

Tommi Gunn:

Datastorm

by Mike Shoemaker

Issue 2

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Tommi stands before Roderick Tyler, hands on her hips, as his men keep their weapons trained carefully on her.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Roderick Tyler, owner and chief executive officer of Tyler Dynamics. I'm elated that you accepted my invitation. Having done so...

"...what say we get down to business?"

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Tommi stands poised before them, not reaching for her weapons, but tensed nonetheless.

"Um... 'get down to business'?" she asks. "Excuse me for being a bit confused. I thought I was ripping you off."

"Oh, you were, Miss Gunn. And you were doing a marvelous job, I might add. Had I not known you were coming, you would have undoubtedly succeeded."

Tommi straightens, hands on her hips.

"You knew I was coming? How?"

"Simple, my dear. I hired you."

Tommi's now got her hips cocked to one side.

"You hired me to steal your own data modules? Pardon me for saying so, but that doesn't sound very smart."

"Under most circumstances, yes. But when you're scouting talent, it makes *perfect* sense.

"Consider it...an *audition*."

Tommi has her arms crossed now.

"Wait...this was all just a big ruse? To see what I can do?"

"Precisely!"

"Oh, don't be offended, Miss Gunn. I'm aware of your reputation, but I still desired a preview of your abilities. What better way to do so than to see if you could bypass our security?"

Tyler has moved closer to her, to stand within reaching distance.

"So," says Tommi, with a half-smile, "did I pass the test?"

"With flying colors, obviously," he answers. "I'm still curious as to how you escaped detection by our security web. Care to share that with me?"

"Uh...."

Tommi glances up.

A security camera is trained on the scene, it's red light glowing.

Tommi smiles. Tyler's hands are clasped behind his back.

"Trade secret. Sorry."

"Very well. I understand your desire to conceal some aspects of your trade.

"Whatever the case, I have an urgent matter that requires someone of your particular talents. Time is critical, so I'll need your reply presently."

More discussion. Tyler is holding a prismatic, credit card-sized item in his hand.

"Fine. What's the job?"

"One of our top scientists was stolen from our midst very recently, presumably by a rival. Her work was critical to the completion of an important project here at Tyler.

"Needless to say, we want her back."

The object has activated, showing a holographic image of Anna Jeffries, wearing a sexy black pantsuit.

"This is Doctor Anna Jeffries, an expert in artificial intelligence programming, and a specialist in the realm of self-modifying algorithms.

"Her work was entering a particularly critical stage when she was stolen from her quarters. God only knows who did it, or where she is now."

"I see," says Tommi. "Can you tell me the nature of her employment?"

Tyler is smiling; there's a hint of evil behind it.

"Well if you must know, she was...retainered."

"`Retainered.` You mean she was a hostage."

Tyler answers, "That's a bit harsh, don't you think? We acquired her services through proper governmental channels. And we afforded her a very comfortable lifestyle."

Tommi is unamused.

"Is that your way of saying she was given a gilded cage?"

"I can see that we don't share a similar perspective on this issue, Miss Gunn. But I nonetheless hope we can still rely on your services for this. I promise that you will be compensated handsomely."

Tommi's smiling.

"Now *that's* what I was waiting to hear. What are the terms?"

"Simply that you locate and return Doctor Jeffries to us as soon as possible. By whatever means necessary."

"I see. Tell me, you have more resources at your disposal than most third-world nations I can think of. Why not just handle this internally?"

More discussion.

"Unfortunately, this matter has become something of an embarrassment to us at higher levels, and the more we involve our own employees--"

--the likelier your shareholders are to find out about it."

"Yes. That about sums it up."

More discussion.

"And what kind of payment can I expect?"

"Miss Gunn, should you succeed in this endeavour..."

Tyler's evil grin has graduated to a full-fledged wicked smile.

"...you will be free to name any price you wish."

Tyler hands Tommi the prismatic card.

"I'm definitely in. If she's anywhere in the known universe, you'll have her back."

