

CRYSTALIS
ZENITH
PART 2



Crystalis Zenith (A Part of *The Crystalis Saga*)

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A New Beginning

The immaculate beauty of Yafan cannot be denied. Full of bright flowers in the spring followed by the most pristine snow through winter.

It was a hot summer day when those all-too-familiar words ran through his ears, “Baby, time to wake up.”

He wiped the sleep from his eyes before responding, “I’m not your baby anymore, Mother! Plus, it’s still early.”

“No it’s not,” his mother corrected him. “It’s almost the middle of the day.”

Turning to face his clock revealed his mother wasn’t lying. He jumped out of bed, asking his nearby parent to leave so he could change.

“I was supposed to meet the guys for practice,” he kept saying to himself until he exited his room wearing a tight black shirt and sweatpants.

Moving toward the front door, he latched onto a faded blue duffel bag placed beside the foyer’s left wall.

His mother quickly asked her son, “You sure you don’t want something to eat?”

“I’m late already,” he informed her as if she didn’t already know that.

Before he could leave his home, his mother verbally grabbed his attention one last time, “Maverick, please be safe.”

Her son flashed a smile that seemingly warmed her heart while he walked through their front door.

At only age seventeen, Maverick – strong of mind and body – had a great sense of who he was. Under Maverick’s somewhat serious & confident demeanor sat the glow of a child. Maverick’s round head, with his small, hazel eyes, stubby nose, and somewhat thick lips expressed the concern in his heart about being too late for practice to no one listening but himself. Running down the street, sunlight hit Maverick’s uncombed black hair and caramel colored skin until he reached his destination: a small, well-lit building with a dozen people close to Maverick’s age already inside.

“Where have you been?” were the first words Maverick heard when he walked through the building’s glass doors.

With a deadpan expression, Maverick told this questioning individual, “I overslept.”

“Well, you’re the one in trouble, not us.”

Maverick’s eyes shifted downward prior to his response, “Thanks for the support.”

When Maverick joined his fellow trainees, their instructor told everyone, “It’s been a long journey, but the big day is almost here. The World Fighting Tournament will conclude right here in Yafan, and you all have a chance to win. But that’s only if you believe in yourselves and train like never before. Today, we’ll practice something that could mean the difference between winning and losing: escapes and reversals when pinned against a wall or facing out-of-bounds situations. Partner up!”

Maverick and his best friend Jeff paired up, with Maverick on defense.

As Maverick did his best to sidestep Jeff’s smaller than average, yet limber body, Jeff tried to change his opposition’s focus by asking, “So, what are you gonna do about her?”

Maverick knew exactly who Jeff meant since “her” was the only woman in the class: a girl with flowing brown hair; light brown eyes, a thin nose; full, rosy lips; incredibly tanned skin. A female Jeff knew his friend liked.

“What about her?” Maverick asked when he slipped underneath Jeff’s left arm.

“You know? Are you gonna ask her out anytime soon?”

Maverick confirmed he would, but Jeff felt Maverick’s procrastination could mean too little, too late. As they continued training, Maverick couldn’t get Jeff’s belief that waiting would mean disappointment out of his mind.

After finishing practice, Maverick made his move by calling out his infatuation, “Hey, Miri!”

Miri was putting her clothes away when she heard Maverick calling her name. For some reason, Miri never looked up. The several seconds of silence between Maverick saying her name and him stoically standing in front of her made Miri realize Maverick was having a hard time vocalizing his thoughts. With her eyes finally on Maverick, Miri motioned for him to say whatever was on his mind.

A loud gulp could be heard coming from Maverick before he said, “Well, I just wanted to know if you’d like to go out sometime. Like after the tournament, or something.”

Miri combed back her shoulder length brown hair, giving Maverick a view of her big, auburn eyes.

Miri nonchalantly replied, “Sure, I think that would fun.”

Embarrassingly loud, Maverick exclaimed, “Great!”

The surprised look on Miri’s face following his response made him think about how he sounded.

Maverick, trying to collect himself, said in an attempt to cover up his overly enthusiastic response, “Well, I-I’ll, um, talk to you tomorrow. Okay?”

Zippering her bag and walking to the exit, Miri delightfully told Maverick, “I’ll be waiting.”

Jeff had an ear-to-ear grin on his face while jokingly saying, “Amazing! My little Maverick’s growing up right before my very eyes. It’s so touching.”

