

Tor is the grandson of the Iceman who he kills in a fit of rage and then spends his life looking for his mother and clan. After many adventures traveling across Europe, he finally realizes that he has to give up his search and live alone.

Tor: Last of the Thals

By Ronald W. Hull

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Tor

Last of the Thals



Ronald W. Hull

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Print ISBN: 978-1-64719-954-8

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-64719-955-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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2022

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Long Journey Home

In the morning, Tor gathered up embers from the fire and placed them in damp moss in his pot. He divided up the meat, seeds, nuts, herbs, mushrooms and other ingredients that they had gathered into manageable portions for him and the girls to carry quickly. They had a long way to go and needed to move as fast as they could with winter approaching.

The leftover meat was left hanging by the trail, hopefully out of the reach of bears, if not crows and other birds. So, that someone else coming along the trail could make use of it. But, just off the trail, under some rocks placed near those trees where the battle with the bear had taken place, a small cache of things they didn't need to carry was placed. Hopefully, that wouldn't be found by others, only on Tor's return. He had to think of returning. Had to. There was no other option for him.

It took some time for Tor to repair the arrows he retrieved from the bear. He had less than half of what he started with when they left the Rine four moons before. Tor hoped what he had would last until they made it to the girls' village for the winter. There, he would make new arrows. But arrowheads were rare and he had picked up appropriate pieces to chip along the path that he kept among his prized possessions. The ones that were flint were also good for making fire.

The trail was easy to follow, long traveled by man and beast, so Tor put Rena in the lead, partly because he expected her to be the slowest and partly because he wanted to talk to Gael walking in front of him. His purpose was clear. He wanted to learn their language. But he cautioned Rena. "Be very aware of where you are walking. If you hear anything that might alert us to danger, stop and come back to me. If surprised, raise your right hand in a sign of peace even if you are afraid."

Rena nodded and raised her hand to show him that she understood.

He also told both. "Please keep your eyes sharp for any food that you might see. We are traveling light and will have to gather food as we go." Both girls also nodded in agreement to that. They were used to gathering food as part of their daily life.

Few people traveled the trails this time of year. Most were settling in for winter. Tor remembered where their settlements were because he had

traveled this trail six times before. But Thals were feared and they had walked through settlements along the way without any threat from the poor, and often, weak, inhabitants.

It was different now. Two 13 notch girls leading him, a young man with little but a bow and arrow for defense, could be a tempting target in some of those places. It would take more time, but he would lead the girls around those potential threats. Fortunately, there weren't many until they got to the River Po, only three, and that was the land of the girls and their language.

As they walked steadily in the crisp morning air, Tor asked Gael to point out familiar things along the way... Rocks, trees, grasses, flowers, birds, anything that was new or different and then to speak loudly what it was in her language. Before long, he was calling out those names, and she was correcting his pronunciation.

While Tor enjoyed walking through new territory, listening carefully for possible game and experiencing the sunlight on the plants, the smells and the general beauty that was all around, the forced march they had taken earlier didn't leave much time to experience the walk. While they were still moving quickly, this time was a bit different and the late fall weather helped when it wasn't raining, cold and miserable. They had those days, too, both fair and foul.

By the same token, with Tor concentrating on Gael's language, the same thing happened at first. At least for the first few days of trudging along with rather heavy loads of gear and food so they could make time to their eventual destination, the girls' family village, perhaps a moon away.

The trail was not always easy. Sometimes, it was steep. Sometimes, it was very rocky and difficult to walk on with bare feet. Sometimes, it was muddy, wet and cold. But their feet were hardened to all of that. Bare feet were better than covering them with chewed or brain-softened leather. Until it was too cold. And it wasn't too cold yet.

The constant conversation with Gael helped Tor with something that occasionally popped into his mind, even while trying to learn her strange way of talking, and keeping his awareness on where they were going.

His mother, Nila. Occasionally, Tor's mind would drift and he would start thinking of his mother so worried about him and his father, and why they hadn't come home. Tor knew it was fruitless to think about that all the time, but he vowed to himself to return the first thing the next spring to confess to her why he had failed his father and the rest of the raiding party.

And then, suddenly, he would find himself aware of his surroundings after drifting off like this while walking.

