

# ZAN- GAH

A PREHISTORIC ADVENTURE

BY ALLAN RICHARD SHICKMAN

EARTHSHAKER BOOKS

## **ZAN-GAH: A PREHISTORIC ADVENTURE**

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# 1 THE LION

From a long distance a traveler, or some wild thing, might see within the deep and absolute blackness of night an intense orange light which looked from afar like a glowing coal. If that observer were curious (or hungry, as was often the case), and had the courage to seek a nearer vantage point, he would see a youthful figure seated on a rock staring into a blazing bonfire. The youth, just in his early teens, wore an expression as intense as his fire, which revealed the preoccupation of one engaged both in thought and action. In his hand he held a staff one end of which he had briefly placed in the hottest part of the fire. He withdrew it for perhaps the tenth time to scrape the scorched end with a sharp rock, gradually shaping the hard, blunt rod into a pointed weapon. And as he worked he meditated on the events of the coming day.

There would be a hunt. A lion had killed a child and it had to be destroyed. Living, it would be a constant threat to the neighboring clans. The elders had put aside their differences in order to unite behind a single strategy in which many would participate. As the sun rose, the males of each tribe would advance toward the

wild, uninhabited region which spread between them. The clans did not much like each other, and were glad to have this desolate space separating their campfires—a treacherous, rocky area mostly covered with tall grass, and a few trees. It was now known that the beast they sought prowled somewhere within, and their intention was to encircle it. Each hunter would be separated by a considerable distance at first, but gradually they would get closer to each other as they approached their target. A very large circle would get smaller and smaller until the killer lion was sighted somewhere in the middle.

The youth knew what followed. At some point, after the ring of men had tightened around it, the lion would see that it was trapped. At that moment an experienced and watchful leader would give a loud signal to charge, and every man at once would run at it with his spear. They would assail it and harry it as many wolves in a pack combine to attack an animal larger than themselves, striking and worrying and distracting until it was bled, exhausted, and unable to resist its final end.

This was a common method of killing animals, but usually it was used to trap edible game—deer, pigs, and even rabbits. But this would be no rabbit. The lion was the fiercest and most dangerous creature his people ever encountered; and they encountered it by accident and bad luck only. It was avoided as much as anything alive—never sought out except in the utmost necessity. But now they had no choice. It must be killed.

These were the thoughts that absorbed the youngster, and it was for this very hunt that he was sharpening

his spear. Although he stared into the fire as if it alone interested him, as if he were hypnotized into rigidity by its flames and sparks, it was the events of the next day that completely held his mind. He took the spear from the fire and blew on the glowing end; and as he did, his face was illuminated for a moment with an eerie light. Scraping it again for the last time, he felt the still hot point with his finger, set it aside, and looked once more into the fire.

It was horrible to think about. He knew poor Rias, the boy who had been killed. A little child, he thought, torn to pieces by a savage, hungry animal. In his mind he saw everything in terrible detail. His lip trembled, and he felt an unwelcome sickness of fear which he resisted with all of his strength. He lifted the spear yet again and honed it mechanically as he sought to steel himself for the coming day. He was afraid with all his heart, but he also knew that he must conquer his fear; because in moments of great danger, to be afraid is the surest way to die. It was not just a matter of preparing a weapon. Above all, he must prepare himself. The danger not only crouched out there in the wilderness; it crouched inside as well.

Although the lad by the fire wore the skin of an animal, he was not comfortably warm. One side of his body was too hot while the other was like ice. He changed his position, turning his face to the blackness and peering into its depths. His thoughts of the lion were brought from the coming day to the present moment. Might it not be nearer than he supposed, stalking him and watching his every move? He looked and listened intently to the tiny noises of the night. There was no danger—at least no

more than usual. Animals feared fire. That was one of the few powerful advantages people had over them. He piled the fire high with twigs and coarser wood and welcomed the crackling response. Then he stabbed the spear into the flank of an imaginary animal, and with a ruthless expression wrenched it from the wound. Tomorrow, in the hunt, he would stand his ground, but now it was time to lie down.

