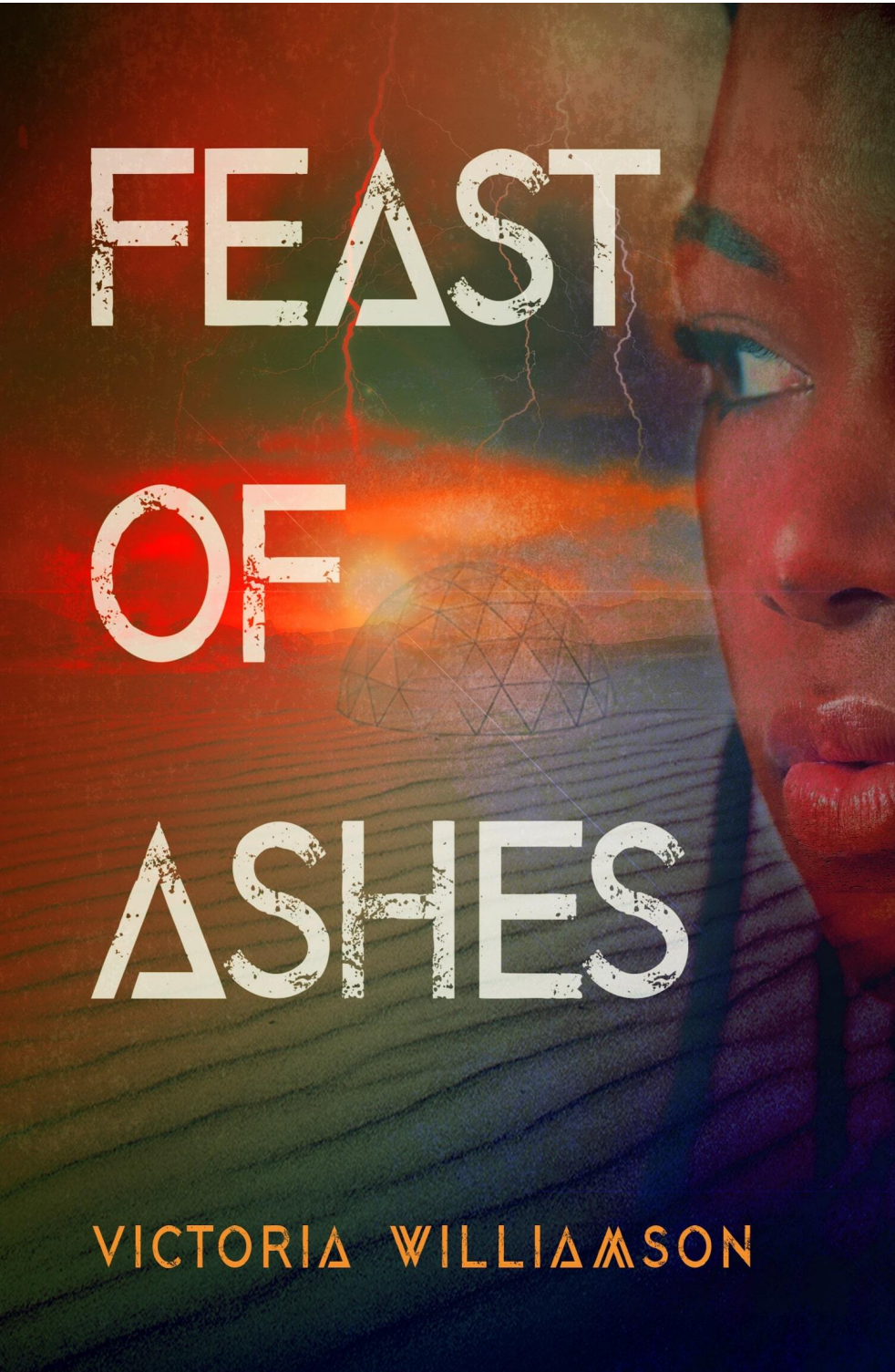

FEAST
OF
ASHES
VICTORIA WILLIAMSON

# FEAST OF ASHES

VICTORIA WILLIAMSON



NEEM TREE
PRESS

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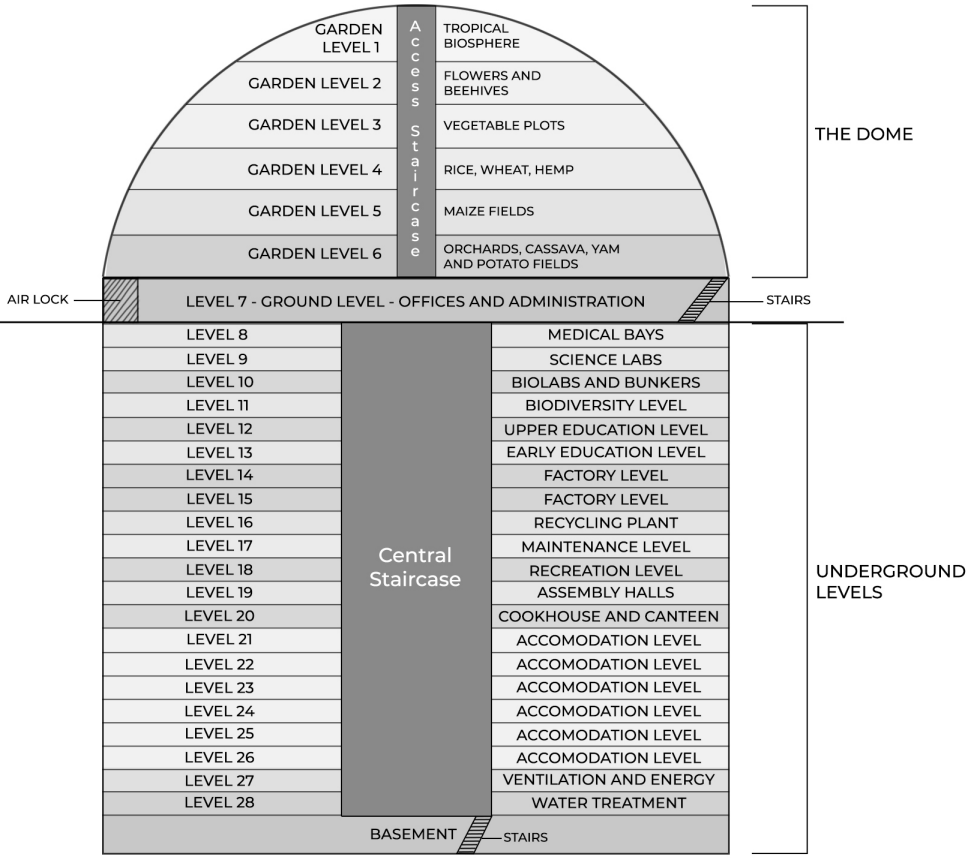
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*My debut YA novel is for Martin, for being the endless font of inspiration and encouragement I needed when my own motivation batteries were running low.*


GARDEN LEVEL 1
TROPICAL BIOSPHERE
GARDEN LEVEL 2
FLOWERS AND BEEHIVES
GARDEN LEVEL 3
VEGETABLE PLOTS
GARDEN LEVEL 4
RICE, WHEAT, HEMP
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WATER TREATMENT
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BASEMENT
STAIRS
UNDERGROUND LEVELS

# PART 1

# THE BEGINNING OF THE END

# CHAPTER 1

# FIVE DAYS/121 HOURS TO THE END

I'll never forget the date September the third, 2123. How could I? That was the day I killed fourteen thousand, seven hundred and fifty-six people.

But I ought to start at the beginning. The beginning of the end, that is. It all started a week before the official harvest, with an apple in the Gardens of Eden Five. And not just any apple—this was a beauty. Round and red, it hung high in the only apple tree at the edge of the orchard, near the wall of the Dome. It wasn't really a wall of course, just the inside of the sphere sealing us all off from the deadly air of the outside world.

Anyway, the first time I caught sight of it, I decided that apple was mine. It's not as if I hadn't earned it. I worked my backside off on the maintenance crew, and I didn't see why the planters and harvesters should get first pick. It's not like the rest of us didn't work just as hard.

A week before the harvest began, I stood under the tree in Garden Level Six, gazing up at that bright red ball as I fiddled with the water sprinkler sticking up between the roots. It was broken for the fourth time in less than two weeks. I should know, it was me who kept breaking it. I had to have some excuse to go sneaking into the orchard when my duty sheet had "Level Twenty—cookhouse lightbulb replacement" and "Level Nine—science lab nutriscope calibration" scrawled across it.

I scowled at the sheet and stuffed it in the back pocket of my cotton trousers. Foreman Tafari may have lousy handwriting, but he knew how to assign work in a way that kept every level of Eden Five running as smooth as greased gears. If he caught me shirking duty up here, I'd be for it.

I unscrewed the broken sprinkler cap yet again, one eye on my electric spanner, the other on the apple. I'd have to claim it soon, it was almost ready to fall. Today was Sunday, the harvest set for the coming Saturday.

