Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

Kai-ro

Written by

Graham Marks

Published by

Usborne

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

KAÏ-RO

GRAHAM MARKS



Remember this…
…gods are like Tinkerbell,
if you don't believe in them,
if you don't *need* them, they fade away.
But, because they're gods, they don't die.
And if the need returns, so, too,
do the objects of belief.

Remember this, because it is true.



1 A BAD THING HAPPENS

Dusk fell, the light fading like a lamp running out of oil, and the temperature began to plummet. On the southern edge of the Vix territory, where it met the banks of the wide, tidal river, a boy, thin and wiry, small for his age, nervously waited for his father to return – hopefully with something to eat – to the outskirts of the shanty area where they lived.

The boy's job, ever since his mother had died five years ago, just before his sixth birthday, was to light a fire and keep it going so they could skin and cook whatever his dad might've caught. But today his dad was late. And the night was no time to be out hunting because, as Stretch Wilson's

father never tired of telling him, it was all too easy to end up as prey yourself.

What was keeping him Stretch didn't know, but in the near distance, over towards the dark, slime-covered tunnel that went under the river, he thought he heard something. He stood up from where he'd been crouched, tending the fire, and caught the sound again: raised voices and the soft thunder of hoofs. And he knew this could only mean one thing...a raiding party from the other side, from the place people called Kaï-ro.

Kaï-ro...

The name, more than the cold night air blowing in from the north, gave Stretch gooseflesh. It was an evil place, if you believed all the stories that were told about it, and because of all the stories he'd listened to, it was somewhere that he'd grown up fearing more than anything. "*Be good,*" every child was told, "*or you'll get taken to Kaï-ro...*" This threat was the seed of many a nightmare because no one ever went south by choice. And nobody who'd been taken over ever, ever came back.

Nobody.

Then, out of the gathering darkness Stretch saw a figure running towards the confusion of discarded rubbish, sun-bleached wood, mud bricks and weathered tarps that only a close inspection would reveal as homes, places people had built to live in. Behind the man, whose arms and legs were a blur, dust exploding round his feet as he ran, he could now see the riders; one of these men, he knew from experience, would soon be whirling a weighted net above his head. Was it his father they were chasing? He couldn't yet see clearly enough, but he didn't think so. Surely not.

It couldn't be, he was always so careful...always.

Stretch was torn between wanting to break cover and run to help the man who might be, could be, his dad and obeying what he'd had drummed into him since almost before he could walk. Which was that survival came first. Above all else. Everyone knew this, it was like a religious belief, and as Stretch glanced around the neighbouring lean-tos he realized that he couldn't see another person anywhere. They'd all got out of sight, so *they* didn't end up being caught themselves. His legs appeared to make the decision for him, backing him into the shadows.

Folded into a tiny, cramped space, he watched as the leading hunter trapped his quarry, bringing him down with the net as if he was nothing more than an animal. Stretch could feel the dread and fear of capture spread its cold, cold fingers through his gut and he wanted his father there with him, now, to protect him.

Where was he? Maybe he'd heard the riders coming out of the tunnel – they didn't seem to care who knew about their arrival as people rarely, if ever, fought back. Maybe he'd hidden so they wouldn't get him. That had to be it. He was waiting until they'd gone before he came back. Maybe...

Then, as the last of the blood-red daylight seeped into the darkness of the horizon, Stretch had a thought that made him bite his lip so hard it bled. What if it really was his father he was watching being hauled off the ground by his hair and shackled like a beast?

Watching, and doing nothing.

Stretch saw the hunter get back up onto his horse and ride away, the man he'd caught and roped stumbling into the night after him; just before the gloom swallowed them

up, Stretch saw the man glance backwards over his shoulder, and then he was gone. For a moment Stretch was quite positive the man was looking straight at him. Did he shout something? Stretch couldn't tell as it had all happened too quickly and too far away. But all he did know for sure was that he had just witnessed a disappearance and, as a single, hot tear ran down his cheek, he felt alone in a way he never had before...

2 SEEK, AND YE SHALL FIND

Stretch Wilson pulled off the thick leather gloves that used to belong to his father, sat back on his heels, resting for a moment as he took a sip of warm, slightly cloudy water from the battered plastic bottle he always carried with him. The bottle, which was vintage, a real antique, had been given to him by his mother; it had a proper screw top, and was probably his most valued possession. He took another sip; it was still early, the best time to be out working the heaps, before the sun got too high up and you could fry an egg on a stone. If you had an egg. Stretch hadn't seen one for he didn't know how long...since at least a month or so after the night his father didn't come home. And that

was five, maybe six months ago.

