

J. Alison James
RUNA



May 1992

R U N A

by

J. Alison James

-

Atheneum 1995 New York

Maxwell Macmillan Canada Toronto

Maxwell Macmillan International

New York Oxford Singapore Sydney

For the Ednabs in my life

A Lucas/Evans Book

The rune interpretations are made with the assistance of *The Book of Runes: A Handbook for the Use of an Ancient Oracle: The Viking Runes*, commentary by Ralph Blum (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

Copyright © 1993 by J. Alison James

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Publisher.

Atbeneum

Macmillan Publishing Company

866 Third Avenue

New York, NY 10022

Maxwell Macmillan Canada, Inc.

1200 Eglinton Avenue East

Suite 200

Don Mills, Ontario M3C 5N1

Macmillan Publishing Company is part of the Maxwell Communication Group of Companies.

First edition

Printed in the United States of America

10987654321

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

James, J. Alison

Runa / J. Alison James.

p. cm.

Summary: A series of accidents and a discovery in a medieval church suddenly change Runa's carefree summer on a Swedish island into three tense days as she finds her life caught up in the rites of her Viking ancestors and subject to the implacable will of ancient Norse gods.

ISBN 0-689-31708-5

[1. Supernatural—Fiction. 2. Sweden—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.J15412Ru 1993

[Fic]—dc20

92-13936

RUNA

Who would ever think that so much can go on in
the soul of a young girl?

Anne Frank, age 12

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Marcia Marshall for being “the finest editor in the business”; to Barbara Lucas, whose memories were so mysterious that I couldn’t help but use them; to the Johanssons, caretakers of the wild Russ horses, who showed me their paths and patterns; to Birgitta Zerpe, curator at Gotlands Fornsal, who let me do rubbings on scraps of real rune stones in the museum’s attic; to the lovely town of Levide (please excuse the many liberties); to Edred Thorsson, who knows Old Swedish and translated the runes; to Eva Sutterland, who gave me Morfar’s memories; to Than, who remembered to ask all the questions; and to Anika, who opened strangers like doors. And thanks to Lizzie and Sarah and to Harriette, my eternal source of Swedish insight.

BEFORE

High above Earth the old Norse gods sit on their thrones in Asgard. Years flicker by like the second hand on a grandfather clock. They watch civilizations, reigns, and superpowers rise and fall with fond amusement. Their power is limited, as is their interest. They are not the omniscient, omnipotent Onegod that so many people worship. But it would be unfair to say: "They are only human." Truly they are divine, and their intervention, when they choose to use it, is unarguable.

Frigga is still a beauty; some things never change. She is also still a mother, and still a woman scorned. Loki, as always, is the trickster, but not the sweet-tempered kind, with jokes meant in fun. If there is a knot of trouble, follow it to its stringy end, and there you will surely find Loki. Balder is himself. For him, fires sometimes still burn on Midsummer's Eve. Balder is the son, Balder is the loving husband, Balder is the keeper of horses and the keeper of peace.

Balder would have things set right between Loki and his mother, Frigga. But the protesting cry of each unwilling sacrifice is heard clearly in Asgard, and each one wrenches the rift farther apart. Loki smiles, but Frigga feels the pain as if it were the death of her own child again and again. All because Balder's horse ran free; because his own fine steed died the death of mortal old age instead of being raised to immortality in the flames of his master's funeral pyre.

The time has come, has taken a long time coming. All that is needed is a life, freely given.

ONE



And suddenly everything stops.

I sit here; this granite shoulder of rock presses against my own shoulder blades. Or am I leaning against it? I can't tell. I lift up my chin to watch the sky; the clouds are heavy and bulging. Are they threatening me? I turn and see the grass; there is a small yellow spider in the center of the bluebell next to me. The grass is littered with dead twigs. I am part of this meadow. I live here, like the spider. Perhaps I shall die here like the twigs.

I hold time in my hands. I have been racing for three days to find a way out of this. But now, among the stone and spider and grass and twigs—among all this that is timeless, now I seem to have found some room to think.

I must be still. A butterfly has rested on my hand. A flame-colored butterfly, which would disappear in an instant if I flinched. But I feel a calm, cool spirit rise within me, and I am prepared to wait, to think, and to reason. I've missed my reason lately.

Sarah, my friend at home, calls me the "epitome of reasonability," which goes to show how distracted this whole situation has made me. But who wouldn't be a little distracted if they found out they were . . . I have to stop my whining mind. That little thought lost the butterfly.

Time. I have time now. A few hours at least. It is only eight o'clock, still just the beginning of night, although it won't be dark yet for hours, if it gets dark at all. Tomorrow doesn't start until midnight. I have time. Perhaps if I sort through what has happened, it will be clearer to me what I have to do. If I think through every detail, maybe I will find a path through this overgrown thorn hedge. I'm not dead yet.

