THE HUNT FOR THE QUEEN-SERPENT

by Ataberk Bozkurt

Creature: *Shahmaran* | **Levels:** *5-7* | **CWs:** *Abduction, cannibalism*

SYNOPSIS

There is a mountain city-state named Tarsos, whose ruling sultan, Jumalee, becomes deathly ill from grief over his daughter's disappearance. Tarsos' vizier, Reza, sends word to those who are brave of heart and capable of mind to find the legendary Shahmaran, Queen of Snakes. Reza can brew a remedy to the sultan's illness from Shahmaran's dead body. The characters will uncover the truth about Shahmaran, the half-snake, half-human race called the maran that she keeps in check, and the missing Tarsos princess. Their choices will shape both the future of a land and a regretful soul.

ADVENTURE HOOK

Reza, the vizier of the Tarsos Sultanate, may hire the party to hunt down Shahmaran. Alternatively, the party may arrive at Cyrdus, a nearby village settled in the mountain range. Cemshab, Shahmaran's mortal lover held captive by Reza's soldiers (jannisaries), pleas for help to save Shahmaran from the janissaries.

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

It all starts when Shahmaran offers heirdom to Parisa, Princess of Tarsos. Parisa accepts the offer after being torn between her dreams of either becoming a mighty sorceress or ascending the throne as the next Sultan of Tarsos. While Parisa feels obliged to tend and protect her people, she instead chooses to follow her sorceress path under Shahmaran's tutelage. However, Shahmaran only wishes Parisa to be her heir in order to keep the vicious maran under control. If Shahmaran dies, Parisa is her answer to prevent the maran from eradicating Tarsos once and for all.

Meanwhile, Vizier Reza plots to take advantage of the princess' disappearance and the sultan's illness. Sultan Jumalee has no other relatives that can inherit the sultanate, making it possible for the vizier to seize control. He knows of an ancient legend that claims if you drank the blood of Shahmaran, you gain ultimate knowledge and health. Falsely claiming that Shahmaran's body is the key to the cure for the sultan's illness, Vizier Reza calls forth his best hunters and sends them to hunt the Shahmaran, so he can drink her blood and become all-powerful.

Hunters track down Cemshab, the Queen's former lover for a century, who knows the hidden way to Shahmaran's bathhouse and forces him to reveal the way. Cemshab deliberately tries to delay them and maran ambushes kill many janissaries. Sooner or later, the bathhouse is revealed.

Shahmaran is guilt-ridden; she has not foreseen the consequences of taking Parisa to her side. However, her maran are vicious and ruthless and without a compassionate leader, they can simply invade and massacre Cyrdus and Tarsos. So she plans to sacrifice herself to kill the vizier Reza… but will it solve the problem in everyone's favor?

CHAPTER 1 – THE HUNTERS GATHERED

The story begins in Cyrdus, a mountain village. The party may come across this village on their travels, or they may be escorted by the vizier's men, the janissaries. Janissary Captain Omar offers 1,000 gp to the hunters that capture Shahmaran.

VILLAGE OF CYRDUS

Cyrdus is a remote hunting village. Only a handful live in this cold, barren town. They mostly live from hunting deer and other game, selling their meat and skin. Still, they are cold towards outside hunters and janissaries. The people of Cyrdus do not want to hunters to take up arms against the maran, so they are cold towards the party. The old, wise medicine woman Yolene knows more about the snakefolk so any senior villager point her out to those who seek more about the maran.

WHAT DO VILLAGERS KNOW?

The villagers of Cyrdus may be persuaded or bribed to reveal what they know about the maran. However, on your discretion, they may not know the legend completely or may tell it differently. One thing is certain, they all fear the snakefolk as vile ambushers and merciless killers. They talk about the maran as "the mountain's folk."

Yolene, Medicine Woman: Yolene and her son Hiskas look out for the village. Hiskas also has a store where adventurers may buy and sell common equipment. Yolene tells the legend of Shahmaran without any mistakes. She may also brew an anti-toxin for each character if they behaved themselves and showed them good will. However, if the characters attempt to force Yolene to show the way, she gives them false directions. A successful DC 20 Charisma (Intimidation) forces the truth from Yolene, but they refuse to do business with the party.

The Legend of Shahmaran

A long time ago and far away, there lived a warrior named Belkia, who was lost at the rocky and sharp mountains of Tarsos. For days, the bitter cold winds pounded against him and journeying through the snow and mist, Belkia grew weary. Belkia's situation was bleak; With his every step he realized it was not the wind that assailed him, but the very breath of Azrael, the Angel of Death. Belkia's judgment was due. However his fate would be delayed, for snakefolk discovered him near unconscious, near death. Their queen, Shahmaran, nurtured Belkia back to health and they fell in love. Despite his second chance, the warrior grew restless, his blood yearning for action. Shahmaran let Belkia go on with a condition—he was to keep the maran secret.

