

# Chapter Nine

## Milk Crates

If it was possible, Kazoo felt he was thinking more keenly than he had previously that day (or was it yesterday by now?). With 'Robotski' in his pocket, he felt much more confidence. If Gel was correct, Kid America was either a living crackpot or a simple fantasy; in either of which, he was a figure around which people made jokes. According to Awdokai, however, the last Sound Barrier to the DJ's musical Uhd, was possibly held by one man who called himself Kid America, along with his infamous band of rebel misfits. Woofers seemed to be happier as well, barking and zig-zagging around the halls.

Unlike the surface, the Deep had some knowledge of a *real* Kid America. True, the School seemed to wish him a fantasy, and Gel seemed to think that the idea of Kid and his cohorts were just silly.

*But wouldn't such sorts of reputation be the kind that could hide his band best from the Electric Company?*

Electro City had been under the Blanket for so long that the students of the old School now found the DJ cool again; they were in awe of him just like the teenagers of the outside world. Like many normal kids throughout the planet, teenage Schoolies desired his addictive music, thinking it was brilliant. A thrill ride.

Kazoo had decided he wouldn't run. He wanted to meet this *Milkrates*, in fact, he had to admit that he was hopeful that the Sub-Principal would prove that the School was not lost to Electric Company control. In the back of his mind he further wanted to believe that the Sub-Principal was, in fact, the Kid America himself. Awdokai stood motionless next to him in the elevator as it blipped down in turbo. Adam Head was adjusting his uniform, obviously nervous to go before the old man.

**"We'll be taking a Sled to reach the Professor's council chamber."**

Kazoo's stomach twisted. A council chamber could mean much more than one person would be present to cross-examine him. What if he was walking right into a trap? What if Jim were right there, sitting at a table with Mr. Milkrates, sipping at cups of flavored *Glomo* or getting tipsy on *Similak*.

They stepped on a hard rubber mat, which raised several inches off the ground and sped off, carrying the standing trio. Kazoo sweat under his mask, picturing the Clubs Third Base and Stuffed Eddie playing cards as the Sub-Principal and Jim shared a laugh at the scene of the dimwitted Truant finally approaching his certain doom.

The tunnel soon grew wide and blindingly illuminated. Adam Head tried to explain as they stepped off of the Sled,

"Milkrates is a very *sensitive* man. I mean this literally, not as a description of his emotional state. His sight, hearing, and smell are all extremely evolved. His sense of touch has long been out of his control. He feeds intravenously because tastes overwhelm him. He is the most advanced telekinetic ever encountered. He floats, quite permanently, and never touches anything unless absolutely necessary. He will want you to touch his hand, once, softly, to determine your power level."

**“Friend Kazoo, these lights, and other such environmental abnormalities are all in favor of providing the Sub-Principal with the best possible conditions in order to defend this sanctuary. He alone can sense danger better than any computer or security system that could be manufactured. This man has not left this room in 75 Electro City Blanket-threads.”**

“He sent me to get you, when you were halfway down the Dark Hole.”

Kazoo’s eyes adjusted to the light, and when they did, he could see Gel waiting at a bench, chewing what looked like *gum*. She was actually blowing candied bubbles. Kazoo had never seen a gum that could still perform such googonic feats. Instead, he had always had to chew old gum that had already been chewed and discarded, years and years ago. Deposits of such disgusting gum, had always been valuable, and he’d spend days in abandoned schools, scraping it off the underbellies of vacant desks and seats. Old gum always brought in decent trade, especially with Juvenaut girls. This was a far cry from the *Supercandy* of Comic-book legend.

Gel said, “What took you so long? You okay, Kazoo?”

“Yes.”

If he wasn’t mistaken, they had become *friends*, in spite of their differences.

Adam spoke to Awdokai, “Auto, please wait here with Jane.”

Gel said, “Dad, I want to go in. I want to tell the SubPrincipal about what happened in the Locker Rooms.”

“I’ll call you in, Jane, if there’s time. Be *patient*. We’re trying to get Bill a place to stay.”

Gel fussed and leaned back. Auto sat down as well and recoiled all his limbs into his body. Kazoo did not expect this feature in the robot. Awdokai plugged into a wall outlet with a milktube and said, “**I shall repower until you call for me.**”

Then his head retracted into his neck, like a turtle. If he were light enough, Gel could easily carry him now. Adam Head said,

“Sebastian must wait here as well. Milkrates can not be hindered by a hyper animal.”

