

CRAIG HALLAM

A woman with dark hair, wearing a black leather jacket, stands with her arms crossed in a neon-lit city street at night. The scene is viewed from an elevated position, possibly a balcony or walkway. In the background, there are buildings with various neon signs, including one that says "BAR" in blue and another that says "The Mini" in orange. A vertical sign with Chinese characters is also visible. The overall atmosphere is dark and cinematic.

OSHIBANA
COMPLEX

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Craig Hallam



Published by Inspired Quill: September 2020

First Edition

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-908600-97-4

eBook ISBN: 978-1-908600-98-1

PDF Edition

Inspired Quill Publishing, UK

Business Reg. No. 7592847

www.inspired-quill.com

Praise for Craig Hallam

[Old Haunts is full of] Adventure, comedy, fiendish machines, dire plots and desperate heroism, with a charming side-order of subverting the action tropes. An excellent read.

– Nimue Brown,
author of *Hopeless, Maine*

[In Greaveburn], Hallam has crafted an engaging narrative with likable characters and a climax which makes a statement about human nature. However, one could argue the city itself is the real star of the story. Hallam's expert use of imagery helps us to imagine Greaveburn as a Gothic metropolis full of splendour.

– S. Kinkade,
author of *God School*

*Greaveburn is such a rich literary tapestry it would be a shame not to dip our toes into it at least once more. Fans of George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* and Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* are certain to enjoy getting to know Greaveburn and its residents.*

– Angharad Welsh,
Cotswold Style Magazine

[In Not Before Bed], rest assured, there's something for everyone and each short story is unique as the last. Sheer brilliance this, one of the funniest horror collections I've ever read.

– Nathan Robinson,
author of *Ketchup on Everything*

Hallam puts so much into his writing and certainly produces entertaining and believable characters as well as thrilling plot lines. If you like adventure, fantasy or the Steampunk genre then Alan Shaw is a truly brilliant read.

– Occasionally Adulting

*To those who fight for the future, find kinship in dissimilar faces,
and love without boundaries.*

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*A lone barnacle clings to a rock; its shell is both its home and
its world.*

Waves crash upon it.

*Even in the throes of its death, it will cling, and long after it has
gone the shell remains to show others that it was there.*

*Perhaps it knows that it is finite and strives for something
permanent after its inevitable demise; a monument to its existence.*

*Perhaps it believes its impulses to be something more complex,
perhaps it thinks of nothing; only instinct drives it.*

*Such is humanity; existing solely beneath a tinted shell which
stands against the solar winds that have stripped this planet clean.*

PART I

Designation

1

THE TUBE'S MILKY white interior blocked out all distractions. No sight, no sound, and Xev's Access, tuned to the Burger Stop company channel, gave nothing but orders and updates in Miyahara's nerve-racking bark. The inner of Xev's uniform had gone from nipple-shattering cold to an unpleasant slickness as eir sweat coated the inside of the polymer material. A hot throb pulsed in eir lower spine, and eir feet cramped at odd intervals, but the tube left no room for slouching, and Miyahara would be watching through Xev's Access, eager to hand out a reprimand. It wasn't worth that kisama's attention. So, bobbing on eir toes to warm up eir pinching calves, Xev waited to be summoned from a narrow, featureless world.

A stilted, artificial voice rang out as a customer stumbled through the Burger Stop door.

"Welcome— to Burger Stop."

Several automations kicked in at once. Xev's Access connected with that of the unseen arrival and the customer's presets popped into Xev's vision. E could see that the customer preferred paler skin, lighter hair, and larger eyes than Xev's own.

The Access took care of it, projecting a sham around Xev's real life template which appealed to the customer's aesthetic preferences. The tube faded to transparent to reveal a Xev that the customer wanted to see, spine straight, hands clasped so that eir fingers formed a yin yang on the belly of eir plasti-cloth uniform which now emitted a soft glow. Where an invisible seam ran down the front of eir tube, the thick polyglass slid apart and Xev stepped from the platform. Bowing as e spoke through a company policy smile, even eir voice was re-modulated into something softer, almost apologetic:

“Thank you for choosing Burger Stop. How may I help you today?”

With a brushed steel briefcase white-knuckled to eir side, plastic tie tugged down from an open collar and coffee-stain rings around eir eyes, the customer looked like e might just collapse before e found a table. Wiping one hand down eir face, carelessly smudging eir makeup, the customer muttered something about a table for one. E looked uncomfortable in that expensive suit and Xev could make out the stain of yellowing sweat around eir collar.

