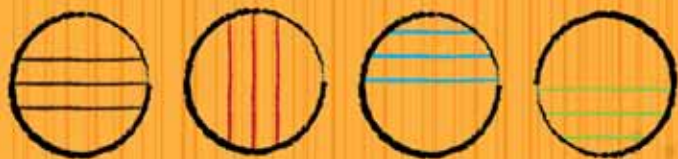


MASTERS

BOOK 2 OF THE INDRALAS SERIES



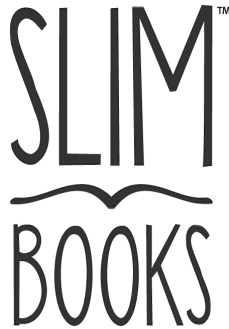
A SlimBook by Bridgette Conrow

SLIM
BOOKS

Masters

Book 2 of the Indralas Series

A SlimBook by **Bridgette Conrow**



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1

The noise was immense, and the destruction terrible. No one knew the cause, but when Kina's Sanctuary in Mulocha had collapsed, all of the fire Priests inside had either died or been trapped in the rubble. The building had been four stories tall, made completely of stone, and just two weeks prior to the incident had been declared safe by the city masons on their routine inspections.

The collapse struck fear into the people of Mulocha, that something dedicated to one of their beloved Goddesses had suddenly crumbled. Not crumbled: it had exploded. Stone had sprayed out in all directions, and shattered glass had sliced passersby below. Many people had witnessed the building fall, some of whom were now dead from injuries, others incapacitated indefinitely, and even more cut and bruised.

After the Sanctuary had collapsed, it seemed as if the whole population had decided to congregate around the mess. Children crawled on the rubble, unaware of the bodies buried beneath them.

The Heads of Malor's, Sylla's and Veran's Sanctuaries had arrived two hours after the incident, first gathering in the city center before making their way to the eastern edge of the city. They walked through the sea of gawkers with a calm that veiled their own unease.

Upon their arrival, the onlookers had parted to let the Heads through. Priests were taught as Initiates to maintain a mask while in the public eye, but nothing could have prepared these three for what they found.

The Power flows were gone, and the Heads were scared.

Jylora, Head Priestess of Mulocha's Sanctuary of Sylla, had the most reason to fear, for she was first to discover that the Webs were gone. She pressed her way through the throng, heading for the nearest inn. She needed to report as soon as possible to the Head Council. She needed a horse.

2

Sylla was thankful for her uneventful return trip to Mulocha. She was even more thankful for the fact that she had not had to travel more than two days due to the fast flowing river leading south straight into the city itself. On foot, the trip would have taken nearer to four or five days, but the river was quick and her little boat, although old, was well maintained. A little extra push with Power had sent her boat flying down the river, and had helped it maintain its distance from the shore while she slept.

She felt extreme guilt for having left Malor behind with the girl, but Sylla had begun to fray so badly, that her mind was losing its grip on her Sent Form. Her main concern was that she had been pulled back to her body while Malor had been out searching for sustenance for the girl. Indralas had been left all by herself—asleep, yes, but what if someone stumbled upon her?

Because of those circumstances her time on the river had been spent recuperating. Fish could not fight against currents propelled by Power, and they practically leapt into her boat. A pity that she could not heat the fish using Power, but she had had the presence of mind to grab her flint before leaving the Sanctuary in which she had been posing as Priestess Serena.

She wasn't prepared for what she found when she reached Mulocha, though. According to her fellow Priestly brothers and sisters, that very morning a Sanctuary building had collapsed, and in that building had been many of the Order of Kina. She murmured a small prayer to the

Power for their souls, something that most of the Orders thought foolish. They all chose to pray to the Four. Sylla did not practice self-worship. *After all, if I were a Goddess, the world would be a much better place, ne? None of this Order nonsense, either.*

She greatly disapproved of the method of the Orders. They hid behind their “made up” gods and goddesses as a way to avoid having to do anything for the common people. In her time, the time in which she was born, it was the duty of a Sage to go out of the way to help others. Things had changed very much, so she tried in her own Sanctuary to teach those values to the other Priests and Priestesses. Some took to those values like fish in water, and others like fish to air.

There were three people from the Orders circling the rubble, trying to get the children climbing on large rocks down from their precarious perches. It was not irreverence for the dead, Sylla thought to herself, it was innocence. They knew nothing of death, and enjoyed their world, the world of life every day. *It is better not to know death, ne?* Knowledge of death could offer only pain.

She shifted her attention from the children to the Priests and Priestess circling the remains of the building. Each wore the medal of Head Priest, which meant that one of them might be the Head of this Sanctuary. Being unable to see the crest on the medals, she used Sight, and her breath caught in her throat.