"Outstanding. Here's the data you'll require on Miss Jeffries, including background on the company she worked for before we...obtained her. Should you require further information, it contains the access codes you'll require to contact me directly."

Tyler and Tommi walk back through the open door.

"Of course, you realize the need for utter secrecy on this issue. No one must know of her disappearance, or of your association with us."

"Business as usual. Don't worry..."

They stand before another active camera, which she looks up at.

She smiles, and says, "...I won't tell a soul."

Exterior transition shot of Jason's apartment megaplex.

Inside, Tommi watches, hands on her hips, as Jason is hurriedly stuffing clothing and gadgets into a duffle bag on his bed.

"Shitshitshit!" he says. "You did it *again!!!* When Tyler finds out I know about your job, they're gonna squash me like a *grape--*"

"Oh, calm down, Jason! They don't know about you, and there's a good chance they'll *never* know."

Jason turns, shaking his fist at her.

"Oh, *right*, and world peace is just around the corner. Any other myths you wanna throw at me?"

"This is the Kobayashi job all over again! You butter me up, I follow you where angels fear to tread, and wind up in the deepest shit imaginable! *Jesus!!!*"

He's turned back to his duffle. Tommi is pressed close behind him, leaning over him, her left arm around him, trapping his left arm against his side, her right hand pulling a t-shirt out of his hand before he can pack it. Her lips are right beside his ear, sensuously.

"I'm dead I'm dead I'm dead--"

"Jason, just *relax*, okay? You aren't in any danger now, and I'll protect you like I did before, if it comes to that."

He turns; she's holding him loosely, her finger on his lips.

"B-but--"

"No 'buts'. You're safe with me, and that's all there is to it."

"You believe me, don't you?"

Tommi has pushed him down onto his bed, and is crawling over him.

"Well, I can tell you're *far* too tense. You know what this means, don't you?"

"Um...no, I don't...."

Tommi is sitting on his chest, and reaching for the underside of her half-top.

"What it means, silly, is that as the one who got you into this state...

Tommi peels her half-top up and overhead. She is, dare I say it, magnificent.

"...it's my duty as your partner and guardian angel to calm you down. And to do that, I guess I'll just have to keep making love to you until I think you're relaxed enough.

"Is that a problem?"

She's lying over him, and closing in to kiss him.

"Well...

"...I guess not...."

Establishing evening shot of the corporate headquarters of Manami, Inc. The building is a sloping, pyramidal construction with a flat-topped roof for the take-off and landing of hovercars.

Switch to the office of Evan Carruthers, thirtysomething wunderkind of Manami's research and development arm. He's talking to a wall monitor from behind a long, black, angular desk. His black hair is drawn back into a ponytail. On the monitor is the face of an older gentleman.

"You people need to give me a *real* challenge," says Carruthers, holding out his hands. "Swiping those designs was child's play. Tyler won't have a clue what hit them."

"You're playing a dangerous game, Carruthers," answers the man on the monitor. "We *never* authorized that raid on their microprocessors section! You went over the line!"

Carruthers sips from a snifter of brandy. He's holding a small prismatic crystal between his thumb and forefinger, letting the light reflect through it.

"Do tell.

"Collins, old boy, is that jealousy I detect? After all, it took me *two days* to get what your best minds spent *eighteen months* trying to reverse engineer in a lab. Once this is safely in your hands, you'll be making me a company officer."

"Don't be so smug. We don't want a war with Tyler, and if they find out what you've done, there may be one. Your hubris may cost us *all* in the end!"

Carruthers hits a button on a desk console, and the monitor fades out.

"Oh, spare me your paranoia. My plan was airtight. Tyler won't know a thing until our processors are on the shelves. And then it'll be too late."

"You listen here--*"

"I'm tired of listening. Ba-bye!!!" *KLICK!!!*

Carruthers gestures toward someone; we see him from over her shoulder, her red hair falling softly to her mid-back.