Okay. So when did it all start? I don't mean the whole thing, thousands of years ago, but for me. Probably with the letter my grandfather Morfar sent with my ticket to come visit him in Sweden. I think back and remember opening the letter, but I don't remember being excited, the way I always was, hearing from my favorite grandfather. Because when I got the letter, I was still reeling from the accident I'd just been in—I'd nearly been killed. That accident was just the first part of the pattern, now I am sure. Is this the universe's way of telling me that it is serious? That my life is as momentary as this mosquito biting

my arm? I decide, in a moment of compassion, not to swat the mosquito but to gently blow it away, like the wind. That accident blew me away. It was a sign.

I was walking home because my best friend, Sarah, had her oboe lesson after school, and we wanted to plan the weekend, so I waited for her instead of riding the bus.

We were crossing Route 7, which is always heavy with traffic. Sarah was a few steps ahead, looking back to say something when she screamed, "*Runa, jump!*" I heard the screech of tires and I jumped so fast I felt as though I'd been shot from a gun. I landed with a bang on the hood of a car waiting to turn left. In the exact same split second, a long, black car crushed in the side of the car I was on, knocking me off into the street.

If Sarah hadn't called, if I hadn't jumped, I would have been pinned like an insect between the two cars. There was a breath of stunned silence, then everything started: people screaming; the driver of the black car got out with a bottle in his hand and started swearing at the other driver, as if it were her fault. She must not have seen me sitting on the ground, because she was screaming at him, "Oh my God, you killed that girl! You killed that girl!"

And then came the sirens and lights. It happened just down the street from the police station, so everyone was there all at once. Some rescue person checked me out, but even though I was so scared I was shaking all over, the only thing wrong was a

bruised shoulder and a scraped knee from falling off the car. The police asked us questions, then someone drove Sarah and me home.

It was weird to come into the house with a police escort and have my mom call out in Swedish: "How was school, Runa?" But she understands English perfectly well. When the policeman called out, "Excuse me, ma'am, I'm afraid there's been a little accident," she came running from the kitchen with her face as white as a fish.

"I'm fine, Mom," I said. "But you should see the cars."

That was the day the letter had come from Morfar with my ticket to Sweden.

Ordinarily I would have been overjoyed to get a ticket to go to the place where my mom grew up; I absolutely love Morfar. But I had just lined up a job at the Morgans' stables for the summer—Julie Morgan had been telling me for years that I could work there when I was old enough to be responsible, and she finally decided this year that I could be trusted. I was going to work to pay for my lessons all winter. My parents are starting to feel the pinch because my twin brothers, Nick and Alex, are both going to college after this year. I've been afraid that in the throes of saving, my lessons might be the first thing to go.

Just think. If I'd stayed at home maybe none of this would have happened—at least I wouldn't know about any of it. It would be early afternoon, and I would be cleaning stalls while the horses were all out in the field and in the ring. At midnight, when the day

changes and it is my birthday here, it would only be six in the evening, and I would be up in the loft moving hay because it is too hot to do that in the middle of the afternoon. I wonder if I could just go home, if . . .

Fantasy is not going to help me now. I am not there. I am in Sweden. I flew here, on my own for the first time. I got to go to the special kids' room in Amsterdam when I was waiting for my connecting flight, and that was cool. And seeing my grandfather, Morfar, in the terminal in Stockholm was the best. I had been worried. I hadn't seen him for two years, and my grandma, Mormor, died last year.

My mother was the only one who went back for the funeral. Now, she'd warned me over and over to take care of him and not to make too much work for him. After all that fuss I was afraid that he would have changed, that he'd look small and worn out. But he looked great, as always. Old as the island and fresh as the wind. God, I love Morfar. Is he starting the bonfire now? Is that going to help?

Stop. Don't jump ahead. I need to think through everything in order, to find the connections. There must be a pattern to what has happened, something I have missed. This couldn't all be random; not something this ancient, not something this big.

So, after Morfar met me, we spent the day in Stockholm; Morfar ran some errands and bought some gardening tools. In the afternoon we visited the National Museum to see the Carl Larsson paintings and went to the old city for dinner. Then we drove to

the ferry. The ferry leaves at midnight and sails all night, arriving in the early morning on the island of Gotland. We had a small room with a round window just above the water.

I was so tired I drowned in sleep. I don't know if I dreamed. It was really early when I woke up, refreshed and excited. I got up, showered, and braided my wet hair. Then I wiped the steam off the mirror and looked at myself, wondering if I looked almost thirteen. My hair is so pale that the only part of my face with any real color is my eyes. They are big and dark blue. Blueberry eyes, my mother calls them. I looked down at my body. Without clothes on, I could tell I wasn't eight anymore, but nobody else was likely to notice. I went into the room and got dressed.