Corp type, Xev thought, recognising the haunted look of an overworked synth who slogged for the Takano-Stanhope corporation.

“Follow me, please.”

It had taken weeks of practice to perfect the effortless glide with which Xev drifted across the pearlescent Burger Stop floor; weeks to master the simple and yet robotically perfect back and forth from door to tables. How the little uniform slippers hadn't worn ruts in the tiles by now, e had no idea.

Past chromium plated tables Xev led the customer, whose

eyes winced against the floor's dazzling shine. Synths of every kind cluttered the Burger Stop tables: studded bikers and Corp suits, career gamers with hollow cheeks and xp to burn and It-synths with layer upon layer of Access sham filters coating their base template with holographic adornments. At a circular table with red leather seating, Xev held out one hand, briefly, before refastening it to the other.

“Take a seat, if it pleases—”

A clatter erupted somewhere behind. A plastic tray and, by the sound, a host of pre-packed meals splattered across the Burger Stop floor. Silence crashed down. A soft pat of flesh hit the cold tiles as a young synth in Burger Stop uniform fell to eir knees, tears in eir voice.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Xev didn’t lose a beat.

“—you. And summon us when you are ready to order. Can I help you further?”

The customer tossed the case onto one chair and slumped into another without a word. Xev bowed and drifted away. Back on eir platform, e allowed emself a brief side-glance toward the back of the Burger Stop as the tube slid closed. Just enough time to see the offending synth, Toriq, ushered politely away by the belly-bloated Miyahara, whose greasy smile melted just a second too early as e guided the poor synth through a rear door. A knot of ice crept into Xev’s spine as the polyglass waxed milky once more, blocking em from view, the light from eir uniform winking out.

That poor worker was done for sure. Burger Stop had a no-drop policy and that meant the poor synth’s designation was now void. E had only been named a week or so. If it had been a few

days earlier, e would have been for the shredder. Now it just meant another synth on the street. Xev wasn't sure which was worse. E sighed. The worker had a cute template, at least. Nice and symmetrical. There'd be work if e wanted it bad enough. And it wouldn't be long until e did.

"Welcome- to Burger Stop," the auto-voice sang.

Xev's spine snapped straight, the company smile blinking onto eir face as quickly as the Access automations changed eir entire self, and the cylinder faded around em.

"Thank you for choosing Burger Stop. How may I help you today?"

End of designated work period
Begin rest period: 8 hours

Xev's Access, tapped straight into eir optical nerve, flashed the words across eir vision. With a happy little trill eir xp value, always at the edge of sight, rose by several hundred points.

5,650 XP

Untying eir chin-length hair from the sprout of ponytail at the base of eir neck, Xev ran fingers through the black strands, sighing at eir scalp's sweet release. The fibre-optics near eir roots flashed electric blue. The uniform hanger shunted back into the locker, door clicking shut, and the sounds of industrious cleaning erupted from inside. The next shift was in and working already, someone inhabiting Xev's tube, other synths shuttling back and forth with trays or waiting for the next customer while feigning robotic inertia for the sake of Company Image. Perish that a robot greets someone, or worse, that real synths act anything less than robotic.

Xev tugged on eir jeans and set them for a sad mood; tiny

crystal raindrops began to fall down the hexagonal cells, creating a pixelated splash when they met the stylised curlicues of ocean waves which danced just above eir knees. Sliding a fake leather bolero over a red vest, Xev licked eir thumb and bent to reapply a peeling sticker on the scuffed old army boots; a roughly drawn A overlapping the circle that surrounded it.

The door thudded as Xev shoulder-barged eir way out the rear of the Burger Stop, its crystal white interior giving way to the perpetual night of Shika-One City. Boots clanged on the metal steps as e propelled eir exhausted husk up to the alley where hulking bins churned their innards, compacting the Burger Stop's trash to a fine powder. In the alley mouth, silhouetted by the throbbing light from the street beyond, crouched Toriq.

Xev thought about walking past. Right on by. Eir boots would carry em right out of the alley and away into the crowd, all the way home where e could log in peace. But the sound of soft weeping rose from Toriq's shuddering shoulders and, as Xev tried eir hardest to sail by, the poor cooch looked right up at em.

Cute template, Xev thought again, as e regarded Toriq's curving jawline and large, dark eyes. Eir bleached hair swept back from a smooth forehead to flow down either shoulder of the clear plastic jacket that covered eir street clothes. At least e'd bought them since eir naming last week, otherwise e'd be out here naked. Xev could see that the usual soft glow of the Access node in Toriq's neck was completely dark.

