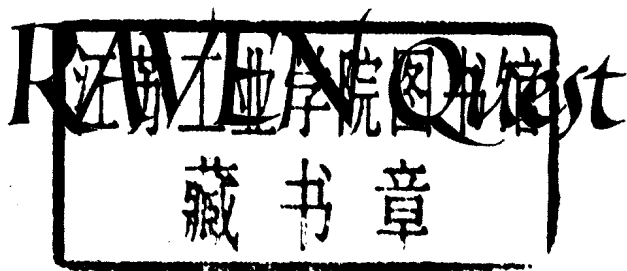


SHARON STEWART

# RAVEN Quest

---





Sharon Stewart



**Scholastic Canada Ltd.**

Toronto New York London Auckland Sydney  
Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong Buenos Aires

**Scholastic Canada Ltd.**  
175 Hillmount Road, Markham, Ontario L6C 1Z7, Canada

**Scholastic Inc.**  
555 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, USA

**Scholastic Australia Pty Limited**  
PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

**Scholastic New Zealand Limited**  
Private Bag 94407, Greenmount, Auckland, New Zealand

**Scholastic Ltd.**  
Villiers House, Clarendon Avenue, Leamington Spa,  
Warwickshire CV32 5PR, UK

Cover photograph © Carl Cook  
Vignettes by Heidi Taillefer

**National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Stewart, Sharon (Sharon Roberta), 1944-  
Raven quest / Sharon Stewart.

ISBN 0-439-98988-4

I. Title.

PS8587.T4895R39 2003  
PZ7

jC813'.54

C2003-901057-0

Copyright © 2003 by Sharon Stewart. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher, Scholastic Canada Ltd., 175 Hillmount Road, Markham, Ontario L6C 1Z7, Canada. In the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a licence must be obtained from Access Copyright (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency), 1 Yonge Street, Suite 1900, Toronto, Ontario M5E 1E5 (1-800-893-5777).

6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada

03 04 05 06 07

*To Roderick, for all the reasons.*

## Prologue

Two ravens do battle, circling high and higher in the icy winter air. The smaller of the two, weakened by long fasting, fights for nest and mate; the other, younger and stronger, to rob him of both. Croaking, they buffet each other with their wings, and slash with their beaks. Then they seize each other with their claws, flipping over in mid-air and plummeting toward the dark roof of the forest below. At the last moment they break off, and crash through the tops of the trees, losing each other for a moment among the branches, then burst out into a narrow valley between two ridges. There the challenger gets above the defender, and drives him to the ground. At bay now, the smaller bird turns on his back, grappling with his claws and striking out with his beak. But his enemy is stronger: pinning the defender down, he shatters his breast with a few mighty blows of his beak. Blood stains the snow. Leisurely, contemptuously, the victor pecks out the eyes of his dead rival. Then he beats away into the north wind on heavy wings.

From the eaves of the forest another raven has watched the battle. She launches herself into the air and circles once over the valley, uttering a hoarse cry. Then she follows the victor, leaving the body alone, very small, very black against the field of snow.

# **Part 1**

**Tok**



## Chapter 1

*First Raven was jealous of other birds. "You've given me no gifts," he croaked to Skyah. "No sweet voice, no bright feathers."*

*"Try your wings," said the Maker, "and dance for my pleasure."*

— Myths of the Tellers

Tok angled his wings against the wind, feeling its lift, letting it carry him toward the south ridge of Mount Storm. Though spring had come late after a winter of deep snows, the rocky crest was already bare. The rays of the strengthening sun had heated it, creating a thermal of rising warm air. Tok soared, letting the currents carry him upward, higher and higher.

Above him, he could see dozens of other ravens. He used his long sight, bringing the distant shapes into sharper focus. As he watched, two of them dipped their wings and rolled over and over in the air, diving

down toward the trees before righting themselves with easy flaps of their wings and riding the thermal up again. Others followed them, and soon the air was full of ravens tumbling like black leaves against the bright blue sky.

