

**KNM-WT 15000**



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by Marcio Tex

Northwestern Kenya, Lake Turkana, one and one half million years ago.

Eternity offers different paths. Long before the scientific age, nature found one. The time came to make one human eternal.

Five members of a *Homo erectus* clan ran across the plains, carrying a zebra's haunch. They were aiming for the bushes, but they still had a long way to go. The heavy prize slowed down the stronger male, and, even worst, the younger hunter was falling behind. The hideous whooping of the chasing hyenas was closing in. They would have to fight. The leader ordered a stop and turned to face their enemy—just in time.

The fateful hunt had started one day before, thirty kilometers to the northwest, at the grassy ridges that dominated the lower savannah all the way to the jade-colored lake in the east—the clan's home range. The hunters had gathered by a trickle of crystal-clear water near their encampment of half a dozen animal-skin dwellings.

The elderly member of the clan had covered his thigh with a piece of leather, selected a pebble from the ground, and started pounding the fringes of the finest tool in his inventory, a shiny-black, tear-shaped obsidian hand axe. He had resharpened the entire perimeter of the worn axe with small angled blows, checking the edges with his fingertips until satisfied. Then he had handed the stone to the leader, who had been watching him the whole time.

The leader placed the black tool on a leather rag, together with other hand axes made from basalt, and wrapped them in a makeshift bag. He stood up and moved toward

the other hunters, who were squatting under the shade of a big oval stone. Four males were chewing on tamarinds for breakfast. The stronger male had emptied his bowels and was still foraging through the tamarind leftovers scattered on the ground for a fruit. A ten-year-old boy, almost as big as the other males, was waiting to the side. He was the fifth hunter.

The boy had a swelling on the side of his mandible; he was chewing on a fruit with bad grace. He had been a promising young hunter, but things had changed when a fleeing warthog had thrown him up in the air two months before. The boy had flipped over and fallen heavily on his back, hips first against the ground. From then on, he had not been the same. He had started to complain about numbness in the legs, lower back pain, and general weakness. In a clan that needed all hands to survive, that was a critical predicament, but rather than become a burden to his fellow men, the boy tried to accompany the hunting parties with stoicism.

Some females came up a trail flanked by bushes of okra, returning from a morning pickup. Their arms were full of horned melons. They passed close to the hunters, and the last female in the line slipped a fruit to the boy, continuing on her way to the communal hearth. The stronger male crept up to the boy and tried to take the horned melon from him. The boy was no fool and pulled the melon back, shouting at his contender. He was determined not to let the stronger male, a bully, have his way without resistance. The fourth hunter, still a juvenile, came to the aid of the boy, gesticulating to drive the bully away. The stronger male drew himself up and frowned at the two defiant youngsters. That was too much, but, before things got out of control, the leader intervened. He called

the stronger male, who withdrew to his place, settling the quarrel. The boy and the juvenile sat together and split the fruit in two.

However, the clan could not live on fruit alone. They needed meat. It was time.

“*Hoooh, hah!*” the leader shouted, setting out to the east.

The hunters reacted each taking a crooked barkless wooden spear and following down the trail in his turn. The stronger male was the last to get up. He was still worried about the tamarinds.

There was no farewell. None of them looked back. The artisan was the only witness to their departure. The line of hunters disappeared beneath the dreary trees that loomed above the coarse terrain. The sparse canopy offered mild protection from the rise of the scorching sun until they got into the grasslands. In the open, barren expanses, there was no shelter besides the shade cast by swooping clouds dancing in the bright sky, but the hunters had the advantage of an evolutionary innovation. The wispy pelage covering their dark skin allowed abundant sweating, favoring endurance running and keeping them from overheating in the middle of the day, when other predators were less active.

The hunters walked the savannah all morning, eventually reaching a shady desert date in a dry grass field. They stopped to rest and profit from the covering during the hottest part of the day. The tree was also an observation post, and its bitter fruits rendered a frugal lunch. The leader climbed the thorny branches with the third hunter to scrutinize the land around them. Four hundred yards to the south, he spotted a *Sivatherium*, its characteristic four-horned skull very clear above the tall, yellowish grass. It was the first animal they had seen since leaving their encampment.

The leader pointed to the *Sivatherium* in gentle movements, keeping a low profile. The third hunter raised his head following the indication and uttered a whisper of acknowledgement when he spotted the prey.

“*Aaah! Aaah! . . . Hooh! Hooh!*” Agitated screams came from below. The stronger male was trying to steal some dates from the boy. The leader looked at the *Sivatherium* with bated breath. The animal turned its head toward them, raised its ears, and started trotting further south.

The leader descended swiftly and laid into the stronger male. His irresponsible demeanor had cost them their prey. He should have known better than to make loud noises during a hunt. They exchanged shouts, but it was clear to everybody who the culprit behind that setback had been. The hunt would last longer because of some dry, bitter dates. The other hunters came to the aid of the leader, reproaching the stronger male for his greed. The wrangle ceased. There was no point in making even more noise. That was not the way of the hunter. The leader grabbed the leather bag and his spear and set out a persistence hunting to the south. The stronger male looked around, searching for one last date, and took up the rear.

