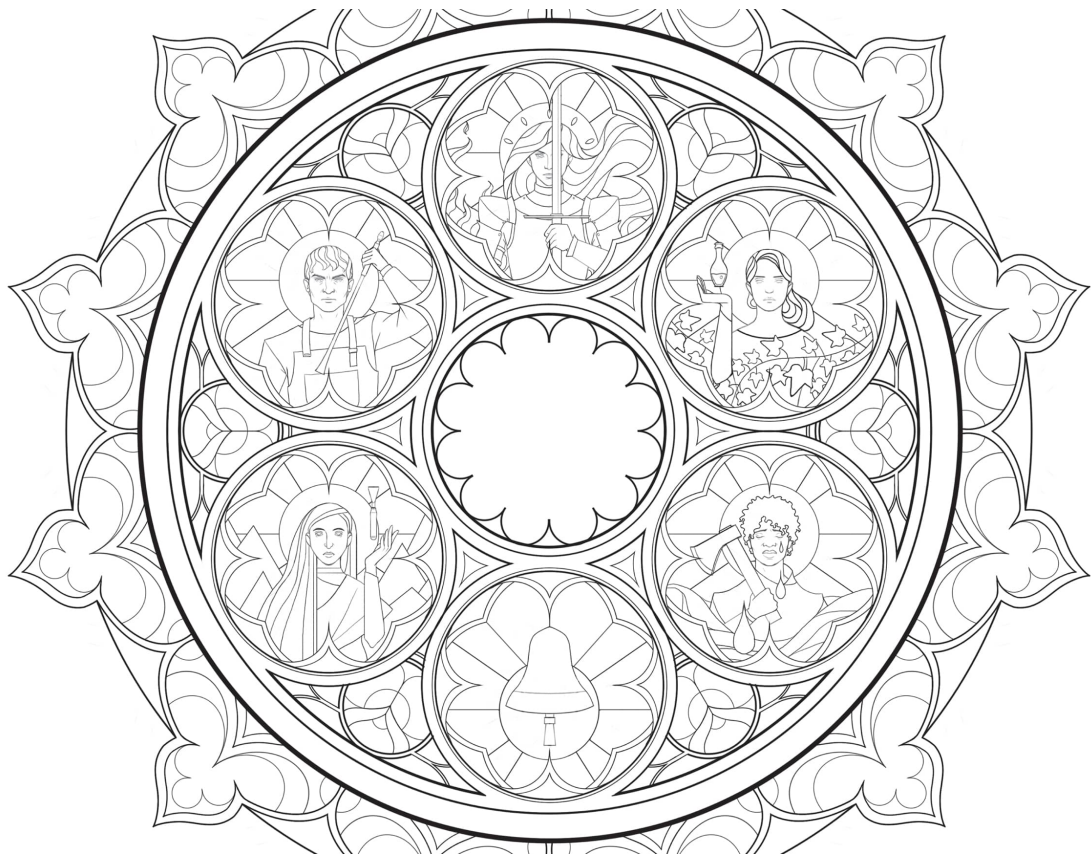




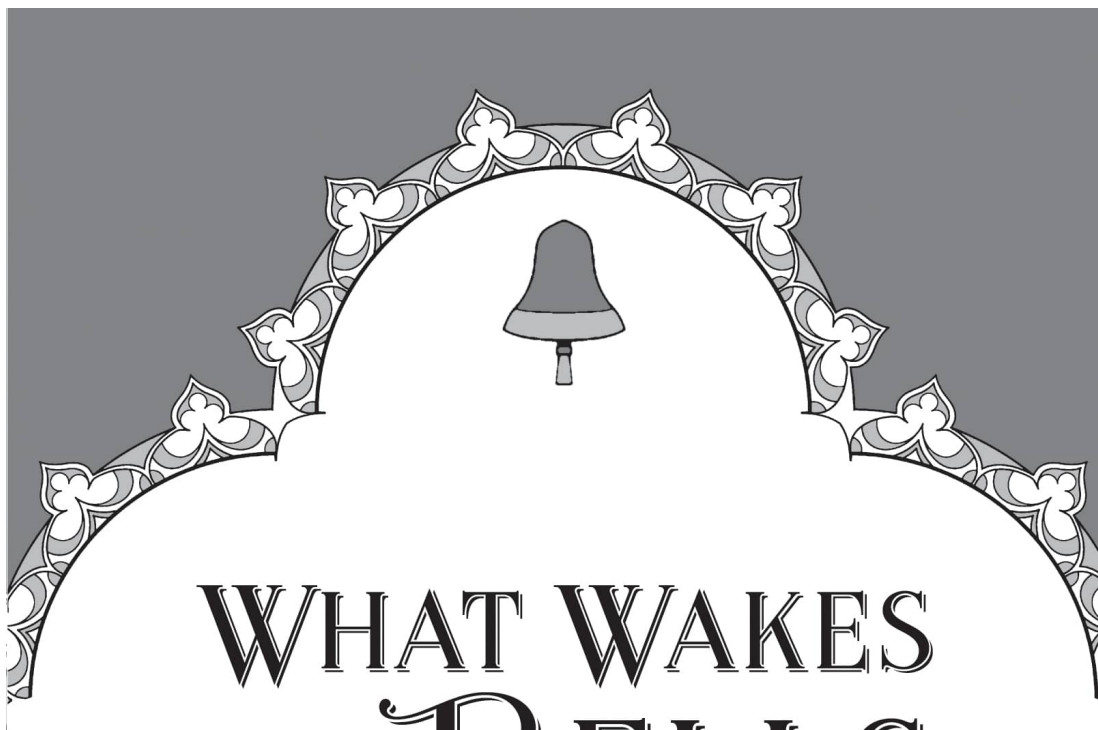
ELLE TESCH

Her city lives and
breathes and bleeds.
And now . . . it *hunts*.

WHAT WAKES THE BELLS







WHAT WAKES THE BELLS

ELLE TESCH



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Feiwel and Friends Book ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

Sign Up

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

Content Warnings: frightening imagery, minor body horror, on-page gore/death/murder, strained mother-daughter relationship, characters grieving death of parent, side character with alcoholism, swearing, sexual coercion

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

FOR MOM
MINA WISHES SHE HAD ONE JUST LIKE YOU.

One

It's always in these final gasps of the hour that I sense the city's beating heart.

With my eyes closed, Vaiwyn's pulse feels as steady as my own. A gentle thrum beneath flesh of stone, metal, and wood. The city bleeds through veins that serve as cobbled streets, settles its growing bones in the creaks of the beams, and claims the airy hollows of its ancient buildings as lungs. Its living rhythm is a seamless match to the mighty clatter of the clock overhead; the softer tick of the watch cradled in my palm.

Together, all three count down to one o'clock.

Stained with grease, my pale fingers snap the silver watch shut and stow it in my pocket. Its fine chain slides against my leg as my grip tightens on the heavy shears. Their serrated, crystalline edges wink in the hazy light drifting through the clock's southern face. I snick the blades apart with an experimental cut, the gesture as familiar to me as the growing tension in my muscles.

Two minutes left.

With one hand, I tug the stepladder toward my enormous charge.