He screwed the faded blue cap back on tight and put the bottle in the bag slung over his shoulder. Every scav had a sack to hide anything of value they might find. It didn't do to advertise that you had something someone else – someone bigger or hungrier or just plain nastier – might decide to take for themselves. And now that he was completely on his own, with no one in the world to look after him, he needed to keep everything he found that he might be able to sell.

His father had told him no one knew exactly how old Bloom's Mount was, or who had started building what was by far the biggest and oldest of Dinium's many heaps. His dad had said it truly was the most massive man-made construction in the entire world, although his dad had never been outside of Dinium's walls.

What amazed Stretch was that there'd ever been enough things people hadn't wanted any more to make something the size of Bloom's Mount, not to mention all the other heaps as well. People still threw things away, so the heaps grew even as the scavs took material off them. There were times when Stretch thought of the heaps almost as living things, crawling with scavs, like his bed sometimes crawled with bugs.

Since dawn, when he'd arrived at Bloom's Mount, Stretch had unearthed nothing that would remotely interest Cheapside Mo, the broker he was sort of allied to. But if he didn't find something, and then get himself over to the sprawling complex of cellars under the vast covered market of Vieille-Dam where she did her business, he wasn't going to eat today.

"Two days without food's not good, is it, Bone?"

Sitting next to him a dusty, off-white mutt, with a reddish-brown face and long, pointed ears, wagged his tail in a silent reply. He'd found Stretch some eight or nine weeks ago, not letting him out of his sight since, and it really wasn't very clear who was looking after whom; Bone, so named because that's what he'd got in his mouth when Stretch first saw him, was not only very protective of his new companion, he'd also turned out to be a hunter of some talent.

The way it worked now, Stretch searched while Bone kept watch, warning him if anyone approached. They made a great team, as Bone also seemed acutely aware of changes in conditions on the various heaps they visited, getting very nervous and wanting to move if something bad was about to happen. Bloom's Mount was an especially dangerous place to work; the unpredictable and often violent methane explosions could be lethal, and getting burned was a bad way to die. Not that Stretch, as he picked his way through a thick vein of what looked like compacted plastic bags, could think of a good one.

"Always got to look underneath, Bone..." At his name, the dog turned to watch the work progressing... "Like my dad said."

There was no one else anywhere near where Stretch was working as the area had become particularly unstable after a recent series of spectacular gas blasts. But Stretch knew that the blasts might well have revealed strata of debris and rubbish – layer upon layer of possibly very valuable rubbish that hadn't seen the light of day for hundreds and hundreds of years. But there was no way of telling unless you took a risk and had a look.

Pulling at the hard plastic – it looked as if heat had welded all the bags together – he saw the glint of sunlight reflecting off something metallic, and his heart raced.

Any metal was good metal, from dull, soft lead to the hardest, rarest ones; he took a deep breath and hoped that this wasn't the old type of plastic they somehow made to look like metal. Stretch, who couldn't read or write but knew the worth of everything, animal, vegetable or mineral, began to pull harder, because metal which didn't go rusty...well, that could mean more than just food for today.

"Might've got something, Bone..."

Stretch put the gloves back on; you had to be careful working the heaps or you'd end up with your hands cut to shreds, infected and useless. He began pulling away at the material surrounding the gleaming object, hardly daring to believe that he might have found something really valuable; by prising away a thick layer of brittle, yellowed cardboard, he created enough room to get his arm into the dark, narrow space and reached down, his leather-clad hand closing around the edge of whatever it was he'd seen.

He pulled, pulled again and still the object wouldn't move. Stretch sat back; this was when you needed to work in a team. He glanced at Bone, who cocked his head and looked straight back at him. Okay, Stretch nodded, so they were a team, but what he *really* needed was another pair of hands, and there was no way he was going to ask anyone here on Bloom's Mount to come and help him. Some of the younger scavs worked in gangs, for protection, and shared what they found, but generally people worked alone. That was just the way it was.

From his position, not very far up the heap, Stretch couldn't see a lot; nearer the summit, though, you got much better views across the city, down towards the river. And over it. On clear days, when he could see the other side, he'd sat and watched and wondered about his father and what had happened to him. They were building something over there – huge skeletal structures which looked like black scars on the horizon. It was said that was why Mr. Nero, the man who ruled Kaï-ro and the whole of the southern territory, sent the riders to take people. Slave workers had a short, hard life and more were always needed.

