

Weariness crept across Yehya's face, and deep furrows formed between his eyebrows. Nagy, who was squatting on the ground beside his friend, had become restless and wanted to leave. Yehya bent over slightly and groaned softly, and Nagy stood up and grabbed Yehya's arm, telling him to sit in his place for a little while. He'd been reclining under the shade of a yellow cloth banner whose colors had faded in the weeks since the election but still showed the candidate's face, his big red heart logo, and the familiar violet party symbol. Yehya turned down Nagy's offer, not out of pride, but because the pain was so bad he couldn't bend his knees to lower his body that short distance to the ground. He searched in his pocket for a strip of the painkillers he always carried with him but found just an empty packet. A handsome young man in front of them had been eavesdropping over Nagy's shoulder, "and he offered a couple of pills of an over-the-counter medicine, the kind for headaches." No matter what happened, Amani never changed. Yehya knew she was guided by her emotions and never considered things rationally. He knew she waited for her dreams to magically come true and never took obstacles into account, even if she was aware of them and how difficult they would be to overcome. He dealt with her optimism by trying to make reality match it as best he could, but this time was different. She'd been drawn into the incident herself. He pulled her close to him, putting an end to her inspection and wishful thinking. He kissed the top of her head and then her lips, but he couldn't hold her as he wanted to--the pain shot through his left side mercilessly, and he sat down, telling himself that there had to be better days ahead. She sat with him for a few minutes in the living room, then went to the kitchen and returned carrying two teacups and the cake she'd baked to celebrate his thirty-ninth birthday. He reflected with wry humor on the fact that it was the first birthday he'd celebrated with a bullet lodged in his guts. She poured them tea and cut the cake into generous helpings, wishing all the while that the bullet would simply disappear. She kissed him on the forehead and handed him his plate, but he couldn't eat with her; the stabbing pain had spread into his whole stomach and down his thighs. He lay down on the sofa and closed his eyes, and she brought him a glass of water and sat in a chair next to him, not daring to touch him. She was distraught. It tormented her to see him sprawled out like this, weak and defeated, and she felt so stupid and powerless. She knew that a glass of water wouldn't do anything to help. Yehya fell asleep and Amani wandered through her memories, pausing in front of the Northern Building where Yehya stood impatiently every day, waiting to enter. She'd seen the Northern Building often, but only ever from a distance: a strange crimson octagonal structure, slightly higher than the concrete walls that extended from it on either side. The main entrance to the building was the Gate itself, built into one of its eight sides. "Yehya didn't sleep long." THE WAY TO AMANI About a week after Um Mabrouk arrived with the letter, two events took place that sparked curiosity and commotion in the queue. First, the elderly woman from the South, who hadn't sat down to rest for a moment since arriving, suddenly collapsed. Her son appeared instantly, a tan young man who carried her off before anyone could ask how he'd known she'd fainted. Some said she was overcome with fatigue and her spirit had risen to meet its Creator, while others said she had survived and was put in intensive care in the military hospital, where they could monitor how her heart and lungs were functioning. But the man in the galabeya, who had appeared in the queue quite suddenly without explanation, proclaimed this a sign that God was angry because she had wronged herself and all other citizens. Despite coming to the Gate and acknowledging what she had

done, she did not repent or hide the error of her ways--instead she flaunted it, unabashedly parading it around. Even worse, instead of coming to submit an apology or ask God for forgiveness, she was bent on filing a complaint, as if she were the one who'd been wronged."Yehya shook his head in silence. Since the Gate had materialized and insinuated itself into everything, people didn't know where its affairs ended and their own began. The Gate had appeared rather suddenly as the First Storm died down, long before the Disgraceful Events occurred. The ruler at the time had been an unjust one, and popular resistance gathered to oppose him. The ensuing uprising wracked his reputation and jeopardized his properties and those of his cronies. It threatened to sweep away the system he and his inner circle found so agreeable and desperately wanted to preserve. One night, as tensions were building, the ruler broadcast a short speech on television, in which he spoke of "the necessity of reining in the situation." "lean, work in the kitchen, and lend a hand around the office three days a week. When Amani's mother passed away, followed soon after by her father, Um Mabrouk started to work at Amani's office full-time: five days a week, morning to afternoon, with only a few minutes for