Despite half my childhood spent in its presence, I doubt I'll ever approach Arbutus without a healthy feeling of distrust. Dark and aged, a coarse patina of rust coats the bell like a second skin. Thin, spiky lettering in a language

unknown to any scholar scars its hulking bronze exterior. The only bell in Lyndell Hall, and one of the most dangerous in the entire city.

A Vesper, crafted by the dying breath of a Saint.

Before I can slide the ladder into place beneath its heart, I'm stopped in my tracks by a nasty, falling splat of white that skids down the side of the bell. My nose wrinkles.

"Wretched birds," I mutter, peering up between the beams. Dozens of ravens claim my tower as a roost. Mess is expected, but that doesn't mean I enjoy the consequences of having such neighbors.

The mouth of Arbutus hovers level with my hips. I need to tilt the ladder to fit underneath and waste no time ducking in after it. Immediately, the tower's constant grind of wheels and pinions rises to a thunderous pitch, every noise trapped within.

One minute.

I shiver. Cold shadows residing in the rusted throat of the Vesper hang heavy, pressing against the thick sleeves of my sweater as I clamber up beside the bell's corroded clapper. It's almost as if it knows what I intend to do. Knows, and yearns to stop me.

But I must steal its voice. Nothing matters more.

The open shears notch against the narrowest part of the iron appendage, below the hook that holds it in place. A deep breath, and the amputation begins.

Half a minute to go.

Sharp and decisive, the cutting motion strains my arms, but it's a satisfying ache. Blades edged with tempered glass—made long ago by the Seething Glassmith—bite into the metal. Bit by bit, flake by flake, the clapper weakens.