Woofers woofed. Kazoo knelt down to the puppy,

“It’s okay, Woofe, stay with Gel.”

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A mechanical circle-door opened in the white wall. Adam Head entered first, then urged Billy Kazoo to step inside. Immediately, the circle closed. They descended down a ramp and into a large and curving room, completely white but for those parts that were clear lucite. A wall of thousands of tiny little viewscreens seemed to show situations taking place throughout the School. To either side of the viewscreen wall, were a row of speakers that circled to a point near to each other, leaving only a small passage to be able to walk into their middle. Suddenly, with a sweet *ping*, the screens all clicked to black.

This was immediately followed by the descent of something from above. A man, much older than any elder Kazoo had ever seen, came floating down to meet them from out of the bright light that obscured the ceiling. His legs were crossed, as if he were sitting in a yoga-position, and when he came close, he remained hovering peacefully. His hair was full and stark white, and, along with his beard, was ridiculously long and unkempt. His skin

was extraordinarily pale, and although Kazoo had never seen such a person, the man was some sort of an Albino, but ultra white, like an egg-shell. He practically glowed. He was mostly nude, but for some tatters about his groin. He was barefoot. His eyes were mutably very large, as was his ears and nose.

A voice came from the speakers that lined the circled space in which they now stood in the middle. The room seemed to grow closer and seats rose from out of the floor so that they might sit. The speaker voice was mild and slightly computerized.

It said, "If I were to use my own voice I may destroy you, teenager. My voice, I assure you, at a whisper, is a thousand decibels too loud for the human body to maintain it's molecular form while under it's vibration. Adam Head here, of course, might turn to liquid and be fine, in a few weeks, mind you. But you, teenager, would *explode* on sight. Then what was left of you would squirm about and turn to jelly."

The man floated down close to Kazoo and put his hand out to him, the way a debutante might present her digits to a man, in order for it to be properly kissed. Kazoo looked to Head, who gestured that it was okay. Kazoo touched the man's hand with his right pointer finger, as gently as he could. The man floated up a little, and threw his head back in what seemed to be pain. It was very melodramatic, and Kazoo didn't really buy it.

Finally, the man spoke again, "Now do tell me Teenager, what brings you to our School? For I am the Sub-Principal, and I keep this place secure."

Kazoo stammered, "Mister H-Head brought me here."

"*Please, now.* Do not attempt to fib or fudge or fabricate with any of the answers you are about give to me, Teenager. I see more about you than you could possibly understand. Please, now, *do not be coy!*"

It was a command, not a suggestion. Kazoo could feel the man nudging around in his head.

Kazoo quickly asked, "Do you mean you read minds?"

The man sniggered and whispered through the speakers. Kazoo thought that he was trying to sound mysterious.

The old man said, "Not precisely. But I can *sense* you and your very composition. I know fidelity when I hear it. Be honest. Now. Again:

"Why--have--you--come!?"

Kazoo shifted his sneakers. There was no reason to hide it. It was the only thing in his brain at this point. It had become his mission in the fullest effect.

In a tone of pledge, then, Kazoo said,

"*I seek Kid America and the Action Figures.* Are you him, or one of them?"

The Sub-Principal was appalled.

He said, "*No*, for city's sake, I am *not!* I was once Eugene Oblongata, the DJ *Milk Crates* of the surface Earth lo these hundred threads ago. Those at this school call me Milkrates because they think it more scholarly. I remain Milk Crates, or Eugene of the Turntable Rumbles, nevertheless."

Kazoo was confused. He said, "Well, I need to find *them*. Can you help me do that?"

Adam Head glanced down at the boy.

Crates intoned, "Head, what is it? Speak up!"

"I, er, I was not aware the boy sought the, uh, the Toy Band."

The Sub-Principal nodded, then scowled at Adam Head's lack of insight.

Crates looked to Kazoo and sneered, "What is your *name*, Teenager?"

Kazoo thought for sure Crates must know this already, but he answered swiftly anyway. In fact, he found that he could barely resist if he tried. The authority the man exuded was like no one Kazoo had ever encountered.

*He's in my mind*, Kazoo thought, *he's pushing buttons beneath my scalp.*

"I am Kazoo."

The Sub-Principal smiled. He sensed Kazoo's true confidence and was playing with it, urging the boy empathically. Crates tried to bring forth the boy's impudence. He wanted to see Kazoo's worst.

Crates floated down a few more feet and stared.

Then, he asked, rather slyly, "Do you wear a mask because you are ugly?"

Kazoo shook his head, frustratedly. He said, "No. To hide my *identity*, sir."

