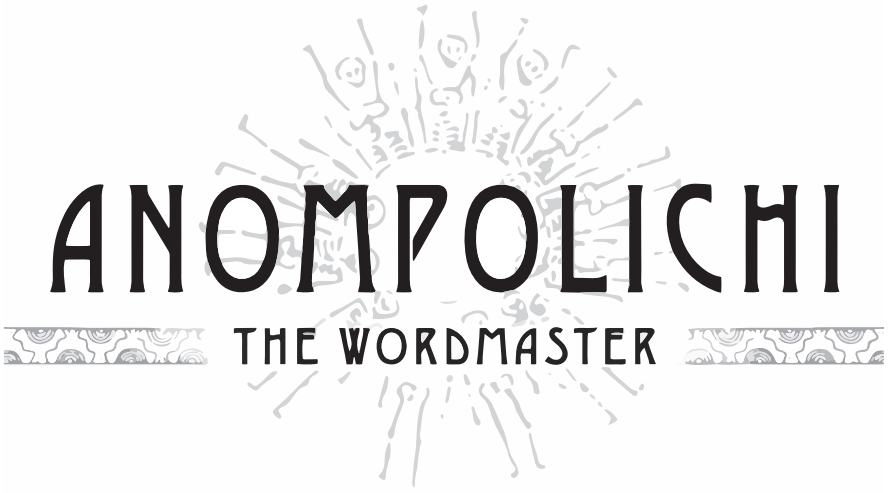

ANOMPOLICHI

THE WORDMASTER

PHILLIP CARROLL MORGAN

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CHAPTER ONE

THE DREAM

THE *MAHLISHTO*, THE DANGEROUS WIND, HAD PASSED DURING THE night, and Iskifa Ahalopa played some of the sweetest notes ever piped from his traveling flute while he ambled along the rocky path in view of the cool blue *okhata ishto*, the eastern ocean. The orderliness of his brightly colored costume contrasted with the panorama of storm-ravaged coastal vegetation and leaf-littered beaches.

He had seen sixty-five winters, but Iskifa felt the vigor of a much younger man. He had seen tropical gales and hurricanes before and once again felt an uncanny sense of joy at such powerful displays by *Aba Binnili*, creator of all. He marveled that his dream had drawn him toward the storm and again to this coastline, after many seasons of absence from it. He felt full of anticipation for his next discovery.

A whelm of scent from a *lowak pakanli*, a fire flower, stopped him, and as he stood to take in its fragrance, he spied a coastal black cap bird clinging upside down with tiny feet to a branch of the *lowak* bush, not two feet in front of his nose. *Lowak* petals lay scattered about. The diminutive bird inspected its one remaining flower.

Iskifa slowly, evenly, let his hand holding the flute return to his side. He gazed quietly at the bird, until it seemed to have enough of him and took flight. He chuckled like a child. He loved watching birds. He

had looked forward to seeing the coastal black cap ever since a wordmaster, one like himself, described it to him in Chunuli, many winters ago. The curious bird was smaller and more delicate than its cousin who lived farther west.

Iskifa did not venture to the coastline often, even though he loved the ocean. Coastal people could be uncouth. He dismissed their worthiness while inland, saying they were so numerous it was hard to walk a hundred flight—a flight being the length of an arrow shot—without running into one of their towns. "*Naniapa*,"fish eaters, he would call them, and he would laugh uproariously.

That often did not seem funny to others, he noticed. Apparently such name-calling was judged inappropriate for an *anompolichi,* a wordmaster. That made it all the more appealing to him. After all, he was not just an *anompolichi*; he was a Yukpan *anompolichi*, a Yukpan wordmaster. Most of the nineteen languages he spoke had separate words for "to bless" and "to laugh." Only Iskifa's people used one word, *yukpa*, for both, thus equating blessing with laughter. They called themselves Yukpans, so they were known everywhere in *yaakni moma*, the world, either as the Blessed or the Laughing People.

Iskifa identified personally as Chikasha, born in a Chikasha town to a Chikasha mother, but his father was Chahta, so he felt affection for both tribes, which in the past had been one. Both were members of the Yukpan Confederacy for many generations, and because his relatives scattered throughout their land, Iskifa felt loyalty and a great sense of security in the confederacy. It included tribes from the south coast all the way north to the Tanasi and Ohiyo rivers. Wordmasters like him were indispensible for keeping the confederacy together and responsible for communications between its tribes.

The salt-spray breeze brushed Iskifa while he stood on the seaside trail, once again drawing intoxicating vapors of *lowak* blossoms to his nostrils. He stepped forward, cupping the lovely crimson flower in his left hand, and pulled it close to his nose. The scent reminded him of the *okla*, the town, where he stayed the night before.