Right on time, a new sound—faint but starkly different from the unending mechanical din—clacks to life at the top of the belfry. The clapper hangs by a thread now. Just another—

I double over with a cry as a piercing heat flares inside my heart.

“No, not *now*,” I spit through gritted teeth. The shears slip, clattering to the floor. I clutch at my chest. My fist pounds the chilled bronze, but the gesture only worsens the frustration bubbling alongside the ravaging warmth.

As if muddled by a dream, I hear the second group of gears release. Violent clanks set delicate workings into motion, and panic crushes my lungs.

One o’clock has arrived.

And I’m not ready.

Ropes creak throughout the tower. They draw through pulleys at the command of the hour, and the dark surrounding me shifts. Gripped by near poisonous terror, my tear-smudged gaze drops to the lip of the bell as it slowly tips to the side.

As sudden as it came, the pain vanishes. Only a barren ache remains in my pounding heart.

Some desperate instinct takes over before my scattered thoughts can realign. I jump off the ladder, recover the shears, then stumble back up to the top. Sparks fly from the point that scratches the clapper as I wrench apart the blades.

The last of the iron gives way.

The clapper falls, cracking against the floorboards.

My relief fades when Arbutus shoves against my knees. My balance breaks. I tumble to the ground with a yelped curse, the wind knocked out of me as I roll clumsily out from underneath the bell.

Flat on my back, all I can do is hold my breath as the Vesper reaches its peak. As all at once, the quartet of ropes relaxes, and the bell swings.

Startled raven wings knock the shadows loose. An onyx blur of feathers and beaks, careening out the open shutters on a cacophony of screams.

There is no deep clang, no rich knell. Only the voiceless impression of one. An empty note that shudders between my bones with a threat to cleave them apart. Like the flow of an avalanche, the silent vibration sinks low through the belfry, through every level of Lyndell Hall, and out over Vaiwyn’s rooftops to the mountains that encircle the city.

A Vesper's Herald. It burrows fear into the souls of any who feel it. Reminds them of what it could do if allowed, the unholy fate it could bring down upon this city the Saints once built.

Suddenly, the bell in this tower stills. Stopped in its sway as if by an unseen fist. But in the city beyond, the danger may not yet have passed. My ringing ears strain to hear if any of the four other Vespers have tolled aloud. If one of them means to wake the Bane.

Silence.

I expel the icy disquiet from my body in a slow gust and seize the small medallion at my throat. Worn smooth by fervent fingers, the Lost Alchemist's golden features are a forgotten memory. Still, I grasp the metal and offer a prayer of gratitude to the Saints that nothing went wrong. And I should consider myself lucky for it.

This strange, sporadic pain has acted up for over a week now, and I *hate* it. I rub my chest with a sigh. Always a spark igniting from my heart, as if it has skipped a beat and struck like flint against bone. I suspect it's a symptom of stress, of overworking myself, but the thought of taking a break from my tower only creates more anxiety. My hand curls into a fist. If I don't handle this, it's another weakness for Mother to wield against me.

For every day and night that Vaiwyn's five Vesper Bells have tried to ring their one o'clock Heralds, a Bell Keeper has stood guard. In the thousand years since the Saints themselves appointed the first of my ancestors to the positions, a Strauss and their shears have been all that separate Vaiwyn from the repeat of history. Of the days when this city fell to the rule of a terrible demon known only as the Bane and tore itself apart.

Forged by the Lost Alchemist in a sacrificial act, the Vesper Bells and their tolls were meant to exile the Bane from this world. But the demon's power was too great—not even the full force of the Saint could wholly contain it. Its infernal influence melded with her divine magic and twisted the Vespers to a different purpose.

Now the bells and their Heralds serve as both the warning song to Vaiwyn and the resurrection call to the Bane. Twelve peals to raise the alarm; a

thirteenth to revive the evil from wherever it lies banished. And we Keepers ensure the Vespers can *never* sing.

No Bell Keeper has ever allowed a Vesper to reach that ruinous thirteenth toll, and whatever my mother thinks, that won't happen under my watch either.

An acrid scent lingers as I stumble to my feet. No longer attached to the bell, the clapper is warm against my fingers. Taller than me and weighing more than my entire family combined, I've no choice but to leave it where it fell, but already Vaiwyn's magic is pulling it beneath the floorboards. Wooden splinters absorb the iron into the city's bones with the faintest of cracks. When the next hour arrives, the clapper will have finished growing back and be ready to ring before I cut it again tonight.

