

## Chapter 1 – Lotus

2nd week of Neweast 227 AJ

"Bring her to me!" Lotus demanded as he readied himself for his new future, a future that she would play a part in. Not a significant one, but important. nonetheless, one of the many wheels that had worked in his mind for over two decades now. One of the many wheels that would eventually turn to hand him the one thing he wanted most. Justice.

Lotus leaned back expectantly on the stone bench. His eyes watched intently as his brother Yetkin led the girl into the gardens. He had picked her up from the streets a few days earlier. She was a filthy beggar, emaciated and alone. A pungent odour of sweat and bodily fluids had clung to her pores. Yet, despite all the filth, her beauty undoubtedly shone through her coat of misery.

But as she walked into the gardens now, her gaze lowered and her steps hesitant, Lotus's eyes widened in astonishment. He rose, mesmerised.

Now that the girl had been washed, her smooth skin reflected the sunlight like a brilliant star. She possessed an unusual pallor, a rare sight in Sandarin. More so, a delicate blush covered her skin, undoubtedly the result of the washwomen's rough hands and scratchy brushes.

As Yetkin positioned the girl in front of Lotus, she gave a tentative curtsy but kept her gaze lowered.

"And what did I tell you?" Yetkin asked enthusiastically. "Once she's all dolled up, she's exactly what we've been looking for. A true and staggering beauty!"

Without answering him, Lotus slowly circled the girl, taking her in from head to toe. Her hair was long and glossy, a beautiful dark brown. Instead of her tattered rags, she now wore a white, gossamer dress that clung to her body in the gentle evening breeze. The delicate fabric allowed the observant onlooker a glimpse of what it intended to conceal. And what Lotus caught sight of was promising.

After he had completed his circuit, he put on a gentle smile. "Look at me, girl!" he commanded, intrigued.

Shyly, she raised her glance and opened her fluttering eyes.

Lotus was met with two large, blue eyes that shone like the sea on a warm midsummer day. When he raised his voice again, it rang in a much more gingerly tone: "What is your name, my child?"

"Jasmina," she replied softly. Again her gaze fell to the ground.

Lotus firmly placed his index finger under her chin and forced her to look at him. "Well, Jasmina, my brother was telling the truth indeed. I have never seen a more beautiful girl than you."

Hesitantly, she gave a small curtsy. If Lotus wasn't mistaken, she was even more intimidated than before. "Thank you, Your Highness. You are too generous, Your Highness."

Lotus took her by the hand, lowered himself to the edge of the fountain, and drew Jasmina down with him. Then he leaned toward the girl and patted her hand affectionately. As he did so, Lotus inhaled the fresh scent of her hair. It was even more intoxicating than all the fragrances of the spring flowers blooming in the gardens combined. "And, tell me, Jasmina, did my brother also explain to you what it is we want you to do for us?"

The girl's gaze darted to Yetkin and clung to him uncertainly.

Yetkin, however, simply gestured impatiently for her to speak.

She nodded. "Yes, Your Highness. Mirza Yetkin explained to me that I am to be presented as a gift to the emir of the Stone Desert."

"And then?" Lotus enquired delicately, as if talking to a toddler.

Jasmina paused and lowered her head once again. Finally, she whispered, "I am to persuade Emir Phalyssa to drink a ... special wine. Your Highness."

Lotus remained silent, waiting with anticipation.

"And..." Jasmina stalled, "if necessary, have some wine sent specifically for him should Emir Phalyssa not be thirsty."

"Very well, my dear. And do you think you can manage that?"

Jasmina simply nodded.

"Good. Very good!" Lotus's grip on Jasmina's hand tightened. "For otherwise, what would have to happen to you would be very tragic. I truly do not want to hurt you,

my child. I am fond of you, Jasmina." Despite his gentle tone, the girl flinched at Lotus's words. With satisfaction, he noted that she even was trembling a bit. He nudged her playfully with his shoulder and smiled broadly. "We are friends, after all—aren't we, my child? And friends don't let one another down, do they?"

"No, Your Highness."

"I don't think that she's suitable," Esra interjected with a serious expression. "She doesn't strike me as someone particularly experienced in the craft of seduction. Perhaps we should reconsider selecting a girl from the brothels."

Lotus looked up at his sister. She stood upright before him, arms clasped behind her back, and scrutinised Jasmina critically.

"Just look at her!" Yetkin retorted energetically. "Anyone who possesses her beauty need not master the art of seduction to wrap a man around her finger."