Morfar was already up, though his bed was so neat it didn't look as if he had slept at all. I wanted to see the island approach, so I went out to find the elevator. All the signs, of course, were in Swedish, and even though I feel completely comfortable with the language, it was still a little odd to see an elevator labeled HISS. I think speaking Swedish in our home is my mother's concession to giving up her country.

On the top deck, I walked by passengers sleeping in their seats to the front of the ship—what is it called?—the bow. The wind was blowing, the water was choppy, and the ship was lunging up and down. There were even some puddles on the deck where some waves had splashed over. I hadn't noticed the movement as much when I was walking through the ship, but out here it was wild. I stood up against the

railing, right at the point of the prow, leaning out toward the water. I was pitched up and down as though I were riding a bucking horse. It was ridiculously dangerous and wonderful.

Gotland was just on the horizon, a long, gray rise in the water, with a few white cliffs that looked like big, breaking waves from this distance. On one bounce, the wind broke apart my braid and my hair flapped against my back. I grinned so hard my teeth got cold. I held on to the metal railing and flew.

All of a sudden a hand pushed so hard on my back that my feet slipped off the railing and I pitched forward into space. I saw the waves in that instant break in my face. Then a vice grip of fingers clutched my calf and grabbed my wrist and pulled me back. My chest scraped on the rail.

Once my feet were firmly on deck again, I turned around furiously to see who had pushed me. It was Morfar. He looked absolutely sick. He was still holding my wrist, as if I'd fall into the sea if he let go. All my fury burst into tears. I think I'd been holding my breath the whole time. Morfar held me.

"Runa. Oh, Runa," he said. His voice was unsteady. "I slipped on the wet deck and fell into you. You almost . . . I almost . . ."

I still felt the splash of the wave on my face, and my mind thought of being plowed under the great ship moving deceptively fast over the dark water. I shivered.

"Let's get you inside," Morfar said. He took off his jacket and wrapped it around me. I started to fol-

low him, but I looked behind and saw, with surprise, the gray stone walls and red roofs of Visby. We were nearly there.

"Wait!" I said, and Morfar came back. We stood together at the rail, both feet on deck this time, and Morfar put his arm around my shoulder, holding me close. We watched the beautiful medieval city grow larger, until the wall became turreted with big Swedish flags billowing from the top of each tower, and the mass of red became separate clay tile roofs climbing like roses up the hillside. We waited there, shivering in the chill of the spray and the early morning wind until the very last minute, when we raced to get our bags and ran down to the car. We got there just as our line of cars was pulling off the ferry.

"Could we eat breakfast in Visby?" I asked.

Morfar nodded. He had some grocery shopping to do anyway, when the shops opened.

Visby is all old houses pressed against each other as if they were gossiping and twisted, narrow cobblestone streets. Even though Morfar drove slowly, my vision was broken into mosaics with the jittery motion of the car on the cobblestones. I don't know how he found the right ONE-WAY streets from the DO NOT ENTERs. This city was not built for cars, a twentieth-century novelty that it had reluctantly accepted.

As if he were reading my mind, Morfar said, "In a few days no cars will be allowed in the city limits. They close it to traffic for the summer."

"Good idea," I said.

We pulled into a parking space in the market square, in the shadow of a huge ruined cathedral. The only place open was a bakery across the way. Morfar went in and got us a bag full of hot, buttery pastries, and we walked down the road, eating and smelling the roses.

"Is there a law that you have to grow roses in Visby?" I asked. But Morfar only smiled, his mouth full of crumbling Danish pastry. It seems that every single little house has an arch of flamboyant crimson roses up to the roof.

There was a gap between the houses where a set of steep stairs led down to the next road. I remembered this place. It has always been my favorite view. We were at the top of the city and on quite a hill, so we could look down over all the peaks of red tile roofs, as lovely as a ripple of mountains, to the sea itself. What a blue. Nearly purple out where it is deep, but closer in, it is just the bright royal blue of the Swedish flag. Perhaps that is why the flag is the way it is: the yellow summer sun and the blue Baltic Sea. Morfar stopped so I could fill up with the sight.

We sat in front of the ruined cathedral to finish our breakfast. It was cool, but not chilly, even in the shade. The fresh air tickled my nose. The back of the ruin, where the roof used to be, was overgrown with grass. And the huge stained-glass windows arched open, empty. Once I came here with my family to see a play. The open windows were the backdrop, changing through the play from blue sky to the rosy pink