"I'm sorry you had to witness that, my dear. The old guard has a hard time accepting the young lions in their midst."

"Oh, I don't mind," she says. "I mean, all this corporate stuff is just so, y'know, *exciting!*"

We now get a phenomenal shot of Tylyn as she steps toward him. She's wearing a black miniskirt (emphasis on the "mini"), white boots that rise above the knee, a low-cut white half-top, and a black jacket. She radiates sultry sex appeal. He's got his arms out toward her.

"I mean, gosh, all this power and stuff, it's just such a *turn-on!!!*"

"I'm well aware of how stimulating a glimpse of real power can be. It's not everyday that the inner workings of the corporate machine are exposed to ordinary people."

Tylyn has slid astride his lap, her crotch down against his, his chair tilted back, her hands to either side of his head, her arms outstretched. She's smiling, her hair cascading down beside her face. His hands are on her legs above her boots.

"Well...I've got some skills that most 'ordinary' people don't have."

"Oh, really? And I assume you'll be...demonstrating those skills to me presently."

She's closing in for a kiss. Her left hand is holding the back of his neck.

"Tiger, you can rest assured..."

SHRAAAK!!! He spasms as arcs of electrical power shoot from her palms and fingers into his body.

"Aaaaaagh!!!"

"...that I'll be showing you *all* my talents!"

Still seated thusly, Tylyn is takes the data crystal from off his desk, while reaching into her pocket for something.

"Evan, darling...you may be a young lion, but the difference between you and your superiors...."

She's showing him what she's pulled from her pocket; it's a silver ball, three inches in diameter, with a thin black line around the middle (where the halves connect). Tylyn is placing the data crystal into a jacket pocket.

"...is that you'll never be an *old* lion.

"This game has rules, lover. And you've broken those rules. So it's time to accept the consequences."

A shot of her pressing her thumb to the top of the orb; it offers a **SQUEEP!** as it arms. A countdown is now visible against its side, reading "00:60".

She drops the ball into his lap.

"Uuuuk...." he moans, drooling from the sides of his mouth.

"I'll just bring this data module back where it belongs, to my employers at Tyler. And here's a little token of our appreciation. It's called an *incinerator*.

"It's *guaranteed* to brighten your day."

Tylyn stands before the window, holding a small penlight laser. She's carving a sizable hole out for herself.

"For what it's worth, Evan, you had promise. It's just too bad that your ambition exceeded your common sense.

"Now if you'll excuse me..."

From outside, as she pushes the glass away. Her hovercar--a convertible--is rising in the foreground.

"...I'm a busy girl, so I've got to move along. But I'm sure you understand."

She winks and blows a kiss at Evan.

"Goodbye, lover. It's been real!"

She drops out of the window, toward her awaiting hovercar.

On the ball in Carruther's lap, which reads "00:05". He's still stunned and drooling. His left hand is reaching weakly toward the bomb.

"Uuuuhn...."

Close-up of the timer. It now reads "00:00".

Behind her, a white-hot ball of light erupts from the side of the building.

"OOOOH!!!"

A "cutaway" shot of the building, with a perfect hemisphere carved out of it.

"Now *that's* going out with a bang!"

Tommi is with Matt in his lab; she's leaning against a console as he plugs the card she's been given into a slot.

"This has gotten bigger, Tommi," he says. "I don't trust it, and neither should you."

"Give me *some* credit, okay? If there weren't more to this, then he wouldn't need me in the first place."

They're looking at an enlarged 3-D view of Anna Jeffries, which has popped up from a nearby surface.

"I believe she's important to them," she says. "I believe they need her back badly."

"What I *don't* believe are the circumstances behind her disappearance."

"Care to explain?"

They study the image more.

"Well, she was a 'retainered employee'--corporate doublespeak for a captive--and that right away set off warning bells. What's more, everything about this--from the entry route to the means of escape for the 'kidnapers'--smells like an inside job.

"The kicker is that they didn't get *any* video of it happening. Nada."