Gripping his newly fashioned weapon, he stepped into the opening of the cave where several families lay asleep. They were all huddled together almost upon one another for warmth, still clinging to their spears and weapons. Their long-drawn breath froze as they exhaled. He lay down next to his mother and felt the warmth of her body. She jerked to feel the iciness of his, grunted, and went back to sleep. In time he too was asleep, breathing heavily.

The youth's name was Zan, which in his tongue meant Hunter. He and his people had a language, but we no longer know it. It was spoken in an era so remote in time that there were as yet no nations upon the earth, no cities, nor written words. Humans lived in caves and hollows or in the crudest man-made shelters—wherever they could establish cover from wind and rain, from wild animals, and from each other. Zan and his kindred lived in that dim period when there was no safety but that supplied by strength and cunning, when there were no laws but those imposed by nature and by humankind's own fierce desire to survive. People faced constant danger, and not many lived to be old.

They were frequently hungry and thirsty. They ate only what they could hunt down or gather in their hands, and had to eat immediately what they could not store. Game was perhaps more plentiful in the summer, but meat kept better during the cold months, and the quarry was easier to see in the winter when there were no sheltering leaves on the trees and tracks could be followed in the snow. Animals also might be weakened by hunger during that season because their food was scarce, and weakness made them easier to kill. So on the whole people ate better in the winter, but game was difficult to bring down at any time, and many days could be spent in frozen, fruitless chases. Animals were swifter and often stronger than the men who hunted them, could hear or smell their pursuers from a mile away, and seemed gifted with a special intelligence that humans neither had nor understood. Given these difficulties, and rarity of success, it was possible to starve in the midst of relative abundance. When the men did manage to bring down an animal the clan had meat to eat, skins to wear, and horns and bones to fashion into tools—truly a cause for celebration.

Homes and shelters were established where there was a source of water—a lake, river, stream or spring. Zan's family was lucky, for there was a spring safely within their cave which trickled from its deep, mysterious interior (where only the women were allowed) to the exit and beyond. There also was a river nearby, but the rains had failed for many weeks and it had begun to dry up, so that even the trees flanking it looked parched and sickly.

Zan's people were cold most of the year, but they were as used to it as the animals whose skins they wore. At



night Zan slept beneath, and wore each day, the pelt of a goat which his father, Thal, had killed and which his mother, Wumna, had prepared by beating and chewing it until it was soft. Zan was fortunate to have it. Luxury was unknown, and strangers could be envious of a scrap of fur or a bit of food. Tools and weapons, crude as they were, were valued and guarded. A stone blade, which took a week's labor to make, might induce an uncouth ruffian to take a life in order to possess it. It is hard to imagine how much simple things were prized and coveted in that frightful time. Darkness was indeed darker to them then, coldness colder, and the cruelest passions somehow crueler and more deeply passionate.

Winter was approaching, the nights were long, and Zan had a deep if comfortless sleep. The family awoke, first one then another, to the sound of each other's snorts and the chill of the morning air. Zan was the last to stir. Upon rising they saw that their world was gray with mist—a good sign because the tribes had lately been oppressed by drought. For the coming hunt it might be helpful or dangerous. They would not be able to see their fierce quarry, but the lion would not see them either at first. It would only hear the approach and fearful din of many men. By the time the hunters drew near, the fog would have burned away and all would happen as planned—*unless it happened some other way, some unforeseen way.*

Zan's father, Thal, would have been happy to have let him sleep. He had little desire to see a boy so young participate in the hazardous business before them. Zan,

eager to assume a manhood not yet his, had raged and demanded the right to join, to carry a spear and raise his cry against the great cat. At last his father had yielded (to the horror of his mother), but warned him to stay close—closer by far than the men would be to each other. He impressed on his son the great peril, thinking in his troubled heart that the boy had to learn to deal with the difficulties of manhood sooner or later. But Zan was not a man, and when he rose that dismal morning the fears of the previous night returned to him and had to be conquered anew. In truth, every man among them shared his feelings to some extent and swallowed them down as he did, none allowing himself to ask whether this dangerous labor might prove to be his last. They made jokes at the beast's expense and at their own, clapping each other on the back or shoulder and uttering gruff words of encouragement. No one spoke of fear.