Tor always made sure that they stopped and rested during the midday to put down their heavy loads, eat and drink a little, and just relax from the tedium of the trail. He would pick an open area if there was one. After resting, the girls would spend some time scavenging for seeds, mushrooms, bird eggs and anything else that they discovered like a snake or turtle, good to eat.

Up ahead they could hear voices, see smoke, and even smell food in the air, knowing that they were coming up on a settlement that they had to avoid or be overwhelmed by men eager to get at the girls for slaves or pleasure. They would stop and reconnoiter, whispering. With the stream on their right, they rarely went that way because people chose to camp near the river. To the left was usually very dense woods, often a hill, and sometimes, a cliff that had to be surmounted to get around the threat.

The middle of the day was the most dangerous to proceed. So, twice, they backtracked and made camp well out of sight and sound for the night. They then moved quickly at the break of dawn to get around the settlement before the people there woke up and started scavenging for the day in the surrounding woods and clearings. It was always risky, but their patience paid off with no human encounters except the time they came upon two men camping, asleep with no fire, right by the trail. By being quiet, they passed by them without incident.

Thrice, they met families on the trail. They were no threat and when Rena raised her hand, the leading member of those parties also raised a hand in greeting. When they saw that Tor was a Thal, some concern crossed the faces of those adults passing by, but Tor smiled and raised his right hand in a way that eased their concern quickly. Some even smiled, but there was no need to talk... no bartering. Everyone was scurrying to get to a place for winter.

The trail followed a stream that was gradually becoming a river. Gael said that it was the Po. Occasionally, in the morning, if the light was just right and he was very careful, Tor could catch fish with his hands up under the banks by avoiding making any movement in the soil as he approached stealthily like a lynx. He learned much from watching predators hunt. The lone predators like the lynx and the wolverine taught him the most, but they were elusive and harder to spot hunting than the fox or the owl.

Each night, they would stop early so that they could fortify their camp against any intrusion by wolves or bear. And sought out known caves if it threatened rain. Tor could smell rain coming and could tell whether it would be light and mild or with strong wind, thunder and lightning, and sometimes, ice from the sky that stung his body and was most feared of all the weather

events. A special form of wrath of the gods for not honoring them or for misdeeds unknown.

Evening no longer brought mosquitoes, something their skin was hardened to. Gone after the first cold weather. But the night sounds... tree frogs and loons by the water, annoying and eerie... doves and owls in the woods, calming and warning. Occasionally, the howl of wolves hunting would pierce the night stillness. Unless very close, like huffing of bear, the grunting of boar, or growl of lynx or lion, of no concern. Wolves had long learned the sting of fire, arrows and spears. Steered clear of smoke and the strong scent of man.

In addition to gathering food, the girls were adept at finding small game trails and setting rawhide snares overnight. The result was catching rabbit, squirrel, weasel, polecat, and sometimes, grouse. Except when they sat very close, Tor did not waste his arrows on grouse, squirrels or other birds sitting in the trees. The same thing was true with shooting beaver or ducks on the water. Great animals to eat, but he had to preserve the arrows that he had and had to repair sometimes after a hunt.

With warm food in their bellies and a warm fire to ward off wild animals, the young trio were usually quite exhausted to do anything but sleep. But both girls were cuddling up to Tor and he had a hard time resisting their soft, warm flesh pressed against him. But he knew they were virgins and even though they sometimes played with their fingers on his peeing tool making it rather large and hurting before he fell asleep, he knew that he dared not break into their soft, moist crevice for fear of being killed by the girls' clan members. He needed the girls untouched to make it through the winter with their clan and return to his mother.

Rena had a particularly disconcerting habit of hugging his back with her bumps for breasts pushing into his back and trailing her hands around in front of him, tickling his balls until she fell asleep. Gael would often face him for a while and snuggle her head up against his shoulder nibbling his ear. And then, she would turn over and Tor would find his peeing tool thrust up between her soft bottom in a way that bothered him much. But he held his breath at those times and tried not to go any further. Waiting for sleep to save him.

And so, they traversed the hills and the valleys for nearly a moon before they came near to the village where the girls were captured and hopefully, their parents and other clan members were still there. The leaves were gone from all the trees except the evergreens by then and a chill was in the air that kept them moving during the day and huddled during the night.

Once in the Valley of the Po, the girls grew excited. The landscape became flatter and many trees were gone, replaced by fields and evidence of crops grown, but abandoned. It was all familiar to the girls and to Tor, but with the approaching winter, had a used up, barren look, unlike the wilderness that he was used to. He didn't like it. The girls didn't notice.