a lunch break. When the expenses for her apartment and children rose like floodwaters and she could barely stay afloat, she took on two more small houses for her days off. Um Mabrouk's face was lined with sorrow. If fate hadn't been so hard on her, she wouldn't have been tossed from cleaning one house to another, working so many jobs. Her train of thought was broken by a large, dirty-looking man who got into the metro car as the woman across from her rose from her seat. He rushed over in his tattered rags, rubbing up against Um Mabrouk's knees as he slumped into the vacant seat. He stuck his head out the window and suddenly began singing gruffly and sucking at his long dusty hair. Um Mabrouk silently promised herself that despite how bad he smelled she wouldn't get up until her stop; she could so "from the office to repair fell onto the floor." UM MABROUK Um Mabrouk had just finished tidying up the last room when it was time for her to leave. She went into the bathroom, shut the door behind her, and changed out of her wet clothes, washed her face, and put on a clean galabeya and low heels. She made sure she had everything in her handbag, felt around for the envelope inside it for the third time, and then said goodbye to the employees who were still in the office and rushed off, just managing to squeeze herself into a microbus before it pulled away from the sidewalk. When she arrived at the Gate there was a river of people flooding the street, and as she got off at the corner, she snagged her stocking on a bit of metal jutting out from the bottom of the microbus door that never closed. She hitched up the hem of her galabeya and saw a wide hole quickly unraveling upward. Her last bottle of nail polish had just run out, but she kept smiling all the same. She walked alongside the queue, assuring people she wasn't skipping ahead of them but had just come searching for a relative and passed dozens of people before she arrived at "She recognized him by the back of his head before seeing his face, and reached out to shake his hand." Meanwhile, the people standing at the threshold of the Gate estimated that there were three whole kilometers between them and the end of the queue--much to the chagrin of those near the end, who insisted they weren't nearly that far away. At the queue's midpoint, the two sides were about to erupt into a brawl over their varying estimations of the distance when a well-known surveyor standing in the middle of the queue intervened and volunteered to settle the matter. Asking for a bit of quiet, he ran some quick calculations, using his geographical knowledge of the area, information provided to him by

both parties (representatives from the beginning and the end of the queue), and a "detailed description of the area's various landmarks and general terrain."The weather was hot and humid, and as the sun climbed upward, it appeared to dissolve the sky behind it. In front of them, the street looked like it had just emerged from an invisible war: papers strewn everywhere, broken bottles scattered on the ground, boxes of garbage plucked out of the bins, piles of burning rubber tires still spouting smoke and occasionally flames. Nagy realized that it had been a while since he'd heard any news from Tarek. He asked Yehya, who waved the question away. He hadn't seen or called Tarek "since that dismal night in his office, when the doctor had shown him those documents."A full range of security units soon appeared, too: the Deterrence Force existed to guard the Gate, and appeared only when something signaled danger near the building itself. The Concealment Force was tasked with protecting Zephyr Hospital and other facilities whose documents, files, and information were highly secret. Finally, the Quell Force handled direct confrontation and ran "dom skirmishes with protesters during times of unrest and chaos."When they arrived at Amani's building, Nagy made his excuses and left so that Yehya could be alone with Amani. Yehya rang the bell a couple of times before Amani opened the door. Despite how deeply she had longed to see him, she looked into his eyes for just a fleeting moment before her gaze instinctively traveled downward. She scrutinized his clothes, and he quickly realized she was searching for any sign of bandages. Her face fell when she didn't see any, and she was "filled again with a sense of anxiety. But then she'd wake up late and run straight out the door, intending to make it up throughout the day, and on it would go. She had so much trouble sticking to what she set out to do, sometimes she wondered if she might even be "She walked the rest of the way home from the metro station, and before she crossed the crumbling wooden threshold she took off her shoes and tucked them under her right arm. She climbed the stairs with feet as rough as the slanted steps, which were pocked with knots and holes. She pushed open the flimsy front door, dropped her shoes, and called for "her son, Mabrouk."Neighbors who noticed her never-ending woes advised her to find out why she suffered such misfortune, and so she did. She visited the High Sheikh, before that too was forbidden--forbidden, at least, without a permit from the Gate--and he told her bad luck fol "followed her because she'd