The skydance! Catching the excitement, Tok bent his right wing and flipped onto his back for a moment. Then he did a barrel roll and powered into a falling-leaf dive that dropped him steeply earthward. Wind sang through his flight feathers as he tumbled, croaking his delight. At last he pulled himself out of the dive, his flight muscles straining in his breast, and rose quickly, the blood pulsing in his head. Finding the thermal, he rode it up again.

At the top he saw Tarkah, a young raven who had appeared in the roost the previous autumn.

"Rrrock! Show-off!" she teased, as Tok came up level with her. At her far wingtip flew Grakk, another newcomer. Ever since he had arrived, the big ravenet had pushed himself forward as the leader of the young ravens. All the other males had humbled themselves before him, except for Tok. Now Grakk stared angrily at him and Tok glared back.

"Come on, you snail-wings, dance!" cried Tarkah, twisting into a barrel roll that challenged them to follow.

Tok copied her movement easily, coming out of his own roll level with Tarkah's near wingtip. Grakk, a bigger bird and heavier in the air, misjudged and came out some way below them. Tarkah winked at Tok with



the whitelids at the corners of her eyes. Then the two of them dove straight down, wings angled backward, with Grakk trailing behind. Giddy with delight, they saw the ground rushing up at them. At the last possible moment they pulled out of the power dive. Then with lazy wing-flaps they found the thermal.

As they rode it back up, Grakk edged nearer to Tok and gave him a savage blow with his wing. With a mocking quork, Tok rolled onto his back and flew upside down, waving his claws in pretended helplessness, levelling out again just beyond Grakk's reach.

Grakk shot him a glance of pure hatred. "Fancy dancing, clown. But it takes more than that to make a raven lord," he croaked. "Bravest at the carcass, strongest against your enemies, that's what wins a lady and a territory."

"Big boasts, Grakk," jeered Tarkah, who had caught up with them again. "You haven't won anything yet."

"But I'm Grakk, son of Barakk, lord of wide lands," Grakk snapped. "I have something to boast about. Not like this no-name. He has no lineage. Why, he's no better than a common crow!"

*A crow!* It was a deadly insult to compare a raven to one of those clumsy flappers.

In fury, Tok launched himself at Grakk, giving him a sharp blow with his claws, then doing an insolent loop over his back. "You should know. A crow must have taught you to fly, numb-wing," he taunted. But anger spoiled the joy of flight for him. Even in the air

his lack of a proper name followed him. And there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing!

Tilting his wings, he banked away from the other two, arrowing downward toward the forest far below.

"Oh, for Skyah's sake!" Tarkah called after him. "Do you have to be so touchy?"

Tok paid no heed. How could she understand how he felt? She had an honourable name. In another year or two she would command a mate, and a fine territory. But an outcast like him had no future. In the air he was more than a match for any other ravenet. But on the feeding ground, at the roost, he was nobody. Tok No-Name, the others called him, when they thought to call him anything at all.

He landed on the limb of a large maple tree, still leafless after the long winter. Despite his rage, he was ever hungry, and he scanned the floor of the forest, the fine hair-like feathers over his nostrils quivering. At first he saw nothing. Then, the tiniest movement. At the foot of the tree, a careless deer mouse popped out of its snow tunnel, half-collapsed now by the thaw. On silent wings, Tok dropped down and seized it, crushing it with his powerful beak.

Though his hunger was fierce, a sudden thought kept him from bolting down the food. His mother, Lady Groh, had ignored him and had driven him away when he tried to find out more about his father. But now it was the Moon of Nestlings, and food would always be welcome.