Esra did not betray a flicker of emotion. "She is too thin-skinned. Under interrogation, she would be easily exposed. And she could never withstand the torments of potential torture tactics."

Beside him, Lotus felt Jasmina wince inconspicuously.

"But the girl is still so young and delicate," Munir, the Emirati vizier, now suggested. "Who could look at her and see a killer? A whore from the brothels is too tainted. But this girl... She is utterly untouched and unspoiled. Who could ever accuse her of a crime as cruel as murder?"

"Anyone with even a shred of common sense?" Esra retorted, unimpressed.

Yetkin snapped at her angrily. "And just what, pray tell, are you trying to imply by that, Sister?"

Thoughtfully Lotus looked back and forth between Yetkin, Esra, and the long-bearded elder. He trusted his sister and had always relied on her astute and sensible counsel. And he knew that Yetkin had long resented him for that very favouritism. Yet, even though Esra was a woman, her razor-sharp intellect was, nonetheless, considerably superior to their brother's. And an emir always had to utilise the resources at his disposal.

On the other hand, Esra was a stiff and utterly humourless woman, and she certainly had no understanding of what men desired. Had she not been the daughter of the

emir of the Sun Vale, she would likely have remained without a husband to this very day. Not that Esra had ever yearned for one...

Lotus rose and smiled at Esra, arms outstretched. "My sister! You overestimate the perceptiveness of us men. I believe Vizier Munir and Yetkin are right. No one will waste their time looking behind a woman's facade as long as she possesses one as beautiful as Jasmina's. The girl will serve us well."

Esra bowed her head without objection. "As you command, Your Highness."

Lotus appreciated his sister's unconditional loyalty. Nevertheless, he did not fail to cast one last, intentional look upon her. He had heard her concerns, and he would take them to heart.

"Is our deal with Shaddow Stone fully concluded?" he finally asked his brother.

Yetkin nodded eagerly. "Concluded and ready to launch."

Content, Lotus stepped into the palace before turning one last time to his advisors. With watchful eyes, they keenly awaited his command. Amidst them sat Jasmina like an invisible shadow, staring down at her feet with slumped shoulders. Slowly, Lotus let his gaze wander—from Yetkin, across to Esra, and finally to the old vizier. "Ensure that all preparations are complete by the time of our departure. I shall now retire to my chambers."

The three bowed eagerly and scattered. The girl followed Yetkin with downcast eyes. As her small, helpless figure faded from the gardens, Lotus heard the first gear of his long-awaited plan finally snap into motion.

After a long bath and a sumptuous meal, Lotus settled onto his soft ottoman and stretched out his legs, satisfied. He was just about to turn to his customary evening reading when his wife, Alea, entered the bedchamber. She was pensively chewing her lower lip, a deep frown displayed on her forehead. In her hand, she held a letter.

"You look troubled, my love," Lotus remarked, noting the tension between her knitted brows.

Alea hesitated briefly; then, quickening her pace, she strode toward him, and Lotus sat up with a groan. "I have learned that you intend to take Yanni with you," she

said firmly, taking a seat beside Lotus. That she did not approve of this decision was unmistakable.

Lotus bestowed a weary smile upon his wife. "The last time Yanni left the Sun Vale, he was ten years old. He successfully completed his training in the Four Stars—yet that was five years ago. Now, he is a man. It is time for Yanni to learn to bear the duties and burdens that fall to an every emir. The journey into the Stone Desert will be a valuable lesson for him."

Alea looked at him with wide eyes. "He is not a man. He is twenty years old!"

Lotus gave a wry smile. "What else would you call him?"

*"My boy!"*

Lotus smiled again. He knew that Alea's concern for her eldest—and only—son did not stem merely from their travels to the Stone Desert itself. It was the implications that said journey symbolised. Lotus had never broached the subject with Alea. Yet she must have sensed that he was not setting out for Azad Phalysa solely for the sake of a trade agreement.

"You need not worry about Yanni," Lotus promised his wife emphatically. Gently, he took the letter from Alea's hands and placed it upon an ornate side table. Then he clasped her fingers in his own. "He is old enough to understand what is at stake for our family. I will not let anything happen to him."

Alea reluctantly averted her gaze. "I thought Yanni would remain here to stand in for you during your absence."

"Vizier Munir and Esra will take on that task for me." Lotus pressed his forehead against his wife's and closed his eyes. For a time, the two sat leaning against one another, feeling the other's breath upon their skin.