Sometimes Stretch would creep down to the river's banks, hiding in the thick reed beds that grew there, and he'd stare across the water. And sometimes, when he was angry – angry with his father for being caught, angrier with himself for not trying to help the man he'd seen being dragged away – he'd imagine getting across the river and fighting his way to wherever his father was. In his mind's eye he would see himself rescuing his dad and getting him back home, where he belonged.

This morning he wasn't angry, just hungry, with no time to waste thinking of what might have been. To his left the morning sun was rising, a huge beaten-copper disc moving slowly upwards to its zenith, where it would hover like a white-hot hole in the sky. He looked south where he could see the light shining off the river that was the dividing line between the very loose alliance of northern territories and the city of Kaï-ro. Although he was sure his father was over there, somewhere, in his heart of hearts he knew there was no chance he'd ever see him again, none at all. He was as good as dead.

Stretch felt the knot of his outrage tighten in his stomach and tried to concentrate his feelings somewhere they could make a difference; kneeling down, pushing his arm back into the crevice again, he took hold of what he'd found and yanked with all his might. Which was when everything seemed to happen at once.

Whatever it was he'd discovered came loose without any kind of warning; Stretch fell backwards, grinning like a maniac, and, as the rubbish beneath his feet gave way, he tumbled downwards into the dark.

Until Bone stuck his head over the lip of the hole in the side of the heap, Stretch had no idea how far he'd fallen. Lying on his back, winded from the fall, he stared at the silhouette of Bone's head; the dog's ears pricked as he tried to work out what was going on. It looked to Stretch as if he was about twelve, maybe fifteen feet down. Not *so* far. Although he might not be saying that when he tried to climb back out.

As his eyes got used to the lack of light, Stretch elbowed himself up into a sitting position and took a look at where he'd landed. It was quite a big space, big enough to stand in if you hadn't just had all the breath knocked out of you, with the edges of the hole curving above him in a rough dome shape. And there was a smell, sour and sharp at the same time, that he'd smelled before. Gas had probably built up here...he knew it did that. It could have burned rather than exploded, pushing the rubbish outwards as it expanded.

Looking round he saw the thing he'd been trying to get, leaned over and picked it up; it was a thin, rigid piece of green plastic, about the size of his hand, covered with an intricate pattern of what appeared to be tiny gold wires that connected up various small objects stuck all over one side of the board. Some of these objects had minute, gold-coloured legs and looked like strange oblong insects.

Old-tek.

He smiled. Stretch had no idea what it was or what it was supposed to do, but he thought it could be the kind of thing that Cheapside Mo might like and might therefore pay well for. Standing up, Stretch put the board in his bag and looked back up at Bone.

"I'm coming, boy!"

Above him the dog whimpered, gave a small, nervous bark and started trying to make his way down towards him.

"No, boy! Go back, go back!" Stretch frantically waved the dog away. The last thing he wanted was both of them trapped in the heap. What he wanted, needed, was a pole or a stick, something he could use to help push himself up the side of this cave. "Stay there, Bone. Don't move, I'm just looking for something, okay?"

He didn't care that Bone had no idea what he was saying, because he was sure having someone else to talk to over the last few weeks – even someone who couldn't answer – had kept him from becoming so sad he didn't want to live any longer. And he'd been feeling more and more like that, until the day Bone had turned up.

As Stretch was feeling around in the darkness, his gloved hands touched stone. Flat and wide, with an edge, like a step. He stopped. What was that...had he heard something? Tiny feet scrabbling, maybe? Rats, cockroaches, some of those white, blind things which lived deep underground in the heaps and sometimes got flung to the surface? This was

no time to be scared of what you couldn't see when what you could was bad enough and Stretch tried to ignore the noises, which, if they weren't some creature out to bite him, might well be the sound of this bit of the heap about to collapse on him.

Taking a moment to clear his thoughts, he reached forward, his hand following the shape of the stone, and felt another step and below that another. Knowing he should be trying to go up, not making his way further down, but for some reason unable to stop himself, Stretch sat on the top step and inched his way into the unknown. Four, five, six, seven steps, and then, in the complete and total darkness, he stopped and took a small candle stub out of one pocket, a lucifer out of another. He knew it was risky, lighting a match actually *inside* a heap, but so was going any further without light...

He held his breath and flicked the sulfur head of the match with a thumbnail. The black vanished in a blaze of yellow-white light. No explosion. Stretch breathed out and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He put the match to the candle's wick and in the faltering, oily light he found he was in a long, narrow stairwell at the very bottom of which was a door.

It was slightly open.