Crates smiled, "Scoff! Scoff, teenager! Ultra-punk, hyper-kid! *Please*. Your identity is *known*, come now. You brats are all as one. The Company knows who you are more than you yourself can. Now. As you said, you are Kazoo. None may dispute that. You wear a mask, however, to hide your *face*."

Kazoo was silent. The Sub-principal continued, slightly more angry,

"You bring trouble with you. Do you know *that*?"

Kazoo hesitated. Then, "No."

"Oh *really*? You simply *lie* to me now, boy. You do not *mean* to lie, yet you do. It is obvious to me that you walk with a shadow stretching long behind you and your rubber mask. Your enemy grows vaster and more desirous of you by the very seconds. Can you deny that?"

The Sub-Principal was pushing Kazoo to utter honesty, allowing him to see and feel, the things that the old man had grown accustomed to experiencing, both empathically and through telepathy. The very old man narrowed his eyes.

*Such a strange youth*, he thought, *surely a hazard to those who hold power. Could this finally be the time of reckoning?*

A moment of silence gripped the room. Crates peered into the holes of Kazoo's mask, as if holding the boy, entranced. He then let open a window to the city's villainy, just a tiny crack wide, in Kazoo's brain.

Kazoo felt the flush of infringing thoughts. He saw, for a second, Stuffed Eddie and Third Base, nodding their costumed heads in the Transistor Cylinder. He saw the great table of executives, gathered together, perspiring under the gall of one all-important presence. For a moment, then, he *saw* the Muffinman, smiling with venomous glee. At this, Crates closed the window, and examined the boy's reaction.

Kazoo's body shuddered as he thought to the music the Clique had played for him in the locker room.

Finally he said, unapologetically, "No, I can't deny the Company is looking for me."

“They are hungry for you! *Predacious*. Do you have any idea why?”

Kazoo shrugged, “I am a Truant. I didn’t report for Academy training like I was supposed to. I dismantled my mono-antenna and smashed my fleshscreen. I used one of the shards to cut the wiring to my nervous system.”

Crates was again smiling. He said, “That must have been quite *painful*, boy.”

Head looked to Kazoo, feeling very sorry for the boy.

Crates then said, “No, this is not why they are prepared to chase you *deep*. They rarely chase anyone deep. They *allow* them to come here.”

He glided still closer to Kazoo, amazed at how fresh a Siphon the boy was. Being in proximity to him was not hurting the way it did with most of the pupils. Kazoo could not help but gulp again. *Surely Jim was going to storm through the circle any second*. Crates whispered,

“You are a very *powerful* Teenager. Your essence, even now, is bubbling. Few are ever allowed to reach this stage of development without being bathed in Company *Soap*. Brainwashed. Then catechized. Bionically reprogrammed. Turned into a Mech-idiot, Plastoid, or whatever they’re called... None of the new generations of the Blanket have yet been allowed to *pop*. Puberty, without careful indoctrination, is outlaw. Your body *drips* with Milk, quite naturally... or supernaturally, as you might rather think. Are you aware of any of this?”

Kazoo had never been so riveted. Perplexion, however, was mounting, as he stuttered,

“S-Sir?”

Crates acted fakely amused, “Yet you are afraid to use your power. This, as well, is true?”

Kazoo shrugged again, in desperation.

The audio speakers began to rumble a bit, and the air rippled. With the sound, Kazoo felt his feet leave the ground, as he was made to rise into the air, trembling. Crates suspended him with no seeming effort. He was dead serious and plain as he said,

“There is no need to fear, Kazoo. Ask what you will of me. Then you *must* go.”

“*Go?!*” cried the boy, crestfallen.

“That is your plan, is it not? Do not play with me child. Few of the doors in your mind are shut to me.”

At this, Adam Head stepped forward, “We cannot just let the boy *go!* You’re saying yourself! He’s *important*.”

“Important to what? The rebellion? *Please*, Head. The Rebellion was squelched long ago, and you know it. You may try to believe otherwise, but you know the School’s policy.”