There was Power around the Priests, yes, marking them as air, water, and earth Priests, but the vast expanse where the building once stood was void of any Power. That did not happen naturally, and no one person would be able to draw in that much Power, or all four elements,

alone. Except a Black Blessed. A Four-Gifted. This building did not collapse on its own. Sylla had only seen this once before, and it was connected to the boy named Keral.

What had happened? Had the Power taken Indralas as it had done to that poor young man so long ago? Had Malor been caught in it? A shimmer overhead caught her eye and she sighed in relief, making out Veran's Sent Form. She released a neutral band of water Power toward him, he saw it, spun and upon catching sight of her, pointed toward the Lilop Forest. She nodded and made her way through the crowd.

Her mind was fixed solely on finding out what had gone wrong with Indralas, and knowing that Veran was at the site of disaster meant that he most likely knew something. Perhaps he even knew where the girl had gone. She walked as nonchalantly as possible into the tree line, maintaining a straight path to avoid drawing attention. About two hundred paces into the forest, Veran landed himself directly in front of Sylla, one hand on his hip, the other running through his hair.

It wasn't actual hair, and they both knew it. It was Power, and because Power connected to the mind, anything he did would feel like the same action in his own body. That Power, if she got close enough, would make a tentative connection with her own mind, and he would feel physically present, even though all his body was, at the moment, was a sheath of Power.

"She's done it, Sylla."

"Gone mad?"

"No, I mean yes—I'm not sure, exactly." He began to pace, head down, shoulders hunched. "She's not herself. I was there, one second she was plain Indralas, terrified, of course because she was trapped by four Priests all from different Sanctuaries—" Sylla gasped, punctuating his speech, "they were looking to drain her, but...I don't think they wanted to kill her. She somehow managed to push past them and the next thing I knew she was facing off with all four of them, and the Power..."

"She killed them." It wasn't a question; it was a statement. She knew what had happened. After all, she had seen the aftermath of Keral.

"It wasn't just killing. She cooked them. From inside *and* outside. It was like a funnel of fire had circled each of them, and then mixed in with the water in their bodies. I'd never seen anything like it. They split open like sausages. She isn't a Keral, she's worse than Keral was, more violent. But I don't think it's just *her*. Keral never spoke, remember. Indralas did, and it sounded odd."

"A side effect of going insane?"

"No, it was low, gravelly, and it echoed. I think she's possessed. Maybe Keral was possessed."

"Possessed by what?"

"I don't know, but it's been a half day already—"

A loud rumbling came from the direction of Mulocha, and Veran stopped cold, looking off toward the city. There was some shouting from the site of the collapsed Sanctuary.

“What was that?”

“I’ll check.” Veran leapt up into the air and a gust grabbed at Sylla’s robe as he flew away.

Possessed. Those were just rumors. Indralas wasn’t possessed, she was just Gifted with all four elements. The Power had to have affected her mind, created something in her that hadn’t been there before. Veran dropped down into the clearing, he reached out to her and grabbed her shoulders.

“She’s taken down another Sanctuary. I’m going to track her. You find Malor and try to meet up with Kina. I can fly faster than she’ll walk, I’ll come back and check in on you regularly.”

Before she could answer him, he had taken off again, and Sylla began to worry. Where was Malor? How long would it take for Kina to reach them? How many lives would Indralas take?

3

The low black buildings on the horizon could be nothing more than a small town. Indralas had no desire to go there, and yet her body continued on, regardless of what she thought, driven on by Masters. It had been a day and half since the takeover.

"You must take back your body!" The voices screamed at her from the back of her mind. Meanwhile, the voices that had taken control of her body, and had demanded she call them Masters, had been blazing a trail through Mulocha, completely unnoticed due to the fact that the whole population had raced to the wreckage of Kina's Sanctuary.

I would if I knew how. She thought back at them, angry, at herself, at them, at Malor and Sylla for leaving her behind, and at Aaron for triggering this whole thing. She was angriest at Masters. Whoever they were, she didn't want them controlling her body. She had decided while they were draining the Power in and around the Sanctuary that she would make the most of this situation, and learn what she could about Power from them until she could regain control.

Everywhere they went, it was like her body was sucking in all of the Power around them. While her mind was somewhat separated from her body, she still Saw, and the Webs were spiraling into her, and coming out in a thick black cobweb all around her. The pulsating nodes were a black that looked almost purple, malevolent looking little orbs. Each thread was solid black, but thin lines of red, blue, green, and gold twisted their way around the core of black, attaching like lichens to a rock.