He felt more than reluctant to make himself known in any coastal town, but the afternoon gust front of the storm, coming in from the

sea, told him it would be a bruiser when it made landfall. He reasoned the repugnance of vulgar people would be less uncomfortable than a howling summer fury. Transplanted *lowak* bushes stood in gardens in the town, and their cut blossoms adorned shell vessels in the humble home of the local wordmaster, Kaheto, and his wife, Nuktala, where Iskifa begrudgingly sought shelter.

It was bad enough to be quarantined all night with fish eaters, but to make matters worse, the couple's widowed daughter, Hosiini, also lived there. She possessed an uncommon beauty and a needfulness Iskifa found tempting. She performed a dance after their meal, a tasteful one that became suggestive only when she faced him.

If she had come to his bed during the night, he felt sure he probably could not have resisted her. Although Yukpans were sometimes polygamous, wordmasters agreed to only one wife at a time, so as not to distract them from their duties and studies. Wordmasters typically did little farming and had small immediate families, so they had little need or means of support for more than one wife.

Iskifa delighted in getting back to his journey. He found Kaheto tiresome and had to speak in his tongue because the fish eater only knew snippets of other languages. The wordmaster traditions had grown weak among the coastal peoples. They mostly lived in small, disconnected towns, intermarrying up and down the seemingly endless shores so often the customs and language of one tribe seemed barely distinguishable from the rest. Even while they spoke somewhat exotic languages, Iskifa noticed elements of at least two foreign tongues mixed with Kaheto's native Onnaha. Kaheto did not seem aware of that. The boat people who traded up and down the coast brought a mixture of influences to Onnaha culture. Iskifa and Kaheto discussed language, as wordmasters, but Kaheto's knowledge was quickly exhausted, and their talk degenerated into the same argument Iskifa heard all along his journey.

"How many of your people are going to the *Yamohmi*, the fashionable event, Iskifa?" Kaheto asked cheerfully, sounding eager to change the subject from language.

The question touched a nerve inside Iskifa. The *Yamohmi* was the

traditional intertribal stickball contest held every ten summers, pitting the best players from the Yukpan Confederacy against players from tribes of the Allahashi domain whose capital, Tochina, lay north of the Ohiyo. The *Yamohmi* was planned for midsummer in Tochina and hosted by the Allahashi ruler, Yoshoba, whom Iskifa did not trust in the least.

"*Iksho*, none," Iskifa replied stoically.

"None?"

"None."

"Don't you know it is going to be the best stickball competition ever held?" Kaheto asked, astonished.

"I know it's going to be the biggest mistake ever made," Iskifa rebutted.

"How can it be a mistake? Don't you Yukpans like stickball?" Kaheto asked snidely.

"Everyone knows that we love *toli*, stickball. What we do not love are the Allahashi and Yoshoba," Iskifa explained, knowing Kaheto already understood his position.

"Well, this is our chance to show him for a fool on the field of honor, is it not?" Kaheto appealed nevertheless.

"It is a chance to be shown as fools ourselves," Iskifa retorted.

"The Allahashi are rich in trade goods," Kaheto persisted. "Their cities are large, and they produce a large surplus of food, I'm told. What they make is artistic and very high in quality. Most are saying that only a few old fools are against trade with the Allahashi and even fewer are against this great competition."

"That's what they said about the great teacher, Anoli, and previously about Komok, the prophet," Iskifa said, "and did they turn out to be old fools?"

"But things were different then," Kaheto argued, "those old hatreds died with our foremothers."

"I'm not so sure," Iskifa cautioned. "The Allahashi have always worshiped strange gods. They require blood sacrifice, and they think of

the sun as equal with *Aba Binnili*. They surely must have come from the great mountain range far to the south and west. Very strange and foreign in their ways."

Kaheto reacted indignantly. "I do not believe it. Human sacrifice has been against our laws for many generations, even in that part of *yaakni moma*. Their people would not tolerate such abomination."

"That's what their name means, you know—children of the sun," Iskifa said. "They've drawn several new and large tribes into their confederacy and have become more decadent than ever. I've also heard from reliable people, traveling builders, that Yoshoba has re-instituted human sacrifice into their temple worship."

Kaheto stared at him, stunned.

"But, of course, I hope you are right, honorable master, I hope you are right," Iskifa added, wishing not to upset his host. "All I counsel is to ask yourselves if the gains are worth the risks. Where is my bed, kind master?" he asked politely. "I have walked three hundred flight today, and I am spent."

"Hosiini," Kaheto called to his daughter, "show the wordmaster the bed you have made for him."

Smiling broadly, Hosiini showed Iskifa the smaller of two sleeping lofts at either end of the crude log house. He made no gesture toward her while she watched him climb the ladder to the loft.