*Friday*, I decided. On Friday I'd make off with my shiny prize.

I could picture my teeth sinking into the crimson skin with a loud popping crunch, and my mouth watered at the thought of its sweet juice on my tongue. I hadn't had an apple all year, not since the last harvest. I only got that one because I won it in a contest to see which member of the maintenance crew could repair the most circuit boards in sixty minutes. There was only one apple tree in the whole of the Dome's six garden levels—planted from a single seed found in the emergency terra-farming supplies when Eden Five was

built over eighty years ago. Unlike the giant crates of papaya, mangoes, guavas and oranges which were put into storage or sent to the cookhouse for turning into preserves, the few apples the tree produced were used as prizes for the end-of-harvest celebrations. The tree was old now and wouldn't bear fruit for much longer. The gardening team had decided to replace it with another mango tree next season. This was my last opportunity to taste an apple ever again—I couldn't leave it to chance.

I fiddled with the sprinkler, stalling for as long as I could so I could gaze up at the tempting apple for a while longer. A week to go until the harvest. It felt like a lifetime.

Everything was planted strictly in season here, the ultraviolet lights on the inside of the Dome timed to mimic night and day. I used to wonder why the huge diamond-shaped panes of glass set in their curved frames weren't see-through, and why we couldn't watch the real sun blazing down on the wilds outside. Then I joined the maintenance crew and learned that the whole outside surface of the Dome was covered in solar panels that soaked up the real sun's rays, converting them to electricity that powered Eden Five's six garden levels and twenty-one underground levels. I guess they probably taught us that in school, but that would have been on one of the many days when I just wasn't listening.

I replaced the sprinkler cap and wiped the grease on the cuff of my shirt. I'd taken my bright yellow maintenance overalls off and hidden them in a service hatch on one of the stairwells. I'd figured out a while back that the dark green cotton of my standard issue shirt and trousers blended in

better with the plants whenever I wanted to sneak around the upper levels. It wasn't just that apple I was after, I had another reason—just as secret—to hang around the maize fields during duty hours.

That reason had eyes browner than the earth he worked on with his strong hands, and a smile that flashed brighter than the Dome's solar bulbs. I grinned like an idiot when I thought of him, glad it was still just a secret for now. I wouldn't like him to know how fast my heart pounded when he looked my way. Not yet anyway, not till I'd got myself under control. I was sixteen, not a little kid, and I'd be damned if I was going to let some boy see me go all weak-kneed for one of his smiles.

I was just straightening up when a gruff voice called through the trees, "Adina? Is that you, girl? Get your lazy butt over here right now!"

I groaned inwardly and trudged back through the long rows of fruit trees. I should've known Foreman Tafari would be prowling about the Gardens this close to harvest time. That guy could spot a worker shirking from four levels away. I swear he had x-ray vision. I stepped out of the trees and swung my tool bag onto my shoulder, trying to look busy and nonchalant at the same time. "Problem?" I asked.

"Duty sheet," the big man growled, holding out a grubby hand.

I sighed and reached for the paper stuffed in my back pocket. He barely glanced at it. He didn't need to—he had every maintenance duty he'd ever assigned filed away in that cunning little brain of his. His beady eyes glared down at me, his breath coming out of his nose in angry puffs like a broken

air-conditioning unit. "Says here you're assigned to Levels Twenty and Nine today."

"Oh, really?" I leaned over and scanned the page held in his beefy hands, feigning surprise. Despite my suddenly dry mouth, I had to bite my tongue to stop from making a crack about his crappy handwriting. *Just act dumb*, I told myself, *and he might let you get away with it just this once.*

"So?" he demanded. "What you doing on Level Six, girl? What you doing in the *Gardens*?"

He said the word "Gardens" like it had four r's in it. Going by the state of his handwriting, that's probably the way he spelled it too.

I shrugged, trying to look innocent. "Some of the sprinklers in the orchard were bust. Thought I'd repair them before starting my other duties. That is what we're meant to do isn't it—repair things?"

He wasn't buying my innocent act. He leaned down, his stale breath making me gag.

"You think I don't know what you're up to, girl? Think I don't see the way you go sneaking—"

"Is something the matter?" a sharp voice cut in.

I looked up, my heart sinking further. Usually I'd be glad for any rescue I could get when Foreman Tafari went on one of his rants. But Director Eshe was the last person I wanted to see right now. It wasn't just because she was in charge of Eden Five and could have me permanently assigned to fixing the toilet systems' plumbing if she liked. It was worse than that. There was something about the way she looked at me that made me want to shrivel up in shame at the thought of every

bad deed I'd ever done. Like she could see right through me to my very soul, and saw only a rotten hole there. I know that sounds crazy, but I felt like I disappointed her deeply in some way, and it drove me mad wondering what it was.