neglected her prayers. It seemed certain this time, he said, and they couldn't miss a chance that might not come again soon."The young man took a step closer and, whispering, asked them what they needed from the Gate. I've got this silly little stomach pain. It keeps me up at night, and I need some special medicine for it--the doctor gave me a prescription when I went to the hospital, and I asked around at several pharmacies, but no one's got it. People who take it say it's available in public clinics, but you know how it is--they need permission from the Gate to fill your prescription."The young man nodded solemnly and looked like he was about to say something else, but then changed his mind and returned to where he'd been standing. She tutted disapprovingly, leaned over to Ines, and pushed some dried mint stalks into her hand."Yehya and Nagy wandered through the near-empty streets. No one knew when rush hour was anymore; there were no set working hours, no schedules or routines. Students left school at all sorts of times, daily rumors determined when employees headed home "and many people had chosen to abandon their work completely and camp out at the Gate, hoping they might be able to take care of their paperwork that had been delayed there."Then one day, Yehya heard about people who

could no longer stand what was happening. Word spread that a small group of people, who had recently joined together, were going to organize a protest. He was skeptical "that an uprising would be possible under the Gate's reign, but all the same he excused himself from work and left at the agreed-upon time, having decided to watch from afar. Tears of humble remorse flowed down her cheeks, and she swore she would uphold her religious duties and never miss a prayer. Yehya gave Nagy a soft jab in the side, so slight that no one else noticed" "the side, so slight that no one else noticed, and quickly replied, "Oh nothing, just permission for medical treatment. Um Mabrouk rushed off, and Yehya's heart trembled, sending convulsions down his left side and bringing him a new wave of pain. A faint shudder shook his hand as he held the envelope, which Nagy urged him to open. The man panicked at the clatter, leapt toward the metro door in fright, and jumped out before the train stopped at the next station. "She was forever cursed with bad luck, and there was no end to her problems, no matter how much she tried to set things right. Her eight-year-old son was sick with a bad kidney and was always in and out of the hospital for more treatments. She'd taken him in several times in just the past month, and watched as "his slender body was pumped with what seemed like gallons of medicine. But Mabrouk cried when he lifted the speaker to his ear and didn't hear the dial tone he remembered from when they'd once had a landline, back when he was a baby. A couple of "On half of the second document, in a space without words, he had drawn a figure resembling Yehya, nearly naked, and a small, solid circle, completely shaded in, occupying a space in the lower left part of his stomach. It saddened him that they couldn't find anything else to talk about, just this bewildering mess that had become their sole subject of conversation from dawn until the ominous hours of the afternoon. He also offered to save Yehya's place in the queue, if he wanted to lie down at the man's place for a bit, but Nagy thanked him on Yehya's behalf, saying he'd heard that the Gate would open today. Nagy leaned over and whispered in Yehya's ear that if he had half the faith she did, it would do him a lot of good. He made sure to include land now occupied by the queue's most recent additions, those who had joined throughout the night. They passed several sleepy cafes and a few small shops lining the road, most closed for the day behind heavy metal grates, even though it was barely four o'clock in the afternoon. It hadn't opened since, nor had it attended to a single citizen's needs, yet it also hadn't stopped issuing laws and decrees. She held fast to her hope that Yehya would undergo the operation: that it would succeed, he would recover, and this ridiculous nightmare they had been thrust into would end. He was concerned when Amani fell silent and began to watch him attentively; she was counting his exhalations and synchronizing her breathing with his, so she would notice if anything changed. He gathered some strength and shifted on the sofa, and his face regained some life. The old woman interjected, saying that medicine only made you sicker, while a cup of warm mint tea would bring back his health and get rid of his pain too. Yehya seemed concerned by her sudden arrival, but he tried to appear welcoming, as if he'd been expecting her. The only thing inside was an unlined white page with a few handwritten sentences. The remedy to poverty was to bow down and pray and to stop her grouching and complaining. She remembered the notice she'd received from the Gate a year earlier, stating that she wasn't entitled to a phone line due to misconduct. Finally, with pen and paper in hand, the man announced that the distance was in fact approximately two kilometers. They left .the main road and headed toward Amani's building, Yehya instinctively taking the side streets