She almost felt like those small balls of black were eyes, watching her and waiting...for what? A chance to completely tear her mind away from her body? The Priests had called her Black Blessed, but this was no Blessing. Not only was her life in danger, but anyone she crossed paths with would be in danger. As she thought this, a man came out of a building to her right. He seemed not to notice her, as he went about closing the shutters to the front of the building.

A sign on the front read *BAKERY*, and Indralas could smell the lingering scent of baked bread from that morning. Her stomach growled, in response to her thoughts, but her legs carried her onward. The man shouted out as she passed, and her heart sank. He had noticed her eyes. There was no hope for him now.

She felt the Power around her enter her body through the millions of tiny black threads attached to her skin. If she had lain down in a nest of ground wasps it could not have hurt more, the Power gathered up her arms, which rose to Masters command.

No! She thought, trying to scream at Masters as loud as possible with her mental voice, and her hand clenched into a fist. It was a mistake. The man dove for the door to his bakery, and made it safely inside, but the Power that Masters had been about to release was choked back into her arm. It burst into flame, her robe quickly disintegrating into ash. Her arm split up the side, her skin rose red and puffy.

"Dammit!" Her voice shouted, and the blue and gold threads woven around the black webbing sprang loose, attaching directly to her arm. The air around her smelled of burnt meat, she realized, her arm was cooking. She sobbed silently, watching as the Power worked. The blue

threads wormed themselves down into her arm, and the heat from the Power slowly ebbed away, cooling. Thin red lines of Power crept out of the split, puddled into orbs and connected together with threads, all of which Masters drew into her and placed onto the black webbing.

The gold Power formed a band around her arm and slid up and down the length of it, sloughing off dead skin, layering a thin shimmering covering of Power that soothed the pain, but still burned. She could not imagine why anyone would use Power if it hurt so. The split in her arm slowly began to close up. Masters released some more of the water Power, cleaning her arm off. Almost new, her arm had barely any sign of injury, but it still felt tender.

"Never do that again. Do you understand?" It was her voice, and yet it had a hollow echoing and gravelly tone to it.

Then remove me from my body completely, because until I've taken it back, I will never stop fighting you, she thought at Masters. They did not respond, rather they continued onward, taking in Power as they went.

Why won't they do it? She asked the other voices.

The moment your mind leaves your body, their connection to life disappears. You will be like us, then, they answered.

You were Black Blessed?

We were born of Power, We are Power. We are of the Webs. We are what the Priests call Black Blessed. We were once called Four-Gifted. You are our sister. We are many. We are now the Broken.

And who are Masters?

Thieves. Bandits. Con-men. They were Sages, They were Head Priests, They were Head Council members. They thrive on Power, and still want more. Hungering, nasty, greedy. They wish to be gods.

The voices fell silent, and Indra felt something draw near, an enormous presence, clearly differentiated from the others. In a crowd, she would have recognized this being.

I do not wish for you to be like me.

Her vision of the streets of Mulocha began to blur, and, afraid that she might be losing her hold on her body, began to panic. She tried to pull back from the new voice, but he mentally clamped on to her.

Do not fear me, I wish to show you what happened.

The someone melded into her, and her sight faded completely, went dark and then lightened again. She was once again in a body, taller than her own by almost a foot, and she was no longer in Mulocha.

These are my memories. Now they are your memories as well.

She was walking through a vast desert. She somehow knew immediately what had passed. She had destroyed five villages so far, and swept through a forest, disintegrating trees, killing animals and people alike. Up ahead she could see two people waiting for her.

"Who are they?" she asked.

They are my saviors, and my destroyers. They took my life, and part of my mind. Because of this, I may not pass from the world.

As they drew nearer to the two awaiting them, she experienced a moment of recognition. The women were dressed in robes, like the Priest and Priestesses of the Orders, but they were brown in color, and much rougher fabric than even the Initiates of the Orders would ever wear.

The long straight black hair and the red eyes of the woman on the right paired with the smooth complexion, high cheek bones, and long slender limbs could not be anyone other than Kina, and the woman on the left... Her wavy reddish hair and wide-set blue eyes, thin nose was Sylla. If they were here, where were Malor and Veran?

Suddenly Indralas felt the same gush of Power that Masters had subjected her to in Mulocha, and a wind kicked up, circling her. Sand rose into the air and whirled into a great funnel. Not a single grain of it touched her body, and yet it felt like all of it was slicing into her skin because of the Power. Then, something burst through the windstorm, and slammed into her back. She stumbled forward, and whatever it was that had hit her latched onto her between her shoulder blades.

Another impact whumped into her from behind, and she heard a yelp, a boy's voice. Two more came from in front of her, latching onto her chest. And then the world turned into a haze of pain. The windstorm died down, but her skin felt as though it were being peeled from her body. The waves weakened, and with each new wash of Power she screamed. The battle began.