Matt's rubbing his chin.

"I see your point. When I was retainered with Arasaka, the tightest security web they had was on our section. Most resources can be replaced, but minds are by far the most valuable."

"Exactly. Every detection system they had was shut off from the *inside*. To do that, you'd have to know exactly where to go, and getting there would have been a miracle."

Matt crosses his arms.

"Well, if it was an inside job, I'm not surprised. Being someone's slave--even a pampered slave--is the worst kind of life you can have. She's better off wherever she is."

"Frankly, I'm not sure I want to help you with this."

"Oh, Matt--"

Flashback time; a shot of Tommi, standing posed with the rest of Shadow Squad.

"I'm sorry, Tommi, but you know how I feel. You have no way to appreciate what I went through. While I was brainstorming for Sakura Corporation under threat of chemical torture..."

"You were out doing their covert ops, with the rest of *Shadow Squad*."

Still flashing back; Tommi and Matt are in his old laboratory, laughing together.

"It wasn't until I'd upgraded the lot of you to the best cybernetics available that you were even aware of me. Although to your credit, once we *did* meet...

"...you eventually got me out of there."

She's holding him; he's avoiding eye contact.

"That's right, Matt. I *did* go back for you, even though I could have hung you out to dry. Trust me, I'm not some soulless mercenary looking for dirty money.

"I don't like the idea of putting Anna Jeffries back in a corporate prison any more than you do. And if worst comes to worst, I won't do that. But if something big is happening, then I'd rather be in position to take advantage of it. There's probably still a way to make a profit here without compromising my principles."

"I hope you're right, Tommi. Just make sure the profit is consummate with the risk."

Tommi kisses him, hard.

"As always, lover. And I promise to bail if things get too hairy."

"I believe you. Now how are you going to trace--*mmmf!!!*

She's striding away, her jacket slung over a shoulder.

"Just leave that to me. I've got my usual backup. And don't worry..."

A shot of Tommi, standing over Jason's shoulder as he whirls his VR gloves before his monitor.

"...we *will* find her."

"We can't find her!" Jason is obviously frustrated. "I can't check every point of registration in New Miami! That'd take *years!*"

"Oh, Jason, calm down. We won't *have* to check every point, just focus on the financial institutions I mentioned."

From behind them; on his screen is a bunch of printed text, illegible from this distance.

"I still say we're pissing up a rope--ah *ha!!!*"

"Got something?"

"Well...maybe. The account number you told me to look for checks out here, but that's not proof that she was involved *personally* with the transaction."

Tommi's got her arms around him, her breasts against the back of his head.

"Well, it's reason enough to take a closer look. How much can you find out?"

"Not a lot, unfortunately. This is all I can access from outside. I'd have to be on the premises to hack the company intranet."

She's in his lap, pulling off his VR gloves.

"Okay, so let's go on premises, then."

"'On premises'? You mean break into Global Financial Corporation's headquarters? Have you lost your *mind?!?*"

They talk.

"Of course I haven't! I'm sure it'll be easy enough--I've done this sort of thing *lots* of times!"

"Forget it! I'm probably already a dead man thanks to you--no need to speed things up!"

She's brought her lips close to his, pulling his chin toward her with a finger.

"I--I mean, I *want* to help you, b-but...."

"Jason," she says, "The more you help me, the more nookie you get."

"Let's go," he answers.

Jason clings to Tommi for dear life as they speed through the night sky on her gravbike.

"This is not happening...this is *not* happening...." he moans.

"Oh, relax. We're almost there."

She wheels the bike toward the roof of the skyscraper.

"Just how are we gonna get *in*?"

"I've got an idea. Hang on."

They hover in wait outside a pair of double doors that lead to the top-story parking garage.

"Okay, I'll have to time this just right...."

"W-what the hell are you--"

The doors slide open, revealing an antigrav stretch limo emerging, and Tommi guns it.

"**NOW!!!**"

"Yeaaaaaahhhhh!!!"