The appointed time had come. Each hunter grasped a spear, and many took a drum or hollowed log to beat with the end of his weapon. The sun, vaguely visible, was rising over the misty terrain, signaling the first stage of their design. As the males of Zan's clan spread out to form a great arc perhaps three miles long, strong legs carried them toward the great rock, Gah, where they would join the second arc of men. When the five clans finally connected, their circle would be nearly fifteen miles around. Speed was required. Zan struggled to keep up with his father, a powerful runner who urged him on, exhaling heavily as he spoke—with each stride a word or two: "Have courage...boy...courage....The...first...rule...

is...to...always...face...your...enemy.” His voice was deep and sure despite his breathlessness, and as he panted his words out, they seemed to freeze as vapor on the morning air. “Better...to...die...than...to...flee...in...the...presence...of...danger....And...more...likely...to...die...if...you...show...your...back....Be brave...be brave...and live!”

The region that the hunters wished to surround was rocky and uneven. Tall grasses grew wherever there was soil to receive them, and there were many places where a crouching lion might hide. Indeed, there was always the possibility that the great cat would escape in between the men who were encircling it, for they were hundreds of paces apart in the beginning. To prevent this, noise would be the first weapon they would use. The hunters would make a great, unaccustomed racket that the beast would avoid; so instead of breaking through their scattered ranks it would head right toward the center of the tightening ring of men. In one way lions were like people. They were frightened by what was unfamiliar. That was what the hunters were counting on as they raised their cries.

All of the five segments came together at about the same time, so it was as if a circle of men had appeared from nowhere. Only Zan stood close to his father, otherwise the distance between each hunter was considerable. It would gradually lessen as they progressed. The mist still obscured their vision but it was beginning to fade. If only the monster would stay away for a short while! If only it would refrain from springing suddenly out of the white vapor to kill before it was even sighted! Something like that had actually occurred a few seasons earlier during

a similar hunt, Thal recalled to his son. They had not been looking for a lion but they had found one! On that occasion a man had been badly mauled before the animal could be speared. Zan did not remove his eyes from the direction of danger, and in fact everyone had placed his senses on alert.

Having formed a boundary, they turned toward the center of the great area it encompassed, where the killer lion was believed to lie hidden. Then they started their advance with grim faces and firm, deliberate steps that were at once cautious and determined. Zan followed the footsteps of Thal, wading through dried grass that was up to the waist of the grown men but reached almost to his shoulders. A few men carried torches of pitch or fat. Animals would fear the smell as much as the fire itself, and run from it. Some set the dry grass on fire as well and used it as their ally, carefully noting the direction of the wind.

The beating of logs and drums began. First, a single drum echoed across the plain, answered by another far off, and joined by a great tribal yell that shook the region. A third drum beat, while other men hammered their shields with their spears, each establishing a distinct, powerful rhythm. Another and another entered in, each with his own sound, creating a dense texture of rhythms which charged every man with needed strength and purpose. The drums boomed a vibrant, manly thunder that filled Zan with courage and resolve. It helped him to feel part of a single force, huge and alive. Now, strong men with fiery, determined eyes roared out a cry of battle. A deep-throated chant was hallooed forth, a mixture of

songs and cries that would surely appall the lion while encouraging themselves: *Kika kika kak, kika kika kak! Tona hai, tona hai!* Run, monster, run! And their voices, combining with the percussion of their rude instruments, wrought a pitch of noise so fearful that it reached into Zan's very entrails and bewitched the hairs on his head. *Kika kika kak! Kika kak! Tona hai! Tona hai!*

So they proceeded, and before very long someone not far from Zan shrilly cried out: *O ah ah, O ah ah!* The cat had been spotted leaping above the smokey grass and then disappearing into one of the numberless nooks or hiding places. Again from another quarter as the men strode ahead came the eagle cry: *O ah ah, O ah ah!* The hunters did not increase their speed but redoubled their thunderous beats. In unison now they hurled out their songs of courage and attack, and now and again the shriller cry of *O ah ah* informed the hunters of the beast's movements.