I drop the shears on my worktable and rotate the shoulder I landed on with a wince. That'll be sore tomorrow, but I'll push through it. Springs and bolts, oil-grimed tools, rags and brushes dirty from constantly dusting clock parts, and a new textbook sent up earlier by Councillor Tamzin litter the rest of the table. The latter's enormous size serves as one more reminder of my mother and her belief in my ... *inadequacies*.

Resentment tears the sheet of parchment at my fingertips. I snatch up my pen, scribbling a message to Vanya about this heart pain. I refuse to give Mother any more reason to challenge my abilities as Lyndell Hall's Bell Keeper. It's my duty. What I was born to be, and what I'll probably die doing, like every other Strauss before me. She can't take that from me—not if I can help it.

Two deft folds, and I smack the note against the wall. Beneath my palm, it melts into the stone, imbibed by the city's veins to travel ahead of me to the Dahlia Wilted.

As I turn to leave, candles snuff out in my wake. Shadows crawl forth from under the oak beams, chasing the pendulum and gnawing through what light remains. The belfry's door opens toward me on silent hinges as I approach, but I pause to touch the letters chiseled into its archway.

M-I-N-A.

My name, etched a decade ago by my late father. At seven years old, I'd never been so happy as I was witnessing him put *my* mark on this tower and my family's legacy. The memory of how hard he worked to get those letters to stay still makes me smile. I sat on a rickety stool at his side for hours, listening to the constant scratch of his penknife while Vaiwyn's magic traced over his efforts, erasing the gouges in the stone. Father had whispered to the wall in his patient tone, coaxed the bones within until he convinced the city to see the cuts not as a wound to heal, but a tattoo to immortalize.

In my small apartment below the belfry, I swap filthy trousers for clean woolen skirts, and fetch my tweed overcoat from its hook. As I transfer my father's silver watch from one pocket to the other, I find a sturdy peace in its ticking. At least *he* would be proud of me.

The spiraling descent to Lyndell Hall's top floor is treacherous, the steps worn smooth by time and countless feet. Twists of cold brush my cheeks as I use my reflection in a narrow window to reapply my favorite carmine-red stain to my lips. The overcast sky appears bleak; the diluted light soaks the tarnished copper and clay tiles of Vaiwyn's rooftops, their spires made sharper in the crisp air. It's a radiance that threatens snow.

I frown, tucking my short, dark-blond hair behind my ears as a lush, carpeted corridor replaces stone steps. Even hidden as we are in the mountains, the first snowfall hadn't been expected for several weeks still. Shoving aside thoughts of an early winter, I button up my coat and pass by government offices without stopping to visit anyone.

The Hall's main staircase drops in tight corners and long landings. An iron chandelier unfurls in the center, ringed by weeping candles. The soft flames, coupled with the light tinted pink, lilac, and gold from the tall window, reveal the dust sparkling through all six floors. Nestled inside the wrinkles of sculptures, caked into the joints of armored suits, a second frame added to every portrait—the aged residue is such a part of Lyndell Hall that to clean it would be to remove the one brick that keeps the entire building together.

The last turn of the stairs rolls into a grand, bustling foyer. A Council meeting must have just concluded—city councillors and their aides stream

across the floor.

I step onto the ebony marble as Councillor Tamzin crosses in front of me.

“Hello, Mina.” Never slowing her brisk pace, she nods in greeting, her crimson Council robes snapping in her wake. Her manner is certain and firm, equal to how she is in her mentorship of me outside of my belfry. The fire blazing in the wide hearth shines on the silver beads knotted in the ends of her long black braids and limns her dark-brown profile.

“Hello, Councillor.” To the pair of aides trailing behind her, I add, “Rhys. Maximillian.”

Rhys, his slight limp helped by a lacquered cane, offers a distracted wave, but Max gives no sign he heard me. His attention is devoted to the bundle of parchment he carries. If I wasn’t watching him, I’d miss the torn slip he drops.

Like Tamzin, my steps don’t falter as I pick up the paper. I can’t help looking over my shoulder, though, earning myself an eyeful of Max’s back. Despite being a few years younger, he towers over Rhys by several inches, those loose chestnut curls gleaming.

I cut through the other Council members and unfold the note, discovering a single inked heart. A smile tilts the corner of my mouth, and my rib cage burns with a different kind of warmth, one I never want to lose.