Lifting himself low over the treetops, he headed for the cliff where Lord and Lady Groh had built this season's nest. His mother had chosen a different site from the place where Tok had been raised. Were her memories as bad as his? he wondered, remembering the bitter cold of that time, the gnawing hunger in his unfilled belly, and the shrivelled bodies of his brother and sister lying in the bottom of the nest. Smaller and weaker than Tok, they had been unable to survive such hardship. Even his mother had come close to starving when the food supply failed long before snowmelt. He could dimly remember his father, fasted to a shadow of himself, winging in with small mouthfuls of food. And then he came no more.

Soon afterward, his mother had returned to the nest, her crop bulging with food. It had the rank flavour of old carrion when she stuffed it down Tok's throat, but he'd gulped it eagerly. He soon found out where the food came from, for a big male raven named Groh appeared at the nest. He stared at Tok with cold eyes, begrudging every morsel of food Tok's mother shared with him. Frightened of he knew not what, Tok had left the nest as soon as he could fly. After that he flapped awkwardly after his mother — Lady Groh now — trying to learn as best he could how to find food for himself. All too soon she lost interest in him, and spent her time foraging and soaring with her new mate. Both adults drove Tok off when he tried to follow them. And so he was left alone.

At first it was not too bad, for it was the way of young ravens to become independent as soon as they could. Tok had banded with other youngsters of his year, foraging in groups wherever they could sneak into the territories of the lords and ladies, roosting together at night for comfort. But soon rumours spread within the roost, and his companions began to shun him. Because when they challenged him, he had no lineage, no father's name, to give them. His mother had refused to tell him, nor would anyone else.

And so Tok had come to understand that his father had shamed him somehow. When the other young birds dispersed at the end of the summer, flying boldly away to seek new homes and future mates, he had not followed them, though his wings ached to. But how could he go? he asked himself. With no lineage to offer a mate, he would never be able to hold a territory. He would remain an outsider wherever he went. His only hope was that his mother would change her mind and grant him his father's name.

So he had stayed where he was, stealing a living as best he could on the fringes of the lords and ladies' territories. In the Moon of the Falling Leaves, young birds who had dispersed from distant ravenlands began to arrive. For a while he was caught up in the excitement of their fall flights, practising his skill in the air, and rejoicing in it. He joined the bold groups that invaded the feeding grounds, defying the lords and ladies by their sheer numbers and demanding

their share of the food. Then came the Moon of the Hunters, the only time the Two-Legs ventured far into the mountains. Most of them only took a little meat from the moose and deer they killed. So the forest was rich in skinned carcasses — prime pickings for ravens. Tok feasted along with the others.

In the evening roosts he listened eagerly to the adventures of the young strangers, especially the dashing Tarkah. For a time he was allowed to be one of them, for the newcomers knew nothing of his past and accepted him as just another stranger like themselves. But then as winter closed in, solitary adult birds from the near territories began to roost with the young newcomers. They all knew about Tok's father and they told the story to the newcomers. When Tok shuffled closer in the roost, trying to hear for himself, everyone would fall silent and stare at him. So once again he was Tok No-Name. And now some called him Tok Stay-at-home too.

Grakk in particular liked to taunt him. A dominant bird, he swaggered about the feeding grounds with bristling feathers, yielding to no one but the lords and ladies. At night in the roost Tok often heard him boasting about his strength and his family to the others; he also had plenty to say about shame and outcasts and ravenets too cowardly to seek new homes. There were always murmurs and whispers of agreement, and the birds who roosted closest to Tok would move a bit further off along the

branches. So in the end he was lonelier than ever.

Of course he never let the others know how he felt. When they snubbed him, he pretended to ignore them. He met every taunt with a jeer, every push with a shove. And in the air he danced circles around them. It was all he could do to show he was *kora* despite his lack of a name.

Carrying the mouse in his beak, Tok now approached Lord and Lady Groh's nest. Groh hated him, he knew, and would drive him away on sight. So he landed first in a tree some distance away. But for once his luck was good, and he could see that his mother was alone. She was standing in the nest with half-open wings, shading her four downy nestlings from the direct rays of the sun. Karah, Lady Groh, was a big bird and she was a beauty. In the sunlight her black feathers shone with iridescent colour — green on her cheeks and underparts, with shades of blue and violet on her back and wings and wedge-shaped tail.