They followed the track that the *Sivatherium* had left, but did not have the joy of finding it. Before sunset, they arrived at a knoll with a tall umbrella thorn at its top, near the home range’s southern limits. They had used that tree before. Its strong branches were large enough to accommodate the whole party. They climbed it and picked their night nests, the leader in the highest one. The boy had to content himself with the lower position, high enough to be safe but too close to the ground to be comfortable. He could

not sleep a wink, and, thus, served as a provisional sentry. There were no easy nights or days.

Far to the north, white jagged lines flashed across the sky, ripping up heavy, pregnant clouds as the rolling roar of thunder announced the delivery of newborn water. It was wonderful and frightening, adding power to the growls of the night. The boy chased the shadows that fluttered behind the sporadic bursts of light until the first light of day brought a new clue. Farther to the south, where a creek marked the southern limits of the clan's hunting grounds, lappet-faced vultures were flying in a circular pattern. It was a good omen. Their expedition might soon be over. The leader hit the branches with his spear to wake up his companions.

There was no time to spare. The hunters climbed down, chewed on some wild sorghum to drive off hunger, and trotted toward the vultures. Within the hour, they arrived at their destination and knelt outside the bushes. Two hundred yards away, the carrion scavengers on the ground marked the spot. The hunting party target was near a baobab, in the middle of a dry-grass clearing. The leader scrutinized the surroundings, checking for other predators that might have followed the vultures. There were none. The hunters charged in line abreast, scaring the vultures away in a rustle of wings and claimed their prize—the half-eaten carcass of a stallion zebra.

The leader distributed the hand axes among all his companions but the third hunter, who went up to the dead animal's shoulder and stood straight to extend his field of view. He was the designated sentry. The leader and two hunters started working the rump, cutting down the inner part of the thigh to sever the hind leg. The boy and the juvenile cut off the scrotum and sliced the testes, serving the delicacy to the others as a makeshift

breakfast. They ate in haste and continued working. Scavenging was dangerous because other animals attracted to the carrion site might consider humans to be acceptable fare. Instants later, the sentry called the leader in a tone of urgency. From the southwest, spotted hyenas outlined by the pale grass were coming their way.

They had to move out—now! The leader finished severing the haunch, lifted it onto the stronger male's shoulders, and took point to the bushes due north with the sentry guarding the rear. The hyenas stopped at the carcass, giggling and wagging their heads. Their clan was large, and the high-ranking females fed first. The low-ranking animals circled around the frenzy, trying to breach the packed wall of fur and teeth to no avail. Amid the confusion, five males detached to explore the scent leading to the north.

The hunters had put some distance between them and the carcass, but not enough. The cumbersome haunch was slowing the stronger male down as the whoops grew behind them. The leader checked the rear and found something even more troublesome. The boy was having difficulty following the party, even at a slight trot. His injuries, the stress, and an ill-spent night were exacting their toll. He had fallen behind the sentry, while the hyenas were approaching the flanks. The leader called a halt and turned to face the enemy. The stronger male dropped the haunch to the ground in the middle of a defensive circle, and the hyenas surrounded them.

Driven by hunger and curiosity, the animals probed the perimeter, wobbling to and fro in an improvised ballet. The stalemate did not last long, though. The boy groaned and shit himself, breathing hard through a grim mask of agony. He dropped his spear and fled, breaking the circle. Two hyenas blocked his path and caught him by the neck. There were no screams. The stronger male came to the rescue, stabbing one of the hyenas in the

ribs. Two other spears concluded the job. The hyena yelped and stopped struggling. The remaining animals scattered, fleeing back to the clan.

The leader hoisted the boy up across his shoulders and ran to the bushes, laying his back against the trunk of a tree. He was dead. The other hunters arrived, carrying the haunch. There was a moment of dismay when they discovered the truth. The stronger male frothed out of frustration, his bloodshot eyes expressing anger. The juvenile cried silently. It was a big loss, but they could do nothing about it. Peril was still around. The leader took the body and laid it down in a nearby groove. He touched the boy's face in a gesture of tenderness, tears welling up in his eyes. The boy would have his rest now. The leader put the obsidian axe in his dead hand as a farewell gift and dropped earth on him in an improvised burial so that the carrion eaters would not disturb him.

The hunters departed in haste. There was still a long, rough road to trail before they would become masters of their land. As for their fallen companion, he would take his own path to eternity.

The thunderstorm arrived from the north and flooded the groove, covering the boy in mud. With time, erosion transformed his home range into an arid wasteland ideal for the preservation of fossils. It was set. He remained there until his descendants brought him into the light again as the most complete early human skeleton ever found—KNM-WT 15000, the Turkana Boy.

The End