

With every last ounce of academic wickedness, Gonzalez mapped out her plans of storming the ugwan. She didn't get far beyond "see who survives the upcoming debriefing" before the TV came on and there was little Miss Peacey-Pie.

Velveteen Allegra, up there on the little screen, waved the front page of a newspaper around and pointed to the headline about a Principa-cidal iguana on the loose. "Are you just going to ignore the fact that one of the people I'm trying to help just kidnapped someone and then committed murder twice? This is not good for PR."

Gonzalez tried to concentrate, but it was too late. Her train of thought broke. "Bad PR is good for you," she explained. "Bad PR means the police will ambush you, then you'll have a reason to learn to run faster, or fight harder. Or such is the case for those who live anywhere besides in front of a camera. How do you even get any exercise?"

Velveteen groaned. "See that?" she got up and turned the camera to face a treadmill in the corner of the room before returning the camera to its regular position.

"I'm afraid fresh air is lost on you, then."

"I don't have time to show you all the open windows around here. You saw this lizard guy up close, didn't you? He's ruining everything. People are going to read this story and think that we're some kind of race of murder demons."

Gonzalez looked up in disgust.

"Flatter not your people. Murder demons could handle a piffling little thing like out-of-shape piln-palu faced vermin grabbers. The likes of you, young lady, can't even depart from... wherever that broadcast studio happens to be."

She-who-it-a-rest-could-not-give blew out a big ugly groan. "The point is, we're not all criminals, but what the iguana guy did will make everyone think we are."

"No, Allegra. The point is this."

Gonzalez hurled a pickaxe at the TV screen. It burst into a spectacular firecracker that would make a perfect circus act if she had time to sit down and eat peanuts, but she had some kids to go brainwash.

She opened the auditorium doors and there they all groaned and fidgeted, shackled, manicaled, chained, you name it. Most school auditoria had chairs. Damselwood Diversity had stocks, or those metal coffin thingies with nails poking into them so you couldn't move around. Some of the kids were in cages or on leashes, complete with the zap collar if they made too much noise.

As for the grownups, they sat smug and pretty in their protective sci-fi armor. Most of them had come in from a lesson they hadn't finished teaching, so they got to hide within their bee-keeper suits, or their mobile fridge fallout shelters. Appropriate, given the unpredictable content they would release from time to time. Gonzalez made her way to the stage, where sat some of the non-teaching staff; the lunch lady in a hazmat suit, the librarian in a collection of dust jackets, the nurse in a plague doctor mask, and, much to her disapproval, the IT commander in a VR headset.

"I'll have to do something about that."

She gave the microphone a few raps on the desk and jeopardized everyone's hearing. It made them stop talking, though, so she figured it did the trick.

"Glad I have your attention. Let's start with a riddle, shall we? What do you call this?" She then yanked the mic stand and opened a trap door just beneath the IT dope, and he howled all the way down to his stinky dark *paloosha*.

"An entity unfit to survive," she replied to herself. "Or maybe he'll live. Who knows? I don't. Nor do I care. What I care about is testing the survivable fitness of you. Now, as I can see, all of you are still alive. I have lately checked the local obituaries and seen none of your names in there. This raises the following question: has Diversity's curriculum softened like the pillowy white wool of a lamb? I dread it has.

"It has come to my attention that Damselwood's surface environment no longer poses any challenge to your survivability. What I believe your peers call 'the real deal' awaits you down in the ugwan. Just take in all this carnage."

She pointed a remote control at the screen behind her and exposed the whole room to visuals like a funeral parlor, a butcher shop, and a taxidermy joint. Homo sapians were included among that last place. Dead ones, all stiff and posed, and that made the teachers shed a sweat drop or two.

"That could be you this semester. Now, if you will all line up single file into the nearest male toilet, we shall begin our new curriculum in the underground water network."

For some reason, there was not immediately an orderly single-file line filled with begrudging little cretins. There was no line whatsoever. And when Gonzalez took a closer look, she realized that nobody could get up from where they were standing, except for teachers. The other reason she didn't find out until she shouted, "Are you listening? Single file line, you piffing vermin," but it was that nobody could hear her over the inner-ringing they'd been experiencing due to the microphone rapping earlier.

They probably weren't literate enough to read her lips, so everything she'd said so far probably went to waste. She could snap her fingers in morse code, but they probably couldn't read that either. The only thing left to do was to bring out the big guns. Only she just had the one gun, and it wasn't that big. But everyone in the world spoke that language.

The idea was to point it at one of the teachers and signal for him or her to unlatch the students. She ran into trouble when came time for her to decide which student to have Mr. Phlipyewauff free first. She could only decide this by turning around, aiming the gun behind her over her own shoulder, and firing. If whoever she hit survived, she or he would be the first in line.

From what she could tell, the first random target - a cotton haired phone addict held put in the stocks - was no more dead than usual, albeit a bit greener and rubberyer than the human race usually produced. "You," she called out to the teacher, "unleash this thing and put her at the front of the line," forgetting that

everyone was currently deaf. Then she remembered, and did the corresponding charades.

The stocks proved useless on this girl, as she'd apparently submitted a prosthetic head and pair of wrists for the stocking, and hit the real deal deep within her jacket. Remarkable.

The rest of the kids getting the bullet were just as verdant and epidermally unnatural, but no one's brains blew out, so they were sure to fare well down in the doo doo dump drains. She didn't have enough bullets to land a hit on every kid in the auditorium, but by the time she got through, the message was loud and clear as to what they were supposed to be doing.

Before taking his place in line, one kid asked, "Aren't we at least getting snorkels or something?"

"Are snorkels an inherited evolutionary advantage? They are not? Then no."

Fit survivors didn't prove themselves through the enability of modern conveniences, philosophized the principal. Those things were for fatsos, not fitsos. Still, now that the idea went from this runt's mouth to probably everyone else's head, she'd better make sure nobody was cheating. Ms. Takostewstay and Mr. Boquerm could watch it empty out. She had a mass flushing to supervise.