The pallet was laid out neatly, its coarse mat woven from what Iskifa figured to be the fronds of the *tala* tree, the palm tree, found in that part of the coastline. The Onnaha traded such mats inland, along with dried fish and shell art, as part of their principal trade goods with the Allahashi. The sky had cleared. Moonlight filtered through the open smoke hole in the thatched roof, illuminating a *lowak* blossom lying on his pillow like a promise. Everyone will have to wait until morning, he thought, for the vigor of youth to show up in this tired old man.

Iskifa slept deeply and without dreams, awakened at dawn by a buzz in his ear. He was troubled by a ringing in his ears sometimes at night while he tried to fall asleep and occasionally when he woke up. It worried him because it did not sound musical. This morning's sound,

however, seemed to have a bit of a tune to it. He identified it as the buzz of a bumblebee landing on the *lowak* blossom still on the pillow.

"*Kiyo*! Do not get any ideas, my friend, that I am competing for your nectar," Iskifa whispered to the bee. "If *Aba Binnili* sent you, assure him we are keeping our stingers to ourselves. If my wife, Nanitana, sent you, I know I am to be stung for even taking the thought."

He smiled and looked at the gray-blue dawn sky through the smoke hole. He thought of morning views at home and the sweetness of waking up with Nanitana. He missed her most acutely in the mornings and looked forward to his return home from what was becoming a very long walk.

He heard a light crack and looked down to see a small flame in the fire pit. Hosiini knelt in front of the new fire, raven-black hair flowing over her shoulders. He felt impressed that she could kindle the fire without noise.

Iskifa admired quiet people, like most Yukpans. He was particularly fond of women and loved how they could move about a house quietly and efficiently, the same way they hunted and snared game. Hosiini arranged a cooking pot, and he could not help but notice the nice roundness of her hip under her summer wrap. He rose for a better look.

The bumblebee took off from the *lowak* blossom to touch briefly on his head and flew up through the smoke hole. Iskifa composed himself and took his cap from his pillow to lay it in his lap, purposely distracting himself to admire its vibrant colors. His cap was made of soft, dyed leather, embellished with shell ornaments and feathers. Its purple-red color, made from raw *koshibba,* poke weed and berry juice, was his favorite to look at. Boiling the *koshibba* juice, mixed with some *takonlo lakna*, yellow plum, juice and a little water, changed it into black dye. The hardest color to come by was the yellow. He made it by boiling a particular type of *chomak*, tobacco leaf, which originally grew only on the banks of the *Hayi Bok*, Walnut Creek, near where he was born. He had to dip the leather in the hot *chomak* dye and let it dry five times. Looking at the colors this morning transported him for a moment to his beloved home.

He was not prone to sentimentality, so he could think fondly of

home without getting too homesick. He carefully arranged the colorful cap on his head and tucked away the small stick and stone he picked up for luck on the path yesterday. The night had been cool and treacherous, so he kept his breechcloth on. He picked up his mantle and pulled it on over his head, gathered the rest of his gear and headed down the ladder before any more bees could fly through the smoke hole. Hosiini met him, looking radiant with a *lowak* blossom over her left ear, where single women wore flowers.

"Where are your mother and father?" Iskifa asked in her language.

"They usually fish in the surf before dawn," she answered, smiling. "They are probably seeing what kind of damage the storm has done. Would you like some…?"

"Yes, I would like some hot…*ashiila*…." He felt suddenly embarrassed—he couldn't remember the Onaffan word for boiled cracked corn, the regional choice for the first meal of the day. The wordmaster was at a loss for words. He gestured clumsily toward the meal urn, moving toward it, out of her reach, nodding, as if pleading for her to understand. She laughed understandingly and cocked her head, smiling at him again, as if to give him one last chance to change his mind. Regaining a bit of poise, he politely raised his eyebrows and nodded toward the corn meal urn. She chuckled again and went back to her cooking.

Iskifa walked outside to take in a deep breath of ocean air, refreshing and moist this early in the day. He glanced at the fish eaters' houses scattered along the coastline, all standing on high ground above the beach, like Kaheto's.

He liked the atmosphere of fishing villages. Everything was so practical and useful and obvious. The fish-drying racks and smoker sheds stood near the piers and wharves where fishers came in with their catches. This morning, of course, quite an array of boats lay on the higher reaches of the sandy beaches, their ropes running farther up the banks in case they needed to be pulled out of the path of a storm surge during the night.

The brunt of the storm had passed farther north. Though the winds were strong, they did not cause much destruction in the village. The

fish eaters were out re-rigging and re-staging their boats and repairing minor damage to piers and drying huts. The only thing lost to the storm, as best he could tell, was the morning's catch.

Checking for new aches and pains, Iskifa bent gracefully to touch the ground with his palms, stretching and limbering. He reasoned he might be getting close to the goal of his journey, although he felt no strong intuition of imminent conclusion.