Tok ventured closer, landing on a dead tree stub beside the nest.

"It's you," said Lady Groh, staring at him out of cold amber eyes. "Why are you still around to shame me? You have no more *kora* than your father — you should have left with your yearmates. If Groh finds you here, he'll kill you!" But she leaned over and snatched the mouse Tok offered all the same. Tearing strips off it, she pulped them in her beak, then

crammed the meat down the gaping throats of her nestlings. The last bit of skin she swallowed herself. When she finished, she stropped her beak on the twigs of the nest. Then she roused her feathers so they stood out stiffly around her body, making her look twice her real size. "Go away," she ordered. "Leave this land, as you should have done last year."

"Then grant me my father's name," begged Tok. "How can I go without that?"

Lady Groh hissed in annoyance. "The Kort declared your father *unkora*. He let us starve, remember? You nearly died like the others."

Condemned by the Kort! It was even worse than Tok had thought, for the Kort was the source of ravenlaw. Its dooms were final, fatal. . . . "B—but maybe he just couldn't find food . . ." he quavered.

Lady Groh cut him off. "Your father betrayed us!" she snapped. "He died for that and his name died with him. We ravens do not speak the names of the dishonored, those who die *unkora*. No ravenlines must ever bear their names. That is your misfortune."

"But Mother — " Tok began. Suddenly a great buffet sent him reeling from his perch. Before he could regain his balance he was struck again and then again. He flapped awkwardly into a spruce tree far below the nest, and faced his attacker, who settled on a branch above.

It was Lord Groh. He roused, shaking his feathers, and stared down at Tok menacingly. "What do you

mean by sneaking around my nest, meddling with my family?" he growled.

"I . . . I only brought my mother some food," protested Tok. "For the nestlings."

"Bah." Groh fanned his huge wings. "We need no help from the likes of you, outcast. Off with you before I kill you as I did your no-good father!"

Tok shuddered. It was true, then, what he had half-guessed but feared to believe. "Murderer!" he croaked.

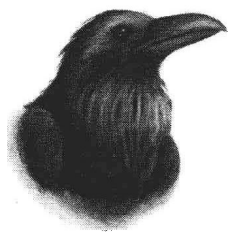
Groh dove at him, slashing with his beak, driving him from his branch. They rocketed out of the trees, the larger bird right on Tok's tail as he dodged wildly this way and that. But Tok's nimble wings saved him, and Groh soon began to fall behind.

"Next time I'll leave you for carrion!" the older bird cried. With a sweep of his powerful wings he wheeled and flew back in the direction of the nest.

Tok flew until he could fly no more, then he plunged into a dense copse of fir trees. Heart pounding, he peered out, scarcely able to believe Groh was not still behind him — Groh, his father's murderer!

He shivered. His mother had accepted Groh soon after her mate's disappearance, granting him the territory and the lordship. She must have known Tok's father would never return. Had she and Groh planned his father's death, then? In misery, Tok buried his head under his wing.





## Chapter 2

*A raven without lineage is unkora; he or she  
may not take a mate or hold territory.*

— Dooms of the Kort

He awoke in the first grey light of dawn. Rousing his feathers he sleepily began to preen them, running the length of each one through his beak. Then he poked his head out of the surrounding branches, gazing westward toward the tall tree where the young ravens roosted. After his escape from Lord Groh he had decided not to return there for the night, but instead had roosted alone in a small but thick-needed fir not too far away.

As he watched, a group of ravenets lifted away from the roost. They circled above it for a while, calling to others to join them, then headed south. Tok could tell from the way they flew, with strong steady wingbeats, that they knew exactly where they were going. Someone must have found a new feeding ground, he