Belkia returned to his land, and there Ukap the Sorcerer sought him out to inquire about Shahmaran. Ukap was a mighty magician, commanding forces of nature, lightning, and thunder. Ukap asked a djinn that how can he become immortal and the djinn told him to seek Shahmaran. "If you boil her flesh and blood and consume them, you will get all you desire!"

"It was for the good of the people," Ukap convinced Belkia. They travelled to the Bathhouse of Shahmaran and there the queen was waiting for them. She knew Belkia would betray her, for he was mortal. Belkia cried and sought forgiveness after the maran tore Ukap to pieces. Shahmaran forgave Belkia and let him go once again but this time she knew Belkia's heart. It is not the heart's fault for even the best intentions are a double-edged sword. It is a sacrifice, they say.

THE HUNTING PARTIES

There are two different hunting parties. They won't cooperate with each other unless persuaded.

Janissary Captain Omar holds Cemshab as his prisoner, to show them the way to the bathhouse. They ventured twice before the party's arrival, both journeys ending with bloodshed. Omar and his men treat villagers poorly; they won't pay for any service and do not compensate for the damage they cause. If confronted, Omar respects courage and backs down from any tense encounter with respect. If the characters still antagonize the janissaries, they react violently. If the party asks to join them, they accept unless the party is hostile. Omar may also reveal why Sultan Jumalee is sick and what Vizier Reza actually aims to do. Omar

can be bribed, persuaded, or deceived, but won't be intimidated easily.

Cemshab, former lover of the Queen-Serpent, tries to divert the janissaries as he fears for the life of his lover. He knows that Parisa is Shahmaran's heir and Shahmaran regrets this decision. He may even give his life to save his lover's own, but they are threatening his whole family line with extinction. If the party earns his trust, he reveals that he knows the location and leads them there if they agree to help Shahmaran instead of killing her.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- Omar (male/human/battlemaster fighter 7/neutral evil)
- Cemshab (male/human/hunter ranger 3/neutral good)
- Jannisaries (varied/varied/**veteran**/neutral evil)
- Hiskas (male/rock gnome/wild magic sorcerer 3/chaotic good)
- Yolene (female/rock gnome/circle of the land druid 3/neutral good)
- Parisa (female/human-maran/**maran**/neutral good)
- Shahmaran (female/maran/**guardian naga**/lawful neutral)
- Sultan Jumalee (male/human/**noble**/lawful good)
- Vizier Reza (male/human/**archmage**/lawful evil)

DEVELOPMENT

After the characters rest for a day, explore the village and talk to many hunters and residents. They have to decide whether to join forces with the hunting party or if they are going to explore Tarsos mountains themselves.

CHAPTER 2 – THE HUNT BEGINS

In this chapter, the party searches the mountains for Shahmaran's bathhouse. There are two encounters in this chapter that must play out before the characters encounter the maran. Length of the journey is up to DM, it may take a day or a couple. If the characters persuaded Cemshab, he shows the way. Otherwise, he deliberately leads the hunters into a maran ambush (3 to 5 maran according to their average party level). The bathhouse is guarded against divination unless the caster adds a special component to the spell that has ties to a maran. A successful DC 18 Intelligence (Arcana) check allows the caster to know the special component.

ROAD ENCOUNTERS

The mountains of Tarsos has many woods and narrow passages and game is plentiful. However, it is also very cold: weather should be a threat just like the maran. Serpentfolk may attack at any time to defend their home and rescue Cemshab. Hobgoblin warbands also populate this area. You may also use environmental hazards such as avalanches. Maran are watching them to discern and judge them from afar, and they are detected with a successful DC 17 Wisdom (Perception) check. After characters have searched the mountains, proceed to the Shrine of Maran encounter.

Encounter: Pile of the Dead

In this encounter, the characters come up across a pile of corpses partially hidden under snow. These corpses belong to a hobgoblin scouting party that was murdered by maran, whose weapons and bites are coated with a deadly poison. The corpses are bloated and cannot be identified properly. However, characters inspecting the bodies determine they are not human. On a successful DC 13 Intelligence (Investigation) check, they find hobgoblin equipment buried with the bodies and bones belonging to a huge wolf. A successful DC 10 Wisdom (Medicine) check reveals that these bodies were killed a day ago. A successful DC 15 Wisdom (Medicine) check determines the cause of their demise.

Encounter: Shrine of Maran

The characters find a huge cavern and as winds collide with the walls it creates an even colder air compared to outside. However, there is a ruined shrine at the middle of the cavern.

Murals depict a series of events, told in three parts. In the first mural, there are dead people lying around and snakes adorning their bodies. At the second mural, a robed lady crowns herself with snakes around her. At the last mural, robed figures legs turns into a snakes body, leaving torso as human and all snakes lie beneath her feet.