Then Alea cupped Lotus's face in her hands and looked at him urgently. "Promise me!"

Cautiously, he raised an eyebrow in question.

"Promise me that no one will be harmed!"

Lotus sighed and withdrew her hands from his face. "You know I can't promise you that."

As if he had just confirmed her worst fears, Alea's features hardened into an iron expression. "Then promise me that no harm will befall the people who matter to me."

Lotus nodded.

She was speaking of her sister, Dajana, and her children. Lotus could not guarantee Alea that he would protect her sister's family. Should complications arise, he would always—and without exception—choose his own family. Yet, at this moment, Dajana's death would be of no more use to him than that of her children. On the contrary, their survival might even provide Lotus with an advantage.

"I promise."

Somewhat mollified, Alea started to stroke his long and gradually greying goatee. Then, suddenly, she seized it with vigour and yanked Lotus roughly toward her. "Why can't you simply listen to me?" she asked him bitterly. "You are going to put us all in danger—and for what?"

Lotus furrowed his brow. "You know that I am not travelling to your sister out of spite. My motives for this venture are—and remain—your inheritance and your rightful claim. And the rightful claim of our son!"

Alea shook her head in frustration. "I never asked you to defend my heritage. All I ask of you is to finally let go of what was supposedly taken from us and instead cherish what we already have!"

"What we *have* is responsibility, Alea," Lotus countered coolly. "Responsibility for our children. Do you not want our son to receive at last what was so unjustly torn away from him?"

Alea let out a heavy sigh. "Yanni has no more claim to rule over the Stone Desert than Emir Azad."

"Not if one properly adheres to the case-specific provisions of Sandarian law!" Lotus retorted indignantly.

"No one cares about these laws, Lotus! Neither Sultan Mhyos nor the efendis of the Stone Desert. If you travel to Emir Azad with the intent I suspect behind this trade deal, there will be no turning back. You claim you are doing all this solely for the sake of our children. Yet you refuse to acknowledge the danger to which you would expose our

family with such a deed. I will no longer attempt to dissuade you from your objective. I know your decision has already been made. But do not use our children to justify your insane ambitions. I am no fool, Lotus."

Now it was Lotus's turn to avert his wife's gaze. They had fought this battle hundreds of times already, and not once had they reached a compromise. Alea might be willing to endure having been passed over in the line of succession by her own parents; Lotus, however, was not about to be cheated so wilfully. He was the one who had wed the eldest daughter of the Phalysas. And thus, it was his son—to whom, in the absence of any other male Phalysean kin, the right of inheritance over the Stone Desert fell.

He had already tried countless of times to make Alea grasp the danger of their inaction. If the other Houses of Sandarin were to conclude that betraying Lotus Sundalin carried no consequences, it could entail far graver repercussions than a direct and personally arranged confrontation. Uprisings, wars, and pillaging were considerably harder to control than an ambush. But Alea simply refused to understand him. She insisted on seeing him as a power-hungry, vengeful hothead—a man whose honour had been wounded, chasing after senseless and risky childish antics. Yet it was not retribution that Lotus craved. It was justice.

Finally, he sighed, exhausted. "You've come with news?" he asked, gesturing toward the letter.

Alea nodded half-heartedly. "Word from Magdalini." She took hold of the parchment and unrolled it along the already broken seal. "Her pregnancy is progressing splendidly. No complications and very few complaints."

Lotus regained his smile. "Does she write of Deniz?"

"He has already started walking," Alea replied with a chuckle, even if the bitterness in her tone had not yet entirely vanished. "He seems to be a boy of great temperament. The wet nurses can barely take their eyes off him without the little one pulling himself up on whatever furniture is at hand."

Lotus shook his head in disbelief. "It feels to me as if Deniz were born only yesterday. It is hard to believe that he is already standing on his own two feet."

Alea nodded wistfully. "I miss them."

"Me too," Lotus retorted sadly. Yet this was the lot of every daughter—and, as such, the sorrow of every parent. "As soon as Magdalini has come through her confinement and recovered, we will go and visit her and the children. First, however, I have duties to attend to."

Alea gave a scornful snort. "Everything for our children, am I right?"

Lotus ignored her provoking jibe. Alea might pester him and question his every intent, but Lotus would never lose sight of the true reason behind his ambition: his family. It was the love for his children that gave him meaning and purpose. His children's legacy would bestow his life as significant even long after Lotus's death. And if there was one thing that Lotus aspired to, it was significance.

