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SKIDA

HULDRA: THE SPIRIT OF THE FOREST

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Of all the beings from the underworld, the Huldra is perhaps the most perplexing and frightening. Trolls are easy to understand; they embody evil. But Huldra inhabit the shadowy space between these extremes, straddling virtue and wickedness, harmony and chaos. This makes her a figure of both fascination and dread, one that is capable of fooling us with her beguiling tricks. In folklore, she is often encountered at the edge of the forest, where untamed wilderness meets cultivated land – a liminal space where opposites collide. Huldra is the bridge between the harmonious aspects of nature and its darker, more violent realities, red in tooth and claw.

Thanks to decades of environmental advocacy, the contemporary view of nature has shifted towards a kinder, gentler perspective. We celebrate the natural world as a space for recreation, a source of beauty and inspiration and a home to an extraordinary tapestry of biodiversity. This romanticized view harkens back to Edenic ideals rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions, where nature is seen as a reflection of divine harmony. According to the Bible, God created the world and declared it good. Yet this vision of nature as inherently balanced and pure stands in stark contrast to its brutal evolutionary realities. Take a stroll through any forest, and you'll find a scene teeming with violence, competition and suffering. Predators hunt, prey animals perish and plants vie for sunlight in a relentless struggle for survival. There is death in every corner, from the ruthless mating and endless fornication behaviours of animals to the gruesome departure of the old that makes way for the new. If God truly created nature, he must have done so in a moment of intense anger. Or perhaps Satan has taken refuge in the forests, a belief that is common in popular Medieval lore. Nature, when stripped of its romantic veneer, appears as nothing but misery.

This is where Huldra steps in. She embodies the paradox of nature's duality, its beauty and horror, its gentleness and savagery. Often depicted as a strikingly beautiful woman, Huldra is a forest spirit whose allure is impossible to resist. But beneath her enchanting exterior, she hides a telltale feature: a tail. Sometimes this tail is described as that of a cow, suggesting her connection to beasts, blurring the line between human and animal. In some interpretations, the tail hints at gender fluidity, obscuring traditional dichotomies of male and female. Thus, Huldra doesn't merely challenge the boundary between good and evil in nature, she also disrupts stable gender roles and the uniqueness of humans in the natural world. Academics and storytellers alike have been drawn to the paradoxes and dichotomies that Huldra embodies in debates about the value of nature, the rigidity of gender stereotypes and the anthropocentric view of the environment. According to myth, a Huldra lures unwitting wanderers into the forest, leading them so deep into her domain that

they are never seen again. In this way, she becomes a symbol of the bewitching complexity of life's greatest questions – questions that, like Huldra's victims, pull us into realms where clarity and resolution are forever out of reach.

Huldra's mythological roots trace back to the figure of Lilith, a shadowy character from Judeo-Christian folklore. According to the Bible, God created man and woman simultaneously in His own image. Yet in the book of Genesis, God creates Eve from Adam's rib. This leaves us with the perplexing question of who the 'first' woman was. This enigmatic woman has stirred debate since ancient Babylonia – appearing in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish mystical writings, and medieval theology – where she is often identified as Lilith, Adam's fiercely independent first wife, whose children were never acknowledged by God. Banished from God's grace, Lilith's children were condemned to live underground, becoming the ancestors of elves, trolls, pixies, and spirits – including Huldra.

Huldra is a shapeshifter, able to change form and identity. In Nordic folklore, she appears as a seductive forest spirit, while in Sami traditions, she takes on

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a wise, otherworldly role, dispensing knowledge and giving warnings. Sometimes Huldra is male, known as a 'Huldremann'. Perhaps the most famous of her historical appearances was in the shape of the powerful Völva, a Norse seeress or shaman whose prophecies shaped the mythology of the Viking age. Huldra also made her way into folktales and literature, most notably in Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867), where she appears as a green-clad woman, both an object of desire and a curse upon the protagonist.

Even today, the word Huldra carries weight in Nordic languages. To call a woman a *hulder* can either be a compliment or an insult, depending on her temperament and personality. Though few believe in her literal existence, her presence lingers in folklore and art. It's still not a word used lightly. Artists have been captivated by Huldra's dual nature, depicting her as both alluring and menacing.

The Norwegian painter Theodor Kittelsen (1857–1914) created some of the most iconic images of her, showing her as a hauntingly beautiful figure set against dark, brooding landscapes. Over time, however, Kittelsen's work has been demoted to illustrations in children's books, making her darker, more complex undertones less visible. One notable exception is the Norwegian black metal band Burzum, which featured Kittelsen's depiction of Huldra on the cover of their famed 1996 album *Filosofem*. In this context, Huldra's haunting presence feels more at home, her voice echoing through the album as a raw scream rather than a lullaby. In psychological terms, Huldra embodies the Madonna-whore complex, a concept introduced by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Freud argued that some men are unable to see women as both sexual beings and individuals worthy of love and respect, instead categorizing them as either saintly Madonnas or degraded, objectified sex toys. Contemporary psychologists have expanded this idea, noting that women, too, can fall into a similar pattern, viewing men either as heroic saviours or disposable fuckboys. In both cases, the complex prevents individuals from forming healthy, balanced relationships. Huldra, with her ability to embody both extremes, becomes a symbol of this psychological struggle. Huldra resides at the edge of the forest, a boundary zone where light meets darkness and order dissolves into chaos. Her power lies in her ability to unsettle those who venture too close, forcing them to confront uncomfortable truths. For those who romanticize nature as a harmonious Eden, she reveals its brutal, predatory side. For those who see nature only as a battleground, she unveils its profound beauty and interconnectedness. By holding these dichotomies in tension, she plays with our minds, ensuring that our imaginations will not descend into dull normality. She disrupts, she questions and she reminds us that the world is far more complex than we might wish to believe. Ultimately, Huldra's allure lies in her ability to embody contradictions. She is beautiful and terrifying, human and animal, sacred and profane. Whether as a figure from myth, a subject of art or a psychological archetype, she compels us to explore the spaces between opposites – the boundary zones where meaningful confusions begin.