A successful DC 15 Intelligence (Religion) check reveals the urals depict a primitive cleansing rite. To perform such a rite, tribals preferred a hill that may

see the dawn. If followed, this reveals the bathhouse's location.

A successful DC 15 Intelligence (Investigation) reveals that this ruined cavern has been carved out and huge chunks of stone were moved from here to a place to a lower part of the mountain. Character may use mason's tools proficiency or Stonecunning to understand what happened. If followed this reveals the bathhouse's location.

A successful DC 16 Wisdom (Survival) or Wisdom (Perception) check reveals that there are huge snake tracks all over the shrine and nearby woods. If followed this reveals the bathhouse's location.

There is also a torso and head of a skeleton on the ground, holding a spear. The spear's shaft is carved like a snake and the tip is bronze in color. This is a *+1 spear*, made and used by maran.

DEVELOPMENT

After dusk, the characters find a passage to the bathhouse. They may also find it via Cemshab or if they came alone and acted fair and just, they are guided by a group of maran as they reveal themselves watching the party. Characters may also encounter maran in the mountains and may have persuaded them to show their way. If the characters persuaded maran or helped Cemshab, Shahmaran is friendly and curious about what the characters will say. Otherwise they are cold, sarcastic, and doubtful of the party's intentions. If the characters bring janissaries with them, maran attacks them as soon as possible and try to rescue Cemshab.

CHAPTER 3 – THE WILL OF THE LADY

After their day-long journey into Tarsos Mountains, the party arrives at the bathhouse which serves as Shahmaran's home. The Queen-Serpent knows that adventurers and hunters are looking for her and to save her lover and her people from further bloodshed; she is ready to negotiate.

When the party arrives at the bathhouse, Shahmaran's heir and handmaiden, Princess Parisa, welcomes them. She informs the guests that the queen does not want (further) bloodshed and grants them a morning audience in her throne room. Parisa require everyone to leave their weapons (foci included). As they wait, the characters may talk to Parisa as other maran only hiss at them even though they understand them. Heroes are then placed in a huge, luxurious guest room with pools and soft beds.

Parisa visits the party and ask about Tarsos and what they heard lately. Successful Persuasion, Deception and Insight checks reveal that she is the Princess of Tarsos and if confronted she tells her story. If Captain Omar is present at this time, he will be quick to identify Parisa as the princess before she has a chance to speak.

Should the characters meet with Shahmaran in the morning, see *Audience with the Queen-Serpent*. The party may try to persuade Parisa here or try to take her away without talking to Shahmaran. Should this happen, all Maran try to defend Parisa and may attack the party. If persuaded, Parisa leaves with the party. If the party attacks the maran before talking to Shahmaran, it takes three turns for Shahmaran to interrupt the combat. She orders her maran to stand aside and deal with the invaders herself.

AUDIENCE WITH THE QUEEN-SERPENT

Shahmaran hails the adventurers with milk and honey, served by her handmaidens. She asks why they have come and demands to know who they are. The Queen-Serpent is patient and answers any questions as long as they are respectful. Shahmaran has decided that she should die and Parisa has to choose her own fate. At this point, heroes should be able to confront both Shahmaran and Parisa with facts. If asked about Parisa, a successful DC 12 Wisdom (Insight) check reveals Shahmaran's visible regret. Shahmaran may reveal why she actually brought Parisa to her bathhouse, if persuaded (DC 18 Charisma (Persuasion) or Charisma (Deception) check). After hearing Shahmaran, Parisa is not angry with her as she understands why she must stay but apparently sad. Parisa can be persuaded to return home not as a princess but as a sorceress, because if she stays and rules, she only fulfills other's ambitions.

If Cemshab is present with the captain, she demands Cemshab's release immediately. Omar only releases Cemshab if Shahmaran agrees to the vizier's terms.

If the party demands Shahmaran to surrender, she simply refuses, she states that she is royalty and would never surrender her body. They will have to kill Shahmaran to capture her.

If the party explains the situation regarding the sultan and vizier and ask for Shahmaran's help, she can be persuaded. She gives her shed scales and a vial of her blood with the instructions.

If the characters kill Shahmaran and also persuade Parisa to return home, they leave the bathhouse while maran mourn and wail in sorrow. They let them go in shock and fear…

DEVELOPMENT

Shahmaran instructs the party (either alive or in her last breath),"Those who seek eternal life must drink her blood and those who yearn for their doom must boil her scales and eat them." However, if she is not killed and willingly gave these ingredients, she adds that only the vizier and the sultan should consume these. Adventurers must either bring a vial of Shahmaran's blood and her scales or her body. Vizier Reza will justly reward them. If Parisa is present, after this she reveals herself and warns Reza not to eat the scales or maybe heroes warn Vizier, however no matter what, he eats the scales, thinking that they try to deceive him. Soon a painful and unfortunate death takes Reza… leaving only a bloody carcass behind him.