Suddenly, Alea leaned toward him and, in a familiar gesture of tenderness, buried her fingers in Lotus's oiled moustache. The spun gold, artfully braided into his black hair, rustled barely audibly as she twirled the tip of his moustache around her fingertip. "I truly hope you turn out to be right, Lotus. I pray that I will end up the one who has been mistaken for all these years."

Her words might have sounded harmless, and her tone betrayed conciliation, yet the hardness in his wife's eyes left no room for interpretation. Lotus sensed the threat seething beneath her controlled facade as clearly as if Alea had slapped it right across his face. Then, her unspoken 'otherwise' echoed through his mind like an unwanted reverberation. As Alea turned away from him and disappeared into the bathroom with a determined stride, Lotus could still hear her silent message dancing inside his skull, keeping time with the frantic pounding of his heart. *Otherwise, Lotus... Otherwise... Otherwise, I will never forgive you...*

On the morning of the following week, right at the break of dawn, Lotus stood with his entourage in the Great Hall and bade farewell to his family and court. His departure was such a spectacle that even Esra's simple-minded husband, Teoman Safak, had come to bid his liege lord farewell.

With any other efendi, Lotus would have worried about his sudden appearance on the day of his departure—particularly given that his wife was to handle Lotus's affairs of

state during his absence. But not so with Teoman Safak. He was a hopeless fool and a pathetic strategist. He was, however, notably rich. And the Sundalins had always married wealthy efendis to ensure their own prosperity's preservation. Teoman might attempt to manipulate Esra's decisions in the Safak's favour; yet Lotus placed his absolute trust in his sister's integrity and insight—just as he did in the simple-mindedness of his impotent subject.

After a heavy-hearted goodbye to his youngest daughter, Elisavet—and a few final instructions for Lotus's sister—Alea finally stepped forward to face her lord and husband. With one last, firm embrace, she pressed Lotus against her, as if this parting were to be definite.

"We will see each other soon again," Lotus whispered into his wife's ear. Then, gently brushing a thick curl away from her face, he offered her a sincere and genuine smile.

Alea met his gaze with the searching urgency of a final plea. But eventually, her stiff shoulders relaxed, and her deep brown eyes surrendered. Then, a defeated smile stole itself onto her lips. Apparently, twenty-five years of marriage and partnership ultimately still weighed out the wedge of their disagreement.

"Don't worry, Mother," Yanni affirmed, echoing Lotus's silent promise—heedless of the palpable distance between his parents. "Father will look after me."

Lotus refrained from correcting his son. Nevertheless, a sour note crept into his expression. Of course, Lotus would always keep a watchful hand over Yanni. Yet, he did not deem it wise—as a grown man and the future emir of the Sun Vale—to loudly proclaim before his entire entourage that he was still dependent on his father's protection.

"Will you bring me back some treats?" Elisavet asked Yanni in the meantime, excitedly. She seemed to sense a higher chance of success with such requests when asking them of her big brother. "And toy figurines? I still need a brave hero for my collection. Like the gladiators from the Stone Desert!"

Yanni grinned, leaned down to Elisavet, and planted a farewell kiss on her cheek. "Whatever you wish, little sister."

Finally—after exchanging yet another round of goodbyes with his family, advisors, and court—Lotus set off amidst their thunderous cheers and resounding music to take his place at the head of his retinue. Upon arriving there, several servants helped him into the palanquin strapped to the back of an elephant. Once Lotus had settled into an upright position, he turned toward his son, who was riding alongside him on another elephant’s back.

All of a sudden, a warm rush of pride welled up in his chest. Yanni might be naive for his age—and might not yet fully grasp the realities and burdens of a ruler—but, in return, he was the most sincere person Lotus had ever known. Yanni deserved nothing but the very best in this world. And the mere fact that Lotus had been able to bring such a kind-hearted boy into this world in the first place fulfilled him with more love than he had ever thought possible.

After a final glance at the Golden Palace, Lotus signalled his captain. Agha Arman—true to the Sundalins’ ancestral home—wore armour of pure and spotless gold. The shiny breastplate gleamed in the scorching heat as if he were the sun itself; one could not look directly at him without being almost blinded. Others might perhaps have found such armour unwieldy. Yet Lotus deemed it more than fitting to reflect the Sundalins’ boundless wealth in the very gear of their warriors.

An excited tightening seized Lotus’s chest as Agha Arman raised his sword in a powerful gesture and gave the order to march. A mighty surge rippled through the golden ranks of soldiers, court and servants alike, and the journey to Mount Shield began.