Tommi narrowly dodges the limo and enters the mostly-empty parking garage. She has a pistol drawn, which she uses to blast a nearby camera (**BRAK!!!**).

"**Bullseye!!!**"

Tommi has set down near a computer terminal; she helps Jason dismount, albeit shakily.

"You gonna make it?"

"Y-yeah, I think so...."

"Good. Get to that terminal and see about closing off the security web."

Jason taps away at the keys, while Tommi watches out for unwanted guards.

"Okay, I've put the security system between here and where we're going into a loop. I figure we've got maybe twenty minutes before they're onto us."

"Plenty of time. C'mon, let's do it."

A hatch slides away at the ceiling of a round command center; consoles of various kinds line the walls. A special-looking computer sits against one side, projected out slightly from the rest.

"So far, so good," she says.

"Y-yeah," he says. "We want that station over there. Just keep your guns ready, okay?"

"Naturally!"

They're standing beside the terminal; Jason is flipping up the lid on a personal datalink strapped to his forearm, and holds a cable affixed to the side closest to his wrist.

"I'll tie into this thing with my datalink," he says. "I should be able to hack their database and--"

Small doors pop open from under the various consoles, and arachnoid spiderbots come skittering out. Electric shocks emanate between their mandibles. There are about twenty in all.

"Oh, shit!!!" offers Jason.

"I thought you shut down the web!" she shouts.

"I *did*!!! But some companies have autonomous security bots in case that happens!"

Tommi greases two spiders with separate shots.

"Eat this!"

"Oh, shit! We're *dead*!!!"

She pitches her guns back to him as she dives toward the advancing spiderbots.

"Take these! I'm going hand-to-hand!!!"

"Say what?!?"

Tommi starts tearing into a couple (**KRRRRUNCH!!!**).

"Come on, you robot bastards--"

"**SKREEEE!!!**" offers a victim.

Jason fires at a spiderbot (**BUH-WHAM!!!**), and hits it (**KRAAAAANG!!**); the recoil sends him flying back.

"**WHOAAAAAH!!!**"

He looks up and over at the terminal he's landed beside.

"Ohhh...my achin'--"

"--oh, yeah! The *terminal!*"

Tommi rends a spiderbot (**SKRRRRUNCH!!!**) a la the shot of Heather wrestling with the tarantula on the cover of *Femme Fatales*.

Jason's interface cable is plugged into an input slot on the console. He hacks away madly at the keys of his datalink.

"C'mon...c'mon...."

Tommi smashes more spiderbots (**KRISH!!! KRUNCH!!!**). One is on her back, menacing her (**ZZZZT!!!**).

Jason is euphoric.

"GOT IT!!!"

The spiderbots on Tommi cease moving. Around them are the remains of eighteen spiderbots; only two remain whole. Tommi is shrugging one off her back.

"Thanks, Jason. I mean, those last two almost had me--"

"Hey, don't be a smartass. That's two you didn't have to mangle, okay?"

"Let's finish this and get outta here."

They're riding away.

"You're sure about this?" she asks.

"Positive. The records show a withdrawal from that private account you mentioned. What's more, it was made *here in New Miami*. It was too recent for her to be far away."

Tommi looks back at him.

"Do we have a solid fix on the point of the withdrawal?"

"Yeah, and that led me to a couple of other points in the area where other transactions were made by the same person. That should narrow the search area quite a bit."

Tommi leans back, and kisses his cheek. He's smiling despite himself.

"You bet it does. Thanks, Jason, you're a great partner."

"Well...okay, yeah, I am. Don't get too used to seeing me out like this, though."

They speed along. Unbeknownst to them, another grav bike is following.

"Come on, Jason, admit it--this was fun. And I need you to help me with some more legwork. Can I count on you?"

"Well...I guess. But let's be careful, okay? I mean..."

A good shot of Tylyn, riding along behind them, smirking.

"...I'm just afraid of getting in even deeper shit."

Next issue: Datastorm revealed!!!