But as they approached the encampment, they saw no telltale smoke or any smell of food cooking. While the girls were excited, they grew increasingly alarmed. As the trail became heavily traveled and the encampment was nearly in view, both girls dropped what they were carrying and ran on ahead, yelling. When Tor caught up with them, they both were at their low stone shelter with the thatched roof partially blown off by the wind, rocks falling off and the wood door wide open, crying.

“Now, now girls,” Tor put his arms around both of them and held them close. “We'll find them... We'll find them.” But he hadn't a clue. He knew nothing of this territory and only hoped that the girls could help him.

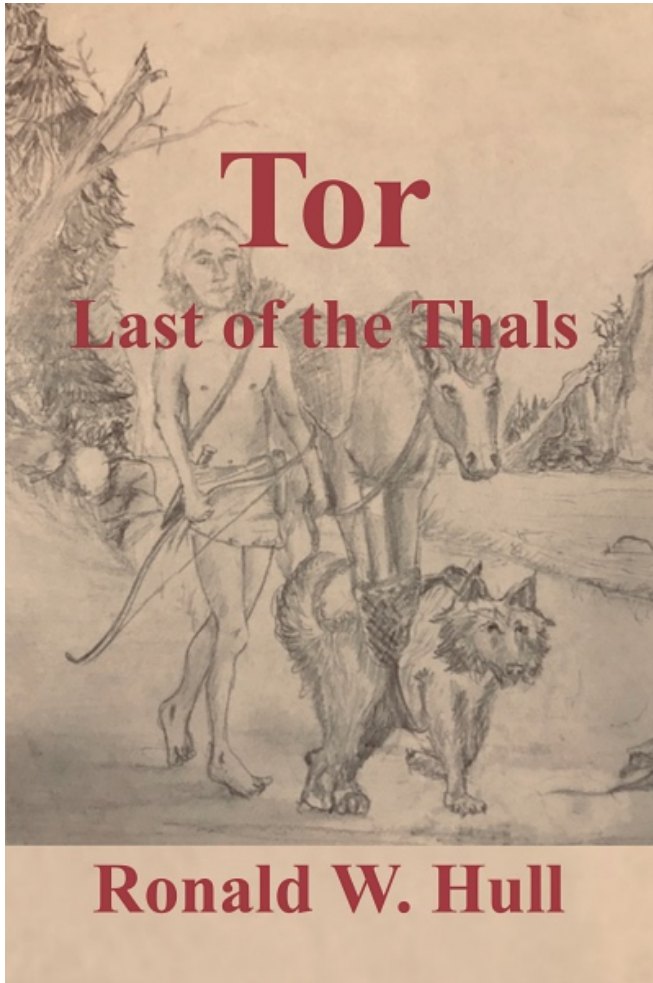
About the Author

Ronald W. Hull is an engineer, educator, and author. Fascinated with history and technological development, he likes to incorporate both in his novels. Paralyzed at twenty in a surgical accident, Ron walked away from the hospital, and, with a special hand splint, began writing again and typing with one finger. After his master's degree, Ron started his career in the telecommunication industry. For thirty-nine years, after earning his doctorate, Dr. Hull worked in higher education as a professor of technology and management, and as a university administrator until retiring at 69.

Ron Hull has written poetry all his life. He now posts a poem a week on his website, <http://ronhullauthor.com>. Ron has traveled widely and experienced many cultures. Starting with his autobiography, he incorporates his many experiences into his books. His topics are wide-ranging and global. Ron's first book, *The Kaleidoscope Effect* was a science fiction first contact novel that spanned thousands of years. *Alone?* the mirror of *Kaleidoscope*, is in its second edition. *War's End* was Dr. Hull's first venture into the action thriller novel genre. Based on the catastrophic premise of *War's End*, the *American Mole* trilogy is Ron's first attempt at a continuing story bridging several books: *The Vespers*, *MS-13* and *Aryan Nation*. Ron has packaged his many short stories into three short storybooks.

Relying on an electric wheelchair and specially equipped van because of the effects of aging on his severe spinal injury, Ron uses computer technology to write and research his books. He resides in Houston Texas with his longtime partner, companion, and assistant, Beh.





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