1. a common literary phrase - لولا . It means just what it looks like “If not”. This is a rhetorical device, where the ف introduces what would have happened “if not” for something.

Here, we’re talking about the greatest Arabic poet working for the Emir of Aleppo. The sentence says:

لولا المتنبي، فنسي التاريخ إسم الأمير سيف الدولة

*if not (for) al-Mutanabbi, history (would have) forgotten the name of Emir Sayf al-Dawla*

Little doubt that this is true, since no one has heard of Sayf al-Dawla except as the patron of al-Mutanabbi (the reason he paid him all those years, so it worked as planned).

Hopefully, you recognize the components of the conditional here. It is لو because it is impossible - there was a Mutanabbi, so this is a purely hypothetical situation. The whole thing is past tense because it is conditional.

 How would you say the following:

* *If not for Arabic, I would have graduated last year*
* *If not for Islam, Arabic would not have spread*