"Xev, I messed up."

"That you did." Xev felt the sounds roll around eir mouth as e expressed something other than company script for the first time in twelve hours. It felt good.

"Where can I go?"

“Maybe the belly. You’ll get along there.”

Toriq’s eyes seemed to widen further and further until all Xev could see was emself floating in galaxy-sized pupils.

“Don’t look at me like that,” e said.

“Please.” Toriq reached out a hand to brush Xev’s leg. Animated water plipped, the waves disturbed by the contact. “I can’t do that. Not now. I’m so tired.”

Xev screwed up eir face.

“Strewh. I can’t take you in, Toriq. You know that. I’ll be undezzed right along with you,” e sighed. “Go to the belly. Try to get your Access hacked so at least you have some xp.”

The weeping synth nodded.

“Then buy yourself a room for tonight. You look like all hell. You need anyth—If it gets real bad, you have my contact,” and e turned away from the figure huddled in the shadows as the sobs choked off Toriq’s thank you.

Stood in the alley mouth, Xev fought the urge to look back. If e did, e knew, eir stern façade would melt away. No. E couldn’t. Tapping the red glowing dome behind eir ear, e felt eir Access drop the Burger Stop channel and connect to Shika-One’s full network like spider feet creeping across eir brain. The node turned blue. E blinked as the assault of throbbing neon that gave Hanabi district its name pulsed into life; a perpetual, holographic light show covering every surface of every high-rise cluster from floor to dome.

“*Hi Xev—*”

Xev jumped hard enough to tweak a muscle in eir already aching back. E growled right at the ad-cast: all wide-shouldered sequins and a glowing grin that didn’t even twitch when it spoke. A halo of in-game paraphernalia orbited its abdomen.

“—There’s no-one quite like Fortini DLC for getting better value for your xp.”

“Strewth. *Ignore.*” The ad-cast and its grin winked out of existence. Xev shuddered. Reaching into the pocket of eir bolero, e pulled out the only luxury eir xp could afford – a foil-wrapped pack of bubblegum. Muttering to emself, e popped one strip in eir mouth and began to chew. “Creepy sham. Don’t let me down, Marsh.”

Swiping eir fingers through the air with practiced motions, Xev surfed eir Access, initiating a bootleg playlist to drown out at least some of the ad-casts that swarmed around em. Every song had been illegally downloaded right into Xev’s head, off Access, the titles and artists long since forgotten and replaced by strings of numbers and symbols. Working eir tongue, e blew, a hot pink bubble growing and growing, only to pop, and e pulled it back into eir mouth. An old, old song bypassed Xev’s ears, the clipped notes and glass-shatter beats of electronic industria moving directly from eir memory to eir limbic system in a shiver of joy.

Xev stepped into the flow of synths, brushing shoulders with a hundred strangers before taking the same number of steps. As e made eir way through Hanabi, neon holo-signage flashed and rolled, morphed and flowed, their effects mixing into each other like a tonic trip. Glowing golden Pisces fish split apart to swoop over and between the crowd, their translucent blue bubbles bursting the words “Best Hanabi tofu-dogs”, only to return and reform above the door of a restaurant. Ad-casts in the latest fashions paced inside a boutique’s window, snapping between vogueish poses to some unheard beat. Samurai, one blue, one red, clashed sparking swords in a deadly dance that the crowd sauntered right through, their final crash ending with the blue

samurai stood over the red, “Garcia Security” flashing above its head. But to Xev, there was only the song, and blowing bubble after bubble after bubble as e walked.

Eir stomach rumbled for the hundredth time in the last few hours, bringing em back to emself.

Between shop front and shop front, where the mass of synths swarmed across the road, small sloped rooves huffed sweet-smelling fog, helping Xev to locate the nearest food shack. E approached the scratched metal counter and eir Access winked a menu into view. Everything worth eating was only a few less xp than e’d earned the entire day. Except, right at the bottom. Food cubes. Tasteless mousse formed into unsatisfying morsels. Technically edible, sustenance by loose association.

Xev let out a sigh.

Rapping the hut’s tin counter, Xev held up three and then two fingers to the stall holder wearing a scuffed old cloth hat and strings of beads piled around eir neck. A moment of pan-tossed sizzling and a carton filled with strips of steaming beef and crispy fries sat before Xev. Taking out eir bubblegum, e stared at the bright pink morsel for a second, sighing at the loss while so much flavour was left, and stuck it to the underside of the counter. E tucked in with enthusiasm, letting the grease and meat and never-been-potato fill eir stomach. Looking up at the cart’s sign, Xev’s Access brought up PAY in yellow letters. E waved two fingers over the area and the Access behind eir ear pulsed.