Everything about Director Eshe, from the hair cropped close to her scalp to the carefully pressed blue shirt that stood out against the deep black of her skin, screamed efficiency and neatness. Her eyes rested disapprovingly on my untidy mop of hair for a long moment, and I made a mental note to get my mother to comb it into braids for me. Then she raised an eyebrow at Foreman Tafari. "Well?"

"Girl's shirking duty again." The Foreman waved the duty sheet at me accusingly.

"I wasn't!" I protested, before he could list all my other crimes. "I was fixing the sprinklers in the orchard. Weren't you talking just last week at the workers' assembly about the importance of initiative, Director? That's what I was doing—showing initiative." It wasn't really a lie, I mean, it takes a good bit of ambition and invention to sneak anything out of the Gardens with the planters watching us all the time.

"Initiative's all very well," Director Eshe said, "but it's not much use to us if you don't get your assigned duties done first." She stared right through me again with those keen brown eyes of hers, and I lowered my gaze, shuffling my feet uncomfortably. "Are you sure you're happy on the maintenance crew, Adina? Your teachers all had you marked down as a science team candidate. You've missed a few years of training now, but it's not too late to change your mind."

*Urgh, this again.*

I'd told them a billion times I didn't want to be on their stupid science team playing with numbers and analysing soil samples all day. Most of the kids in Eden Five left school at fourteen to join one of the work crews. They trained as planters in the Gardens, production staff on the Factory Level where our clothes and other necessaries were made, food technicians in the cookhouse, teachers on the Education Levels, and a few made it onto the small medical crew. Given the choice, there was no way I was staying on in school a minute longer than I had to. I'd joined the maintenance crew as a technician the first chance I got. I liked being a techie, fixing things and solving problems, but I had a more important reason for putting up with Foreman Tafari and all his crap. The maintenance crew was the one team that got to wander round all the levels of Eden Five without a pass. Sure, I'd get some funny looks if I was somewhere I shouldn't be and I didn't have a work order written out on my duty sheet. But I'd never had this much freedom to explore Eden Five before, and I wasn't about to give it up to go and sit in some dull lab all day.

I shook my head. Director Eshe could give me all the disappointed looks she wanted, but I wasn't letting her send me back to school.

"Got ideas above her station, this one," Foreman Tafari grumbled. "Thinks she's smarter than the rest of us and doesn't need to do what she's told. Ought to send her outside the Dome to clean the solar panels—that'd sort her out and set her head straight. How about it, girl?" He glowered at me. "Should I put you down for maintenance duty on the *outside*?"

I looked up quickly to see if he was joking, but his face was deadly serious.

*Outside*.

My heart skipped a beat in terror at the thought. Outside the Dome of Eden Five? Outside in the wastelands where once there had been a whole world? Now only the wind whipped the dry dust of the wilds, the air filled with biopoisons that would claw through your body and kill you slowly. I didn't know much about the outside, I just knew it was somewhere I never wanted to go. Some of the other techies on the maintenance crew talked about it sometimes when a solar panel failed and they had to leave the safety of the Dome to fix it. They whispered round the airlock doors as they pulled on their biohazard suits, their faces grim. They didn't say much when they came back in either, but their hushed conversations were filled with words like "scorched earth," "deadlands," and "barren." I knew what those words meant from the few times I did pay attention in school. I didn't need to go and see it for myself.

Director Eshe had just opened her mouth to speak when her communication pad beeped and lit up. She looked down, the lines in her forehead deepening as she read the report. "The water pressure alarm system's gone off in the basement below Level Twenty-Eight again," she muttered. "That's the third time this week. Tafari, get your best team members together—we have to get this sorted before something serious happens. Get back to work, Adina," she told me as she hurried off. "This place relies on everybody pulling their weight. We don't want Eden Five falling down around our ears because

you can't be bothered doing the duties assigned to you. And put your work suit back on."

Foreman Tafari glared at me on the way past, looking back over his shoulder and following me with his beady eyes until he reached the greenhouse doors that led to the lower levels. When he was gone, I felt another set of eyes on me.

I turned round.

A group of teenage planters was standing at the edge of a potato field, leaning on their plastic hoes and spades as they watched me getting a public dressing down from the Director and the maintenance crew foreman. The tallest boy in the group said something, and the others burst out laughing. I felt my face grow hot under his gaze, and I cursed my bad luck. Why did *he* have to see that? I thought Otienno worked the Level Three vegetable plots on the Sunday half-day shift. It's not like I didn't have his duty schedule memorised by now.