“Very funny,” Maverick said. “Whaddya think we should do now?”

After hanging out with Jeff and several of their friends well past nightfall, Maverick decided it was time to go home.

Maverick’s father met him at their home’s door with a question when his son returned, “What were you doing out this late?”

As he attempted to scoot into the house, Maverick mumbled, “Sorry, I just lost track of time.”

Maverick’s father reminded his son to be mindful of his surroundings during such hours. Nodding his head to signify that he understood what his parent meant, Maverick approached his bedroom.

When Maverick’s hand latched onto his door, Maverick’s father spoke again, “Yeah, almost forgot. Some girl came here looking for you.”

Maverick yelping Miri’s name made his elder think and audibly confirm, “Yeah, that’s her name. She just wanted to make sure you had her address if something came up before next week. What’s going on next week?”

Maverick reminded his father about the tournament and how Miri wanted his expertise before the big day, “I think she wants me to help her practice, or something.”

Grinning, Maverick’s father asked his only son, “Is that it?”

“Of course. Just practice.”

Maverick could see his father had something else on his mind. Their eyes moved in the same direction until they were both staring at Russell’s dinner plate containing a chicken leg, white rice, and stemmed carrots. Maverick shaking his head and entering his bedroom allowed his father to eat Maverick’s meal.

Many times a day, Maverick would daydream about the rest of the world. His thoughts were not of seeing everything a town or city had to offer, but how drastically different those places and people were compared to Yafan and his fellow Yafanites. Maverick couldn’t think of one person he’d known from anywhere other than Yafan, and doubted they were truly any different than him. It wasn’t until Decennial World Fighting Tournament that Maverick found out how wrong he was.

Fifty competitors (ten from each WFT-approved school) out of the four lands warmed up in the respective areas, but interacted with their fellow fighters. The different looks, skin tones and accents amazed Maverick. During the first round, Maverick observed Jeff watching everything but the tournament.

“Jeff,” Maverick said to his friend as the current fight came to a close. “Jeff, you’re missing everything. What are you staring at?”

A sly look accented Jeff’s face when he answered, “That cute girl in the third row on the western wall.”

Having to refocus on the task at hand, Maverick ignored Jeff for the majority of the day until it was time to do battle. Maverick did very well in his weight class by making it to the semifinals before losing to a young fighter from Tyrong.

Following the match, Maverick asked his victorious opponent, “So, you’re Tyrongy?”

“Yes,” the young man responded while trying to catch his breath. “It was a very fun match. I hope to fight we again someday.”

Maverick loved the idea, shaking hands and wishing luck to the man who bested him on that day. Surprisingly, the finals included the fighter who defeated Maverick and

a pale, burly, yet nimble girl from the distant land of Sonfa. The only three-time WFT champion headed the school this female fighter represented. After nearly fifteen grueling minutes, the Sofanian fighter became a WFT champion as well by kicking her opponent out of bounds when countering an attempted hip toss slam. The ring announcer proclaimed her the first woman to win the tournament since its creation nearly a century ago – a fighting series spearheaded by King Gonan of Gonaga.

Maverick told the tournament winner once she passed him backstage, “That was a great match you had.”

Her lack of a response made Maverick repeat himself. She gave no answer to his praise.

The girl finally raised her head, coldly staring into Maverick’s eyes as she said, “Thanks for tha compliment, but he was nothin’.”

Astonishment enveloped Maverick’s voice when he responded, “What? You guys fought forever.”

“I wanted ta give everyone a show,” the champion explained prior to walking away.

Maverick refused to let her get out of their conversation with such a lame answer. Looking back, the champion discovered Maverick tailing her. She picked up speed until she was out of sight amongst the horde of fighters and the news reporters interviewing both the competitors and their trainers.

Seeing his friend apparently running from something made Jeff physically and verbally intervene when he reached Maverick, “What’s the rush?”

“I have to get her,” Maverick told Jeff as he caught his breath.

“Maverick, the only girl you need to worry about is Miri. She got eliminated pretty early, and some companionship is just what she needs.”

Two hours after the tournament, Maverick met Miri at a local, buffet-style eatery both had frequented in the past.

Miri enthusiastically told Maverick upon seeing him, “You did really well today.”

“Thanks,” Maverick responded with a smirk gracing his face. “You didn’t do too bad yourself.”

The stunned look on Miri's face preceded her rebuttal, "How could you say that? I stunk. I didn't even win a round."

