



ALTYN ARYG AND THE SNAKE'S BELLY

SIBERIAN LEGEND

Once there was a khan who led the largest tribe in Siberia. He described himself as an unfortunate man, because he had no sons. But the unfortunate person was really his one daughter, Altyn Aryg, because the khan never stopped moaning about how much happier he would be if he had a son instead of a daughter.

It didn't matter how hard Altyn Aryg trained to become the tribe's fiercest warrior, most skilled horse-rider and strongest sword-fighter. Her father just kept saying, 'But who will lead the tribe after me? How unfortunate I am to have no worthy heir...'

It didn't matter how many lost lambs or calves Altyn Aryg found and returned to the herd, nor how many tribal disputes she resolved with wisdom and diplomacy, nor how many thieves she tracked and caught. Her father still kept saying, 'Even one hundred girls wouldn't be equal to one boy...'

Eventually Altyn Aryg realised that her father would never be impressed with mere

human deeds. She needed to do something superhuman.

She said to her father, 'I will show you what one girl can do!' Then she grabbed his favourite sword and marched out of the tent to hunt for a snake.

She wasn't hunting for an ordinary snake; she was hunting for the giant snake that had been terrorising Siberia for years.

This snake was so enormous that a horse would take a day to gallop along its spine and a tribe could pitch fifty tents in a line across its neck. Its fangs were longer than ten men are tall, and its mouth was wide enough to swallow a tribe in one gulp.

The monstrous snake demanded that each tribe pay tribute of one thousand cattle a year. If any tribe refused, the snake ate the whole tribe. In one gulp.

When khans ordered heroes to defeat the snake, the snake devoured the heroes too.

Altyn Aryg hoped that if she could defeat the snake, her father would finally respect her.

She tracked the monster, following the trail of crushed plants, cracked earth and weeping relatives. She found a snake as long as a river, as high as a hill, with a grass-green belly and a sky-blue back.

Altyn Aryg rode all the way up to the monstrous head, jumped off her exhausted horse and stood in front of the snake.

‘Have you come to pay me tribute?’ asked the snake.

‘Why would I pay tribute to a monster? You don’t deserve my respect or my tribute.’

‘Then I will eat you.’ The snake opened its massive mouth.

‘No need to eat me,’ replied Altyn Aryg. ‘I’ll jump right in!’

And she did. The khan’s daughter leaped between the snake’s fangs into the snake’s mouth. She ran down the snake’s throat, towards the snake’s belly.

And the snake’s jaws snapped shut behind her.

Altyn Aryg looked around the long belly, which was full of people, their animals, their tents and their lamps.

The snake's digestive juices worked slowly, so while there were many gently dissolving corpses at the far end of the belly, there were also herds of cattle, tribes of people and one hundred heroes, all sitting sadly at the other end, waiting to die.

Altyn Aryg marched up to the one hundred heroes and said, 'I'm here to help.'

'No one can help,' said one of the swallowed heroes. 'There's no way to escape and no way to kill this beast.' He pointed to the left side of the belly. 'Its heart is so hard, none of us can pierce it.'

Altyn Aryg said, 'Give me your swords!'

The heroes handed her their one hundred swords, then she stabbed and slashed at the heart. It was like hitting a rock, and she couldn't pierce it either. However Altyn Aryg was so strong that every sword she swung against the snake's solid heart shattered into a dozen pieces.

Finally she only had one sword left: her father's favourite sword.

She looked closely at the snake's heart. In the place she'd been striking, the spot where she'd already broken one hundred swords, there was one hairline crack.

She aimed at the tiny wound, she lunged forward with all her strength...

And Altyn Aryg drove the sword deep into the snake's heart.

She dragged the blade out. The snake's black blood oozed on to her hands.

The snake gasped and shuddered, and its mouth fell open.

Altyn Aryg led the tribes, the herds and the heroes out of the snake's belly and out of its open mouth. They stood together and watched the snake writhe and die.

The tribes thanked Altyn Aryg. 'You have defeated the monster and set us all free. We will pay tribute to you now.'

Altyn Aryg shook her head. 'You may keep your herds.'

'But you've done what one hundred heroes couldn't do! You can't go home empty-handed.'

She smiled. 'Once I tell my father how the snake died, my hands won't be empty for long.'

Altyn Aryg rode back to her father's tent, and she told him about the snake, the one hundred shattered swords and the pierced heart. She showed him the black blood on his sword and on her hands.

The khan bowed his head to Altyn Aryg. 'You have done what one hundred sons could not have done.'

Finally, the khan named his one and only daughter Altyn Aryg as his heir, and he offered her both his favourite sword and his respect.

FINDING OUR OWN HEROINES

I'm sure all the readers of this book know that girls and boys are equal and should be allowed – in real life and in stories – to defeat their own monsters, go on their own quests, make their own mistakes and solve their own problems. But unfortunately not everyone acts as if that were true, so there is still a need for stories which show that girls are and *always have been* just as capable, strong, brave and smart as boys.

Just like the stories in *Girls, Goddesses & Giants*, my first collection of heroine myths and legends, these stories are all genuine traditional tales. I've not turned any heroes into heroines, or male warriors into female ones. I've not taken a story about a boy doing

something amazing, then stuck a girl in the lead role instead, just to make a point. These tales have all been told, for many years, in many places, about girls who are the stars of their own stories, rather than sidekicks or prizes. (Girls have starred in stories for as long as stories have been told: the story of the goddess who wrestled a mountain is well over four thousand years old.)

However, I have made other changes to the stories, as every storyteller does. When I share these stories, with live audiences or in print, I tell them in my own voice and in my own way, which is never exactly the way I first heard or read them.

One change that I've made to several of these stories is to cancel the wedding at the end. I've always done this when telling stories out loud, and I used to think I was making a major and radical change to the plot. But recently I've wondered whether the 'happy ever after' ending may have been stuck on to some stories because it was the easiest way to end them. Finding the right line to end a

story can be really hard, and once upon a time a storyteller might have thought, ‘I’ve no idea what to do now the girl has defeated the monster! I’ll just say she married a prince and lived happily ever after, then everyone will know the story has ended...’ If a story is about someone searching for the love of their life, the ‘marrying a handsome prince’ ending might make sense; if the story is about a girl escaping an ogre, a ‘marriage’ ending isn’t necessary to the plot and might not have been part of the original story. (We’ll never know, because most traditional tales weren’t written down until relatively recently.) So I’ve removed those unnecessary weddings and let the girls decide their own futures...

I’d like you to be able to track these heroines back a few steps, so here’s information about where I found each story. I hope you enjoy discovering more about the stories and the people who first told them, and possibly retelling them yourself, in your own way!

ALTYN ARYG AND THE SNAKE'S BELLY

Siberian Legend

When the stories in this book were first told, none of these heroines would have described themselves as feminists, because the word didn't exist. But Altyn Aryg definitely had to battle against sexism and use all her girl power to impress her dad. He was probably more difficult to deal with than the huge snake... I found this story in the *Encyclopaedia of Folk Heroes* by Graham Seal (ABC-CLIO, 2001).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lari Don

Lari is an award-winning writer for young people of all ages. She loved traditional tales and folklore as a child, and now collects stories of any shape and size, from all sorts of sources, to inspire her novels. *Fierce, Fearless and Free* is her fifth anthology for Bloomsbury, returning to the theme of her first – the best-selling *Girls, Goddesses and Giants*. She lives in Edinburgh with her husband and two fierce, fearless and free daughters.