The others went back to work, but Otienno didn't lower his gaze. He was eighteen, and had the kind of easy confidence that comes from being bigger than all the other boys his age. His brown skin was paler than mine, his eyes dark and deep set. Just looking at the muscles that bulged on his forearms beneath his rolled-up sleeves did strange things to my stomach. I lifted my hand to wave, just before I realised how stupid it would look. My arm froze halfway up, and I stuffed my hand back in my pocket. I turned away quickly, but not before I caught the flash of his amused smile. A low chuckle followed me through the rows of groundnut plants, making me blush harder. I felt about ten years old.

*Next time I'll talk to him,* I promised myself. *Next time*.

But I promised myself the same thing every time I saw him working away in the Gardens. It would be easy if only he wasn't so damn popular. He always seemed to be surrounded by a group of boys laughing at his jokes or girls smiling whenever he whispered something secret in their ears. But maybe I liked him because he was popular. I often wondered what that would feel like, to have other kids jostling to sit next to me in the cookhouse canteen, or running to be the first to tell me a fresh bit of gossip. It's not like I was a total social reject, like anyone ever went out of their way to avoid me or anything. But apart from fixing things, my other main talent was rubbing people up the wrong way. The way I did things, the way I said things just seemed to annoy people, and they'd roll their eyes and ask why I always had to be so difficult. They didn't ignore me or shun me in the canteen or anything that obvious, but they didn't sit next to me either if there were free seats somewhere else.

I turned out of the groundnut beds, heading for the doors, when the sight of something I'd seen a million times before made me stop short.

The wall of the Dome rose up in front of me, towering high overhead. The five other garden levels above were floored with glass, and through the tangle of soil, roots and vegetable plots, I could just make out the point in the distant ceiling above where the Dome's support beams came together and met the very top of the access stairway that spiralled up through the centre of the Gardens. Each large glass wall panel had a row of three ultraviolet skytube lights set behind its pane. It was midday, so now they were glowing bright blue. If

you didn't look too closely through the glass, it was just like the Gardens were surrounded by sunny blue skies. I know that's what it looked like—I'd seen pictures of the real sky in old books when I was little.

But it wasn't the sight of the Dome's skytubes that stopped me. On the corner of one glass panel in front of me, a small round light was blinking red. On, off, on, off it went, a silent warning sign. I dropped my tool kit and pulled out a maintenance request form. This would have to be reported. The red emergency light meant the solar panel on the other side of the glass had failed. I frowned as I scrawled the identification number on the form, already feeling sorry for the poor techie who'd have to suit up and go outside into the wilds to fix it.

"It's all red!" said a voice suddenly from behind me. "Red for danger!"

I didn't need to turn round. I knew exactly who that high-pitched, hovering-on-the-edge-of-a-nervous-breakdown voice belonged to.

"We're not in any danger, Baba," I sighed without looking up from my form. "It's just a warning light letting the techies know we have to fix the solar panel."

"Red for danger, Adina!" the voice quivered. "Red for death! We're all going to die!"

That made me whirl round faster than an air-con fan on its highest setting. "Baba, what the hell are you—"

I didn't finish, I just stared at the old man standing behind me with my mouth open. Baba Weseka was so skinny, his green shirt and trousers hung round his bones like stalks on a

withered corn cob. Even though he looked ancient, I knew he couldn't be more than sixty at most. That still made him the oldest person here—life was tough when Eden Five was first built, and it took years for the Gardens to grow enough food for everyone. There were a few members of the first generation born in Eden Five left—grandparents who still did odd jobs in the factory rooms or worked in the cookhouse. We all knew Baba Weseka had been born here, same as them, but some days he'd get so confused, he'd tell everyone he'd been born in the time *before*, when people still lived in the outside world. Those were the days he'd swear blind that the ground of the wilds outside now ran with blood instead of rivers, so you didn't want to go believing anything Baba Weseka said when he was in one of *those* moods.

He was definitely not having one of his good days—I could tell straight off from the way he was staring back at me with eyes wide as overripe peas ready to burst from their pod. It wasn't his crazy eyes that made me shiver, though; I was used to their glazed expression by now. I was even used to his visions of doom and warnings of impending disaster. What I wasn't used to was the sight of the bright red blood that dripped from deep gashes in both his palms.

"Red for danger, Adina," he gasped again, holding his hands before my face so the blood ran down his wrists and dripped to the ground. "Red for death. We're all going to die!"