

We knew about Hans Groening from the earliest days, when he took over a bombed-out mill on the periphery of a ground zero site. We knew that he'd gradually rebuilt his lab, and that he somehow managed to be largely self-sufficient in a hostile environment. Occasionally, towncam would catch footage of him bartering at a rural market before heading back out into the wilds, but it was infrequently enough for us to work out that he didn't need to trade to survive. How he managed that, we'll never know. Those badlands were off-grid to the force, and for good reason. They were full of kids whose fathers were also their grandfathers. Some said when drought set in, the elders resorted to cannibalism. In a nutshell, we had better things to do with our time.

We watched Hans for a while, but it was never easy, largely because of his position on the grid, but also because of the renegade bands who patrolled the area our side of the forest. You'll have heard the saying that one guy's freedom fighter is another guy's terrorist. Well, those ex-urbs are misfits and renegades. Most of the time they're just an irritation, but occasionally they sortie a border patrol to steal supplies and ammo, and that causes us problems.

We were aware that Hans's grandson remained in his care, and that at some point a girl joined them, although we assumed at first that she was the strayed child of an ex-urb fighter, and that Hans would find himself swallowed up into their ilk or would be forced by aggression to give up the mill. Assuming was the worst mistake we made.

In supposing that Hans would become integrated, and in misinterpreting the appearance of the girl, we made two fatal mistakes. When the Unit scaled back operations and made cuts, we'd already taken the decision to label Hans Groening low-risk and to switch off surveillance.

We had no way of knowing that within a few years he'd have turned the girl from an ordinary kid into something other than human. We had no idea what his intentions were, what method he used to brainwash her, or what he was about to

use her for. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, because by the time we found out, it was too late.

That very first time, Response didn't know to suit-up. More than two dozen had fallen in the street when Command worked it out. The mayday went out, the recall was made, and the next crew hit the street in full bio-weapon protection gear. I didn't work in the field at the time. I was still in decryption. But I'll never forget being stuck to the news channel as the second team streamed out of support vehicles in suits that made them look like huge grubs with big black eyes and tubes on their bellies. Bio kit looked pretty gross back then. Before the camera cut out, we got a view of the first team writhing and twitching in the street even before they'd reached the dead, foam filling their mouths, eyes glassy. A nerve poison, they said. Whoever dispersed the toxin had taken out an entire shopping mall complete with security, and civvies including mums and kids. Whoever had done it was caught on camera, a delicate little silhouette of a girl wearing no bio kit, stepping over the bodies and leaving in silence. She was immune to a chemical poison that we had no cure for. And that was only the beginning.

I've been with the task force three years now. It was my dream, growing up. Now every day I get to see Hans Groening's legacy. Every day I get to see the burned-out faces, twitching corpses and roll-call of the dead because even though Hans doesn't send her often, when she comes there is no warning. The list of victims is such that we're watching a population cull of the likes we've never seen before – all sent with his calling card. The flip side is, it didn't take long for the other terrorist groups and religious fanatics to quit and vanish. Guess they didn't have much to say anymore. They were as likely to wind up dead as the next guy.

Recently, we received intel that her name is Archer. It came from an unexpected source. We were contacted out of the blue by a guy called Gus who said he was once known as Avi, that he'd been reared by Hans Groening in the mill next to the accident site – the grandson. My first reaction was to order him

euthanised for wasting force time but the details he gave were so compelling that I brought him in under guard. He'd risked himself by crossing ex-urb to city, so he was either insane or he had a damn good reason.

Gus, Avi, whatever he wants to call himself, is young enough to be my son, but he looks way older. That was the first thing that surprised me. The second, was how good looking he is. Gus is tall and dark haired with big doe eyes and a voice that, if he'd been civilised, might've been to die for. But I work with all sorts and despite enjoying the eye-candy, I wouldn't be so stupid. There's them and there's us, and Gus and me aren't on the same side, no matter who he chooses to snitch on.

I had the guy in my incident room for long enough to know he was telling the truth. He'd left the mill on a hunting trip one day. He'd grown tired of being trapped, as he put it. He'd described his grandfather bitterly, and he clearly resented the girl the old man had taken in.

That's where it got interesting.

It seems that Hans Groening's lab was more high-tech than we'd imagined, and that he'd begun to enhance his ward – and Gus – before the kid had left. I ran Gus through a scan and discovered that he was telling the truth about kevlarised tendons, all-round vision, and unique blood chemistry. To find out the rest, I would've had to look deeper inside him. So, I booked him in for a lab visit from which he mightn't have returned when the slippery critter vanished into the night and found his way, no doubt, back to the ex-urbs. Maybe he's smarter than he looks.

Tech that tampers with human biology is pretty special. For Hans Groening to be able to do this on his own is quite something else. Before Gus disappeared, on quizzing him about the equipment he saw at the mill, I was able to establish that the old man must've owned one very special piece of tech in order to create what he made out of the girl.

Our team said the only way that Hans could've done it was theft. Pure and simple, he'd taken some government-licensed kit to the mill with him when he'd left the city. He shouldn't have been able to. We subsequently discovered that Hans had left his former employ with a dated servile droid that scanned out at a low price for parts. Clever. Very clever. So, Hans Groening had marched off into the sunset with a full bag of tricks that nobody looked at twice, and then settled in a remote area below the radar. Then he'd turned the girl into a weapon and the rest, as they say, is history.

Gus told me all about Archer, the girl. Said she was clever, resourceful, and tough. Said she'd been sold by her parents as a little girl. It didn't take a genius to see there was bad blood between them – that much I picked up loud and clear. I also knew that I hadn't seen Gus for the last time. I'd let him run, for now, back to the badlands to live in his ex-urb band and take his child bride and eat his firstborn or whatever the fuck they did out there, but I'd get him back, and one day soon too, on my terms. Gus would become Avi again and then he'd help lead me to the girl so that I could do what I had to. I might even offer to let him pull the trigger, although of course I'd be lying.

What Gus doesn't know is that me and Hans Groening go back a long way. I'm the project he started on before he left for the mill. Only he didn't get to finish me. I prefer not to think of myself as an experiment, but as a work of art – a work still in progress. So, I guess that Archer and I are almost siblings, although she doesn't know it yet.

I'd love to see the look in her eyes when she finds out.