

## *Preface*

When time was long ago, there reigned in the kingdom of Wisland a king as good as his name. King Goodliwink was known by his subjects as one who would listen to you and care about you though you might be the most bothersome peasant.

On the evening of which our fearful tale begins, the court was seated in the Great Hall, celebrating King Goodliwink's birthday. There sat the brave knights with their meat knives at the ready. There sat the courtiers, laughing and boasting. There, too, sat the great nobility of the land—lords and ladies in such finery as would dazzle even the Devil.

At the right hand of King Goodliwink sat his trusted advisor, Lord Ugsome and his wife, Lady Ugsome. Beside them, alternately picking at his pimples and picking the meat out of his dog-like teeth, sat their seventeen-year-old son, Master Snit Ugsome.

That night the merriment seemed great, but all was not as it seemed. King Goodliwink tried to be cheerful, but

since his beloved queen had died three months earlier, his heart was as an empty sack. And he was not the only one secretly sad. If you were to have looked carefully among the glittering people you would have marked next to the Ugsomes, two unhappy children. One was a dark-haired girl by the name of Wynnfrith with green eyes the color of meadow grass. Wynnfrith had reached her twelfth year and was as good as she was clever. But now, even with the music of the minstrels, antics of the jugglers, sweetmeats and sugarplums, she felt a deep loneliness. And well she might. When she was born, her mother died. When she was nine, her dear father who had been the trusted advisor to the king took ill, and he, too, was carried up to Heaven. From that time forth the queen had cared for her. Queen Olivia tended to the girl with kisses and caresses just as she did with her own child, Prince Oliver. Now the loving queen was also in that forever world and Wynnfrith and the five-year-old prince were put into the care of Lady Ugsome.

As Wynnfrith watched the merrymakers, two big tears rolled down her cheeks. “Crybaby,” sneered Master Snit, giving her a kick to the ankle.

“Ouch,” cried Wynnfrith.

“Hold your tongue, girl,” Lady Ugsome snapped. And, to little Prince Oliver who was munching on a jam tart, she muttered under her breath, “Choke Changeling.”

After the buffoons and jugglers, the King announced the

finest of all amusements: The Word Dancer. Yes, the Word Dancer was to appear, and that night something would happen that would forever change the lives of not only Wynnfrith, but of everyone in the kingdom.

All foretold by a single word.