The Hall’s doors fling wide of their own accord, and the chilly embrace of the city swallows me whole.



It doesn’t matter that I took the long way down the hill, hoping to discard my lingering worries over my chest pain in peace. At this time of day, *every* street in Vaiwyn teems with bodies, voices, and smells. Schaden Bridge in particular—one of a trio crossing this arm of the River Riga—is the busiest route between the main isle and the south bank.

So, when I stumble to a halt at its center with that Saints-*damned* heat surging in my chest again, I'm quickly lost in a horde eager to elbow me aside.

Jaw clenched, I shove through a fleeting opening to slump against the rail and the statue of the Weeping Carpenter perched there. Sculpted of stone and copper long since turned green from age, a dozen such regal figures stand guard on either side of Schaden Bridge. Their blank eyes brim with a judgment I don't appreciate at the moment.

"Come *on*," I almost growl. My fingers claw into my coat, as if I can remove the pain by force. "I do not need this."

To distract myself, I lift my gaze to the frosted Alosse Mountains surrounding Vaiwyn. Snow still clings to the flanks of the tallest peaks, stubborn and thin after the passing of summer. A sudden clamor of bells strikes the second hour across the city. The mountains distort the sounds, but five distinct peals rise above the rest.

When not marking the first hours silenced by their Bell Keepers, Arbutus and the other Vespers sing the sweetest melodies with their newly restored clappers. From the Ingmund Courts and Buchari University to the south; Elke Cathedral and Farvald Bank to the north; and Lyndell Hall on the island that splits the river in two.

I couldn't care less which bell clangs right now. Breathing through this spiked heat in my heart, I half expect steam to billow from my ears, too.

When it finally subsides, I dive back into the swell of people and reach the south bank.

Fine threads of pewter and gold, bronze and silver, carve between the cobbles. If I wished, I could follow each metal line to the buildings they once adorned. Sculptures and fortifications, reduced to melted rivulets. Frozen tears upon a city's face. Today, I trail a string of iron up several winding side streets to my destination.

The wooden sign above the apothecary's window sways with a creak. Upon it, a dying violet flower in peeling paint reveals the shop's name: DAHLIA

WILTED. The facade is wood, stucco, and drips of iron, and as I approach, the door opens inward.

“Hello?” I call over the merry chimes announcing my entrance.

The potent punch of herbs is all that greets me. One after the other, ribbons of basil, sage, and anise unravel before my nose, guiding me between the cluttered shelves. Sunlight never quite reaches inside, the buildings too close-knit to allow it, but I’m certain it would reveal the motes of magic that must nest here.

There’s always been something wondrous about the Dahlia Wilted. The shop’s very aura grips your wildest thoughts—no request is too lofty. Every time I visit, I discover some new and strange item on display. Pigeon feet in corked glass jars, labeled drawers containing beheaded irises and foxgloves, shallow baskets of nuts void of their meat—each so odd on its own, but altogether small brushstrokes on a beautiful canvas.

Caught up in the silence, I move to tap the small bell resting on the counter, and freeze.

The Dahlia isn’t as empty as I first assumed.

The woman waiting to be served doesn’t so much as turn her head to acknowledge my presence. Still, chin lifted and gaze forward, she knows it’s me.

“Wilhelmina,” she says, her silvery voice laced with eternal impatience.

Through gritted teeth, I reply, “Hello, Mother.”

Two

Imogen Strauss has never deigned to notice how hearing my full name makes my lip curl. And why would she start now?

“I trust you are well,” she says tightly. While grease from her work in Buchari University’s bell tower stains her clasped hands, her neatly pinned hair shines a resilient gold.

“Yes, thank you. How are—”

“And your studies?”

“Erm ... they’re all right.” When the fine lines around her mouth deepen, I rush to add, “Councillor Tamzin is pleased with my progress.”

The solid weight of the watch inside my pocket barely steadies me as a vile sense of incompetency floods my gut.

To be a Bell Keeper is to possess not one role, but two—and despite my best efforts, I’m woefully unprepared for the second. The textbook waiting in my belfry haunts me even from here. No good can come from a book that large, yet if I’m also to fill the position of Council Speaker in the next year, I need to commit its every line on administrative appeals to memory.

And I will. I’ll choke down every bit of legal jargon if it means proving myself to Mother.

A funny grunt sounds in her throat, but she says nothing more.

I suppress the shrill laugh balanced on my tongue. Our first conversation in almost a month, and it’s already over.