Now it was seen by all of the men in Zan's vicinity, running in the opposite direction, and soon turning back again or to the right or left as the hunters closed in. The circle was still very large, making a charge impossible, so the elder gave no signal. Meanwhile, the lion was looking for refuge, not only from the men but from the appalling noise. It was so loud that every hollow of the earth resounded in its ears. The enormous, unaccustomed din pulsed out from all directions was working its potent magic, and might have put a whole herd of savage animals to confusion and flight. This was a creature whose sensitive ears could hear from some distance the smallest movement in the grass. It could not endure the amazing man-made thunder.

The hunters, whose dark bodies were now visible opposite against the rising mist, converged toward a clearing paved with rough stones; and there the beast paced and growled, with little natural cover to hide itself. It was a lioness, a female, and doubly to be feared. She began to move warily in a circle as the men tightened the trap, and as they got closer the lioness began to stride and prowl in a circle so small that she almost seemed to be chasing her tail. But she was watching, watching while she turned and snarled, for a weakness in the ever-tightening ring of her pursuers. Then, at the moment the attack finally was sounded—when the men, putting down their drums and torches, charged on the run with their spears—the lioness saw what she was looking for. One of her enemies was smaller, weaker than the rest. There was a point in the strengthening line that could be broken! Thought merged with furious action and the beast, with a mighty bound of astonishing swiftness, darted toward Zan. Five hundred pounds of snarling fury sprang directly at him with claws bared and fanged mouth open!

In the last instant Zan could see the now bright sun shining into the lion's crimson mouth, and he saw as well his mother, his lost brother, his toys, and his entire childhood race before his eyes. It all happened so suddenly that there was nothing anyone could do. Even his father, who was a little in front but several paces away, could give him no aid. Zan would have to protect himself.

He held his sharp spear, almost twice his height, rigidly before him, pointing it straight at the lion's dreadful face. The beast leapt directly at him, razor claws

extended. Quick as fire Zan thrust the point into the oncoming jaws. The weapon never left his hand until it was deep in the animal's throat and coming out the back of its muscular neck.

The lion's own great power and weight were Zan's friends. Possibly the beast, concentrating on the boy rather than what he held in his hand, did not even see the spear. She saw only a weak youth whom she would rend like a rabbit. But in leaping upon him the monster ran into the firmly held weapon. Zan had not even thrown it; all he did was hold it steadily before him. But that was a great deal indeed! Few among the clans, child or man, could have faced a moment of such terrible danger so steadfastly.

The lioness was not dead. She rolled and twisted in anguish, roaring, clawing at the spear in her maw, and wounding the ground with her great paws as she writhed. The warriors of the clans felt no touch of pity. They stood around her, silent and awed, watching the death-agony. None raised another spear to her for they saw that it would not be necessary, and would even be impious—disrespectful to the animal's noble spirit. Nor did they wish to further damage the beautiful and valuable pelt. Then the famous elder of the northern clan took a great rock and threw it onto the dying lion's head. The others followed his example, each throwing a stone (though not such a large one) at the creature that had caused them so much trouble and fear. If you had asked them why one and all bothered to do so, they might have said that it was for luck, but deep in their hearts they wanted to reassure themselves that they, not she, had conquered.

Zan was wounded. The lioness had marked his arms and shoulders with her claws, and dark streaks of blood showed like stripes upon them. They would be seen long after as honorable scars, reminders of the heroic action of this day. People were accustomed to accepting injuries worse than these. One at work might almost cut off a finger by accident and just go on working, muttering to himself. Zan's father was not overly concerned and neither was Zan. These hurts would heal.

What followed was not merely celebration and excitement; it was hysteria, a wild overflow of cheer that attends a difficult conquest—that bursts forth when endangered men overcome great challenge and peril. Zan's kindred gathered around him and he was raised aloft, still bleeding, onto the shoulders of his father and his huge, hairy uncle—men of known strength and honor. From his mighty chest Zan's uncle, Chul, sent forth a cry of triumph which was seconded by Thal and by every man. Their gravel voices vented their exultation with a sound so leaden that heard far off it was like a moan or a lament. The women, who had been left behind when the hunt began, heard it and knew that it was no moan but a signal of success. The lion had been killed. And they too sent up shrill cheers and ululation.

