depending on your point of view, is trapped in a frozen moment of waiting. After writing the introduction I put the whole thing to one side until I could figure out why she was there. As it turned out, the object she’s smuggling out of the city is knowledge. And knowledge is a commodity with properties akin to those of jelly, say, or cats — you can try to get it back into the container it’s emerged from as much as you like, but you’ll never manage it. More pertinently than with jelly, however, you can develop enough wisdom to understand how best to use it (cats are a different thing altogether).

Of course, wisdom isn’t issued like favours. You have to work at it, then work at it some more. Balancing the books, at least in the world of this story, is not so much a question of levelling two columns on a metaphorical ledger as it is granting equal access to opportunity. Whether that favour is spurned or received with insight is a matter between the beneficiary and their conscience. But, in the end, knowledge will out, and personal ethics will always reveal themselves in turn. Preparing yourself in advance for the inevitable seems like the wisest move possible.