Kazoo looked to Adam Head, pleadingly. He was not sure *what* the Sub-Principal meant. Head put bent his neck and stared at his feet. Kazoo thought to the old man’s words, *Few doors were shut...*

Crates continued, “Besides, the boy will not stay. He seeks a figment of all our psyches, the very *fringe* of an absurd and ungraspable *hope*. Things have gone too *far*,

Adam. The DJ has accomplished *voluminously* in these hundred threads. If we are not mistaken, time has passed at 1/5 this rate outside the Blanket's cover. We live under different rules. *Multiversal* rules, Head. If the Blanket were ever lifted from this domain, the interdimensional balance would surely crumple the entire Ultra-earth! We no longer live within the confines of our old universe. The DJ has pioneered a *multispace* that ultrakin and all humanics were not fit to inhabit. That is why we are now bred *superhuman*, genetically neoformed, mutably hypermental, and, ultimately, and without exception--

“*Crazy!* None can escape the villain's dominion, and none can ever fully understand their predicament! Children born into madness are brought up into lunatics. It's pure mathematics, my good man!”

Kazoo was astounded. *He'd surely felt crazy in his time. But...*

Adam glared at the old man. He said,

“But *Kid is* out there, somewhere. If not, he would have--”

The old man grew cold, “*Surely, the man you refer to as Kid America is long dead.*”

Adam refuted, “What of the Album? The Demo Cube.”

“What of it? It is old. A weak try at best. He might have been a powerful youth, but the Komicon you speak about slowly lost his marbles, one by one. I saw it happen, here in this very School. Then, when he had little sense left, he turned his back on me, on all of *us*. With that, he demolished our chances at superhuman *unification!* We needed a Siphon *army* to dethrone the DJ! And now our ranks have splintered. First he left and took his friends with him. Soon later Jason had gone his way as well. The underground, now breeds too many renegade clusters of cutthroats and vigilantes.”

Head almost screamed, “Kid America understood something important! He knew that the music was the only way to fight this *war*. He knew certain audio-forms needed to be developed. They were musical *technicians...* they *knew...* Kid was onto something... His work could not have progressed under the School's paltry *masquerade* of privacy--”

The speakers crackled with energy.

“Nonsense! Why did *you* not leave with him then? Why did you stay if the School was not the way? The *right* way. Our *only* chance to survive?”

Head was silent.

Crates continued, “Power! The Muffinman himself is a complex *conduit!* He, like the very *Milk* that gives us our powers, is not of this world. Not of this universe! He *collects* power from throughout the multiversal dimensions, manipulating our humanity without care! Compounding and fusing it with machines he can use even better to invent: “*A dream...*”

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Gel grabbed Sebastian Woofe and held her fist over his mouth. She pressed a button on Auto's exterior, and said, “Auto, put you mic on extra-senz. Now.”

Quickly she moved to the side of the bench and inched along its path, several yards away from Awdokai and the entrance to the Sub-Principal's lair. She squatted, deep into the corner and whispered to Woofe,

“I hear something strange. A static. It’s ominous. It’s not right that it should emanate at this level. Something I’ve only heard when I’m pirating my rabbit-ears to get a wavecast from DEF. Now be silent, Woofe.”

She removed her hand, and the puppy didn’t make a sound. She could see all the way down to the opposite end of the hall, to the way they had come to get to the Sub-Principal’s quarters.

She said, “There’s something going on in the robotics department.”

Then she saw Elroy Matheson, aka Plus Nice. She squinted to see what she could. More figures followed after him, each clad in a murky purple.

“Both of you wait here.”

With that, she was a puddle, and she seeped into the nooks in the floor tiles. She ran her liquid self close to the incoming troop. It wasn’t like *seeing* when she was in her liquid form. It was an *optical sense* of things. And there they were, she’d seen them on the Pogo.

Several large creatures came up the rear, all in puffy animal costumes. Although she’d never seen a real one, she recognized them from pogo-grams and drawings. Kids collected trading cards of these guys. The police.

*Club*, she thought.

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The old man seemed ready to break something, he was so overexcited,

“No one understands his powers...”

Kazoo reached into his pocket. He said,

“*I say, Kid America lives.*”

The old man looked into his eyes, and pushed out with his mind, nudging Kazoo to show him whatever it was that made the boy believe in this foolishness.

Crates asked,

“What *proof* have you?”

Kazoo slipped his hand out of his pants and produced the rather limp jointed Robotski.

Head looked at the robot, his eyes bursting with curiosity. Although he had never met this little robot, he had his suspicions as to what it might be.

Milkrates did not react.

Kazoo said, “*This* is what I ask of you. Bring this robot back to power. Supply me with a vehicle. And let me leave this stunted sancutary. You’re teaching these Ultrakin how to *hide!*”

Laughter from the speakers.

“Oh, you *are* bold. I can see why the DJ does not let any of your sort *pop*, as I’ve said. But the things you ask for are granted with ease. Place the *toy* on the pedestal before you. He proves nothing.”