The drums began to clamor again and the hunters sang a deep-throated hymn of manly victory. Zan, still on the shoulders of his kin, was the center of their celebration. He was greeted by all, and clapped on his thighs by their friendly hands. Had the strongest warrior of the tribe brought the great beast down, he would have been



honored in the same way; but that it was accomplished, unaided, by a mere boy struck the multitude with wonder, and moved all hearts in his favor.

Now, the great elder of the northern clan came forward, and all were silent. Aniah was his name. Of all the men in the five clans, he was acknowledged as the greatest—an old warrior covered with scars, his white hair flying in the wind. Because he was not of Zan's people, his notice was doubly to be valued, and Zan was filled with pride. Aniah made no speech. He simply struck Zan roughly on the thigh with his sinewy hand and said "*Zan-Gah.*" Zan of the Rock! Zan who began his trial of manhood at the great rock, Gah, and who stood like a rock, immovable in the face of overwhelming danger!

The tribes took up the new name as if it were a cry of battle, and with it hallooed their regard. *Zan-Gah! Zan-Gah! Zan-Gah!* It was the raw release of gruff, brute men whose roaring rose from their hearts and stomachs. They bellowed and chanted in ecstasy, dancing and thumping their weapons and hollow drums. *Zan-Gah! Zan-Gah! Zan-Gah! Zan-Gah! Zan-Gah!* and so carried the boy all the way to his cave dwelling where his mother, Wumna, awaited his return with tears of gladness and no little astonishment. Several men had tied the lion's legs to two poles to carry it away on their shoulders. The prized skin would be Zan's.

The heavy carcass was given to the women of the tribe because it was female. Had it been a male, the men would have skinned it themselves and removed its insides, but they were not allowed to violate the secrets of a lioness. It

was a matter of respect. Zan was permitted to recover his spear from its mouth, and he had a chance to examine the huge head and jaws. A tremor passed through him as he touched them. The large, dead eyes were still open, and the beast did not respond as he pulled the lips aside to look at the terrible fangs. With a frown he placed his foot on the lion's great muzzle and wrenched the spear, all bloody, from the animal's mouth. He held it aloft and the women resumed their high-pitched ululation.

They rubbed Zan's wounds with an inky substance which would aid the healing, but leave dark marks when the wounds closed. Having earned his scars, Zan had no wish for them to disappear. Then the women hung the animal by its forelegs, cut it open so that its entrails spilled onto the ground, and carefully stripped off the tawny pelt. The body was hewn apart to be roasted, for everybody would want to taste it—not because it was good to eat, but because the eaters hoped and expected to benefit by doing so. A taste of the lion's flesh would give them some of its strength, speed, and ferocity, and it would continue to live in them. That too was a matter of respect.

Deep into the night the celebration continued. The heart of the lion was given to Zan to share with his friends, while the men passed around lion parts and gnawed on the bones. The women joined in too, tasted the flesh, and participated in the dance. Large logs, carved with brute images, were used as pounders, beating out rhythms on the ground to encourage the dance and awaken the spirits of the earth. They sang and chanted old stories of mighty hunters and warriors of the past. They re-enacted the scene of the hunt, showing how Zan had held his

spear and stood his ground, wielding their weapons in dance, with every man acting as if he himself had struck the fatal blow. Imitating the lioness too, they play-acted her ferocity and re-enacted her death-throes. Some even lifted a spear to their own mouths to show how it had entered and how the lion had howled and rolled in agony. All rejoiced until they were exhausted. Then, one by one bidding Zan farewell with gestures of regard, they went to their rude homes and frozen beds.

Zan was left alone at last, staring deeply into the waning fire and thinking on the day's events. Now, with the sounds of applause and congratulation dying in his ears, something strange happened. Suddenly he was convulsed by a shudder of fear as real as if the terrible beast had reappeared alive before him. He was shaking uncontrollably. His breath left him and his heart started to pound audibly in his chest. He told his body to stop but it would not obey. It just shook the more until his teeth chattered. This would pass. Zan knew what was happening. All of his fears had returned to take revenge on him because he had dared that day to stand up to them.