He only knew the strange, pale-skinned man in his dream came walking up out of an ocean much like this one. Of course, this was the only ocean coast he knew besides the *mahli okahta hochito*, the south ocean, and he saw no evidence that his dream pointed south. It was a fact about dreaming in his experience, as his mentor, Atanapoa, taught him, that you could not see any place in a dream you had not seen while awake. You could see people you had never seen before, they agreed—even people from your ancestors' lives—because people and their spirits move freely in the world.

Iskifa did not depart from Atanapoa's teachings. Since his time with him, he gathered little new knowledge other than from practical experience in trades and arts. He did believe *Aba Binnili* dealt with him more in dreams than with Atanapoa. Iskifa learned to trust and respond to his dreams. He did not question them.

They frightened him while he was younger, as did the unusual adventures they put him through. He learned through his life journey, however, to embrace them, because to do so was to embrace the *Hina Aalhpisa*, the forward path, and ultimately to embrace *Aba Binnili*. Wherever the infrequent but powerful dreams placed him or showed him, he went.

It became for him a simple and fundamental fact of life that any creature's central purpose was put in him by the Creator; that everything the Creator creates has a purpose within a potentially perfect design. The peculiarity that separated people from other creations, like rocks or animals, was that people could choose to abandon their purpose, their place in the design.

No other part of creation could do anything but what it was designed to do. But men and women could choose. People could choose evil or good. They could choose to love or choose to hate. They could

choose to make peace or war. Iskifa believed that if you opened yourself to all creation, *Aba Binnili* would keep you on the *Hina Aalhpisa*. The reasons the Creator did this were unknown.

Although many who knew about the Creator regarded *Aba Binnili* as a father figure, Iskifa viewed him more as a whole spirit, with all potentials and qualities. He did believe *Aba Binnili* prescribed certain roles for men and women, young and old. The only thing sacred about how a person "chose" to pursue his or her *Hina Aalhpisa* were the rhythms the Creator set in motion for each person and for each family or larger group of people. One rule never changed: respect your elders.

With Kaheto and the fish eaters now several flight behind him, Iskifa felt happy to walk along a path overlooking the ocean and more certain his strange dream would prove true. Many along his journey, now twenty-four days' strong walk from Chunuli, ridiculed him. No one but a fool, they jeered, would go on such a walk.

They found it particularly asinine that he looked for a "white" man. Many did not accept the possibility such creatures lived anywhere in *yaakni moma*. Still, some traders said a northern group of people, the Delamac, once had a "white" man in their midst, and that he spoke an unknown tongue—but no one else believed them. Traders would tell whatever lies suited the promotion of their business. Iskifa, however, listened to their tales with great interest, because they seemed to be repeated more often the farther north and east he traveled. He had in fact sent his apprentice, Taloa Kinta, three winters earlier to study with Anli Basha, the wordmaster of Anoli, who had heard and believed stories about pale-skinned people who spoke a strange language.

The sun, now directly overhead, beat down on the beach, so he stayed on a fairly worn wooded path just above it, passing bushes he had never seen before and identifying a new variety of a familiar tree, all of which fascinated him. He kept a keen eye open for new birds or animals. He had not earned the reputation as one of the foremost experts on trees and things made from wood by owning a lazy eye. He felt proud of his understanding and knowledge and gathered more wherever he traveled.

The blue skies, the scents of coastal flora, the fresh sound of the

rolling surf, and the occasional squawk of a shore bird provided high entertainment for the Yukpan wordmaster. Such sensations made him recall the brightest adventures of his lifetime. The sudden appearance of a fish crow changed his mood.

The bird lit on a turn of the path and held an odd-colored scrap of something in its beak. Iskifa recoiled with surprise, and it quickly took flight. He chided himself for being spooked, but he could not dismiss a sense he now felt. He had never been wrong about such a perception before—not when it felt so strong.

And it felt strong. It felt like death. Death was unmistakable. Death was near, not as an odor, but as another sense. It felt like human death.

It did not feel like his own death threatened him, but he drew an arrow from his quiver and readied it on the bowstring. A skillful hunter, Iskifa could shoot the eye out of a squirrel. He had never killed an enemy in battle, although he had been present at many. Wordmasters were protected because their skills were often essential to achieve peace after men had been killed. Hoping against killing, he crouched and tested the wind. He still sensed death ahead.

He stole away from the trail to find a higher vantage point straight up the hill and found a large *osak*, a hickory tree, with low, scaffolding branches. He crouched, balancing the bow and arrow between his teeth, and with silent hops made his way up the *osak* to see the beach over the under-story of brush. The scene he saw through the forking branches, toward the sea, turned his blood cold.