A pedestal rose up from the floor, just as the seats had. The pedestal’s top parted itself, revealing a small electronics kit. It looked like a miniature operating table. The Sub-Principal went on,

“Head, please make the necessary connections.”

Head, using tools resembling a screwdriver and a tweezers began opening several outlet ports on the robot's tiny body. He proceeded to attach at least a dozen wires to these outlets. Crates glared down at Kazoo.

He said, "What I shall give you, teenager, is this: *a chance*. These are dark times, boy. If you think you can make a difference... then so be it. I shall allow you to go, unhindered. I shall keep the Transistor *Jim* from tracking you for as long as I possibly can. Jim, as it so happens, is already on his way. He is extremely *interested* in you. The wrath of the Electric Company shall fall on this School when they do not obtain you immediately. Yes, as you may have gathered, this school has been under the thumb of the DJ for nigh half it's existence. It is the only way to keep the poor souls that have gathered here safe. We allow his broadcasts through, and sometimes he takes the students he likes into his horde. The DJ does not want to have to go to war with us because the war would destroy much of what he's built upstairs, even though, he would *win*. He prefers, instead, to allow our adults to teach, as he sees it, *his* young. We develop superhumanic powers the DJ knows little of. The Muffinman, for the most part is a just a computer hack."

Head interjected,

"What we have involved ourselves in, is... suicide."

He looked to Kazoo and said,

"I am sorry Bill."

Crates ground his next words out, the speakers twitching,

"Regardless, I did what I felt I must. I saved lives. And eventually I will have to tell them when and why Kazoo was here and where he went. This I will do to save the many who are protected *here*. The *School*, Head, remember: *ever the School!*"

Robotski suddenly shot up like a resuscitated drown victim. His eyes glowed bright, as if he had drunk too much energy. Adam Head said,

"I do not think the robyte has ever been powered on *Milk* before."

Robotski looked about. When he found Kazoo in his optical view, he waved.

Kazoo crouched to meet him. Robotski spoke, for the first time in over a year, his circuits sending out more questions than the capacity for receiving the answers.

**"It is good... to operate again. I am Robotski, assistant to the 808 Jr. Drum Outfit. Is she *present*? Where am I? Have I reached the studios of Kid America? Who are *you*?"**

All kinds of musical phrases pumped out of his little chest speakers as he spoke. He was wired, speedily, as if he'd drunk too much coffee. He was a little creature, with humanlike movements. To Kazoo, he seemed to be alive.

"I'm Billy Kazoo. I'm gonna try to help you find Kid America soon."

**"Excellent, Billy Kazoo. How long have I been inoperative?"**

"I don't know."

**"Where is my Tape Recorder? My word! The T-bug! Do you have the *mixtape*? I am to get the mixtape to Kid America and the Action Figures. Our affiliate, the lady-girl Goose, has hatched a great plan, but I fear she has rashly begun without those who are integral to it's success. If I fail in my mission--or am too *late*..."**

Kazoo said, "Where is she now?"

**“Oh! I daresay... In Stereo.”**

With that, the SubPrincipal’s tolerance was all but spent.

The speakers boomed, “*Enough!* I need not distract myself further with these foolish *games!* You will go back to Adam’s quarters, get the necessary rest, and leave in the morning with your little robotic *utensil.* My head aches from listening to your mumblings! I will see to everything that I said I would. Let us hope you can keep up your end, eh, *child!* If you find the senseless upstart you seek, give him my regards. Good *Bye!*”

With that, he floated away. The seats flattened themselves into the floor, the room grew vast again, and the circle door once again presented itself. Kazoo made to carry Robotski, but a thruster suddenly exposed itself from his back, and emitted circular ripples of *sonic* propulsion, allowing him to fly. A favorable *put put put* sounded from the robot’s butt. The robot seemed to stretch his many joints. He said,

**“Where are we, may I ask?”**

Head said,

“The underground School of Siphonary Research and Upliftment.”

Robotski grew horrified.

**“NO!”**

Head left the circle first, saying, “Come on gentlemen. All will be well.”

Outside, Gel was back on her bench pretending to sleep. Sebastian Woofe leaped up Kazoo’s leg then into his arms, then out of them again. He stared at Robotski, seeming to greet the worried robot with a solitary bark. Robotski waved at him.

Gel looked at Kazoo, he nodded to her.

No one spoke on the way back to quarters, Robotski mulling over the warnings of Goose about the underground School.

Glomo: slang for Milk