Payment accepted

Eir xp total reduced by several hundred points with a sad little sound. Still, it was worth it.

Wiping eir mouth, e tossed the cheap paper napkin to the ground. A spheroid drone rolled around eir boots, corralled the

rolling napkin, and disappeared into the trash space beneath the pavement. Xev watched with a smile. So happy in its little task. Back and forth, back and forth. The same motion that drove Xev half mad. Dipping back into eir bolero, e stared at the last few pieces of gum in the packet for a little longer than was sane.

“It’s been a long day. You deserve it.” And e popped in another piece. Two in one day. “Sheer frivolity.”

Pushing off from the food hut’s counter, Xev continued on eir way. The ad-casts and holos swam around em. Eir music could do nothing for the visual interruptions. E continued to mutter eir mantra, “Ignore ignore ignore,” between bubblegum pops as e headed toward eir home cluster and, hopefully, Marsh’s package.

THE FOOT OF the cluster was home to a pawn shop displaying a red bicycle in a dusty window, a rough old thrift store where Xev bought all e ever wore, and a radiant pink nirvana where Lolitas bought their pastel dream dresses and parasols. Hidden right next to these, a rusty metal grid covered the entrance to the cluster which stretched all the way up to where processed clouds scudded against the starless dome.

Xev Accessed the unlock window. With a clang, the cluster’s locks disengaged. Whether synths had died in that piss yellow corridor or just voided themselves, it was hard to tell, but a rotten person stench filled the air. Bile green moss clung between once-white tiles, creeping through the grout millimetre by millimetre in an attempt to make the whole corridor a slimy tube.

Eir Access brought up a list of olfactory upgrades which scrolled down the side of eir vision as e walked. Eir Access could

pipe music straight to eir ear, bring up menus and information to eir eyes that e could interact with ar-el just like e would in-game. All for free. But the olfactory upgrades cost a pretty amount of xp. More than e would ever afford. With resignation, Xev pushed on through the smell as fast as e could. The elevator was no better. Worse, if anything, as the brushed steel closet concentrated the smell. But holding eir breath just meant keeping the stench inside and so e breathed steadily, mostly through eir mouth, trying to focus on eir bubblegum's scent as the doors slid closed. A wheel of numbers appeared through eir Access. E span it, stabbing it to a halt on 76 and the elevator gave off a whistle of air as it shot into motion. A few fetid breaths later Xev stepped out into another corridor along which e would find eir pod.

At some point, someone had painted a rooster feather (eir Access search had revealed) across the pod's iris. It was faded now, with a glyphic tag in bright blue graffiti splashed across it, but the sight was a welcome one to Xev's weary bones. E selected OPEN and the iris widened, breaking the feather apart a little at first, and then in one clunking expansion, retracting into the pod's aperture. Inside, iris closed, a single strip of light along the pod's centre winked to life. On reflex, Xev waved the rattling atmo to life. Turning eir face up to the breeze, e breathed deep. The patchouli patch slapped over the outlet filled the room with an earthy tang; not sweet, or even pleasant, but it helped Xev to forget the city's oil and ozone scent.

Identical to every one of the hundreds on this floor, and those mirrored on the storeys above and below from street to dome, the pod was small enough that Xev could touch both walls of the tube-shaped space at once. The pod housed one bunk,

small enough to render any sharing impossible. Then there was the window. Taking up the entire wall opposite the iris, a circular pane of polyglass stared, lidless, into the void between clusters which hummed and pulsed with storeys-high ad-casts peering into the pods to get at the juicy consumers inside. At least, that was the idea. With centuries of grime crusted to the windows, curtains were unnecessary. Still, the ad-cast's voices came through just fine, calling Xev's name every waking and sleeping second, begging for eir xp.

“—armour that looks as strong as it is, Xev. Just head to our in-game store—”

“—don't let your xp go to waste on second-rate mods—”

“—no need to be alone, Xev. The right nanipet for you is just 15,000 xp away—”

“—omplete customisation for your template. Never fear meeting yourself again.”

As Xev shuddered, eir Access pinged.

Message: Marsh: You're welcome.