CONCLUSIONS

IF SHAHMARAN DIES…

If Parisa does not return: Parisa becomes Shahmaran and rules over the maran. Our adventurers return to Tarsos and Vizier Reza holds a feast for them and he eats the flesh of Shahmaran and dies. The sultan's death follows after a couple of weeks and Tarsos falls into chaos.

If Parisa returns: Vizier Reza is displeased as Princess Parisa returns and only pays half of the reward. He may send a couple of assassins based on heroes' reaction. Parisa heals her father and they may rule together or Parisa may leave Tarsos to pursue her magical talent. No matter what, after a couple of weeks, maran attack both Cyrdus and Tarsos, they sack the city.

IF SHAHMARAN HELPS..

If Parisa stays with Shahmaran: Shahmaran instructs adventurers that the Sultan must drink her boiled blood and the Vizier must eat her scales. Parisa asks the characters to deliver a silver pendant to her father. Reza holds a feast for them and he eats the flesh of Shahmaran and dies. Sultan is relieved by Shahmaran's blood and rules justly, inspired by his daughter.

If Parisa leaves Shahmaran: She travels to the land of Ukap to pursue arcane secrets. Parisa asks adventurers to deliver a silver pendant to her father.

If Cemshab's present: Shahmaran and Cemshab live happily after, if anyone tries to touch Cemshab, Maran kills them on queen's orders.

If Cemshab is not present: Shahmaran asks for a favor from the party she wants her lover Cemshab to be rescued from the clutches of Captain Omar. She rewards them in Cemshab's weight in gold to compensate their efforts.

REWARDS

DM should reward characters for mostly exploring and uncovering a couple of secrets. Here are some example milestones or XP rewarding events:

- If Shahmaran survives, award characters with 6,000 XP.
- If the party rescues Cemshab from the Vizier, award them 3,000 XP.
- If the party persuades Parisa to leave, award them 3,000 XP.
- If Shahmaran dies, award characters with 3,000 XP.
- Should a character drink Shahmaran's blood, their Intelligence and Wisdom increases by 2 permanently.

The party may gain a simple magical spear as a souvenir. If you use a high-fantasy setting, you may reward characters with more magical items. Here are some suggestions: *potions of poison*, *potion of longevity*, *ring of animal influence* (snakes only), *ring of poison resistance*, magical longbows and ammunition (+1 quality), *scroll of conjure animals* (snakes only), *scroll of healing spirit*, *scroll of protection from good and evil*.

In the end, either Reza or Parisa awards the party with gold; you may adjust the amount again based on your setting, 500 gp per adventurer is enough.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Thanks to my family, especially my mother, Pernan, for helping me to adapt Shahmaran tales into this story. I took some liberties with the story and combined myths and Tomris Uyar's interpretation so you may read different versions of Shahmaran's myth on web or in books. Shahmaran's story is an interesting piece of folklore; as a medusa-like figure, she is depicted as wise and compassionate. If you ever visit Turkey, go to Tarsus, Mersin, where the folk tale is set.

CITATIONS

Uyar, Tomris. Ödeşmeler Ve Şahmeran Hikayesi. Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2003.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in October 15, 1996, always been a great fan of fantasy and sci-fi works. Studied American Culture and Literature in Hacettepe University. DMing and playing *D&D* since 2008.

Maran

Medium monstrosity, neutral

Armor Class 15 (natural armor)
Hit points 48 (8d8 + 16)
Speed 40 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
17 (+3)	19 (+4)	15 (+2)	11 (+0)	13 (+1)	12 (+1)

Skills Stealth +7, Perception +4, Survival +4
Damage Immunities Poison
Condition Immunities Poisoned
Languages Celestial, Telepathy 60 ft.
Senses Darkvision 60 ft., passive Perception 14
Challenge 3 (700 xp)

Innate Spellcasting. A maran's innate spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 12). Maran can innately cast the following spells, requiring no material components:

At will: *animal friendship* (snakes only)
1/day: *pass without trace*

Multiattack. the Maran makes two ranged or melee attacks, but can use its bite and constrict attacks only once each.

Actions

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack.* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. *Hit:* 5 (1d4 + 3) piercing damage plus 3 (1d6) poison damage.

Constrict. *Melee Weapon Attack.* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (2d4 + 3) bludgeoning damage, and the target is grappled (escape DC 13). Until this grapple ends, the target is restrained, and the Maran can't constrict another target.

Spear. *Melee Weapon Attack.* +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 7 (1d8 + 3) slashing damage.

Longbow. *Ranged Weapon Attack.* +7 to hit, range 150/600 ft., one target. *Hit:* 8 (1d8 + 4) piercing damage plus 3 (1d6) poison damage.