The first smile of the day spread across Xev's face. That sneaky cooch had come through after all. Kneeling to a low panel by the door, e popped the housing from a vent which, beyond another cover, led back out to the corridor. There, wrapped in ridiculously floral paper ruined by coils of tape, was the package. Vent closed, Xev flopped down onto the bunk, one leg tucked underneath em, and searched for some place where the tape was thinnest as e blew another pink bubble and popped it. Eventually, with a ratty fingernail, e picked an edge free and began to dissect the wrapping.

An old coffee tin, rusted at the rims but still bearing an image of cascading coffee beans turned this way and that in Xev's

eager hands. As e upended the can, something inside slid from end to end with a *shhh-ponk*. Eagerly tearing off the can's cap, Xev tipped its contents onto the bed. No brown grounds or beans, but a small plastic dome which lit blue when Xev tapped the top.

Eir Access pinged.

Upload available: Sender: Marsh
Begin?

With the upload initiated, a red ring appeared around Xev's vision. As e shrugged off the bolero and sent eir boots flying off to thud against the pod's iris, the ring turned to amber, to green.

Ping.

Upload complete

Xev crawled along the bunk and wiped at the window with eir sleeve to very little effect and peered out through the dirt. The blinking and swirling nebulas of Hanabi district's neon were still there, but the ad-casts were gone. No more sham grins and shiny skins. No more xp grabbing holo-sales. Flopping back onto the bunk, Xev let a grin expand into the silence of eir pod, and made a yummy noise at the back of eir throat.

It was time to log.

Making emself comfortable on the bunk, Xev swiped eir hand from right to left, the Access picking up the familiar movement, and one reality traded places with another.

XEV FLOATED. THERE was no ground, no sky – only an unending vista of pure white and the sensation of stretching out, beyond the limits of eir ar-el template's solid form. Savouring the feeling, Xev drew emself further into the game, every twitch of thought

diverted from eir ar-el muscles to steer em through the menu space's expanse. Concentrating on where e wanted to be, Xev lurched as gravity reasserted and e was suddenly upright and still. Opening eir eyes, the Access displayed eir in-game stats and levelling progress, a green hp haloing the entirety of eir vision. Only eir xp counter remained between worlds.

Horizons. The game had horizons. At least, this module did. Across a vista of grasslands which rose into warm hills, Xev could see all the way to fog-choked mountain slopes. E scanned around to where the pale sun made a twinkling line of the ocean in the distance. Ar-el, Xev could never see much further than the next cluster, but here, the feel of eir eyes focussing on something so distant felt like stretching after a long time confined.

After continuing to scan for a moment, eir focus came to rest on a spire of ice that scratched the sky, impossibly visible despite the vast distance; the in-game representation of the Takano-Stanhope corporation. The only piece of undeletable code in the base module on which all synths built their vast, virtual wonderlands; an anchor to remind gamers who made all worlds possible. Xev had played modules where it was a star that shone night and day, or a great tree whose lower branches could never be reached. In the Alkia module, it was a spire of ice at the edge of the world.

Xev took in eir form, enjoying the sensation of stepping outside eir own template for the first time that day. E was seven feet tall now, made of dark metal, eir face a high-crowned helm with glowing red eyes. E flexed the segmented gauntlets that were eir hands. When e stretched out eir arms, e felt the squeak and grind of eir joints. Still, e could feel the cool breeze that came in across the rustling grass to lick eir metallic skin. Magic. Drawing

a greatsword from eir back, e gave a few practice swings, the blade making deep *whoomph* sounds as it moved effortlessly despite the imposing weight.

A rustle in the grass beside Xev, and there stood Marsh as if e'd never been anywhere else. Eir thin leather armour fluttered for a second as if whipped by the wind, along with the platinum braid which ran down to behind eir knees. Slightly serrated ears twitched and Marsh turned with an impish smile.

“Greetings, Truckface.”

“Hello, Shrimpy,” Xev rumbled.

Marsh burst into laughter which sounded like birdsong and mountain streams when modulated through eir avi.

“Got your package. Legendary.”

“You wanted the best, and you paid some pretty xp for it. You could have upgraded your armour for the shiny mithril skin but you want to waste it on ar-el stuff, who am I to argue?”

“No more ad-casts. That’s better than shiny armour. Plus, shiny doesn’t mean good. I’ve seen some real shiny squishies go down way faster than my rusted old hide.”

“The Corp ad-casts will upgrade eventually. They’ll be back.”

“But for now, there’s peace. We busting this level tonight or what?”

“Wide open.”

Xev Accessed eir menus for a second, a large blue gem appearing in eir hand. As eir gauntlet hand crushed it, their forms shimmered and winked out, leaving only glistening sand to fall to the grass.