"Just inexperience at the big stage. You'll get used to it and start showing off those skills. Don't forget those same abilities got you chosen in the first place."

Miri graciously smiled at an equally grinning Maverick. The two fighters shared many laughs and strategies for future matches after receiving their meals until Maverick slumped in his booth, rubbing his full stomach. Miri also felt the repercussion of her overeating as she tried to move, but couldn't.

Maverick asking how Miri could be full when comparing her intake to his own made Miri jokingly point out, "I don't have a bottomless stomach like you."

The chuckling between the two abruptly halted because of Miri. Maverick hastily observed Miri's sudden shift in expression. Miri's eyes were looking past Maverick at something in the distance. Maverick spun around to discover a rather large someone wearing a hooded black robe standing behind him.

To this unknown individual Maverick said, "Excuse me, but you know it's rude to stare."

Without warning, the robed person clutched Maverick by his throat with a mammoth left hand. Miri slid out of their booth in hopes helping her friend when another person robed in a black grabbed her by the waist. Deciding it was better to run than fight, Maverick pried the thick fingers from around his neck before leg sweeping this incredibly strong attacker to the necessarily sturdy floor – inadvertently knocking over several tables and chairs due to the impact's reverberations. The distraction allowed Miri to elbow her captor and free herself. Maverick clutched Miri's left hand, forcibly dragging her out of the building before something else could happen.

Miri and her companion made it five steps outside when a seven-foot tall individual also wearing a black robe slipped in front of them. Maverick stepped back in awe as this giant with hands larger than the person who choked him seconds earlier yanked a nearby, bolted-down trash bin out of the ground prior to throwing it down as a barricade of sorts. Once again, Maverick grabbed an almost shell-shocked Miri by her hands to take her away from this incredibly powerful giant.

Miri screamed, “Who are they?” as Maverick led her down an alley behind the eatery.

Confusion overtook Maverick like his friend. The only thing Maverick knew to do was to keep moving. Miri and Maverick ran for half a mile through various back streets until she stopped in an attempt to get some significant oxygen into her lungs. As Maverick looked up, he noticed a man standing across the street with his face tilted toward the ground. Calling for help, Maverick shouted at this person. Maverick approached the unmoving individual in an attempt to attain some much-needed assistance, only for the person disappear. Maverick couldn’t believe what he’d just witnessed; becoming stunned & motionless as he attempted to process what just happened before his eyes. Miri shouting that another robed person had appeared behind Maverick grabbed his attention when he couldn’t figure out how someone could just vanish. Running as fast as she could, Miri tackled the potential aggressor facing Maverick’s back. With Maverick’s help, Miri began their escape again. The trip to Miri’s house went much smoother than expected following their last physical encounter. Miri was still visibly shaken by the whole incident as Maverick walked her up the nearby steps.

Maverick’s attempt at comforting his friend with a hug proved ill advised with Miri pushing him away and saying, “I think I’m going to get some rest. I had a great time before... y-you know. Goodnight.”

The concern on Miri’s face made Maverick ask, “Tomorrow?”

Miri slightly nodded her head to confirm Maverick would see her the next day. The run home for Maverick worried him greatly until he walked through his front door. Making a straight trip to his room without being confronted by his parents allowed Maverick to collect his senses. Unbeknownst to him was the fact his mother and father weren’t even home.

Maverick fell on his bed, looking at the ceiling until his eyes peered at the photo of himself & Jeff standing on his bedside dresser – the thought running through his mind, *Should I? Jeff’s probably heard by now. I better ho see if he’s heard anything.*

Cautiously exiting his home after realizing his home was empty outside of himself, Maverick made it to his friend's house; knocking on Jeff's bedroom window. Thankfully for Maverick, Jeff greeted him seconds later; coming outside.

The tone in Jeff's voice was that of intrigue when he gleefully questioned his visibly tired friend, "So, what did you two do?"

Maverick immediately asked his best friend if he'd heard about what occurred at the restaurant. To Maverick's surprise, Jeff had no idea what he was talking about. Maverick ordered his friend to go back inside & turn on his radio, but Jeff wanted to hear the news from Maverick.

"Keep this under your hat," Maverick said after several hushed seconds. "After Miri and me finished eating, a tall guy in a black, hooded robe grabbed me."

Jeff simply asked, "What did he want?"

"I don't know. So I was struggling to get free when another robed guy grabbed Miri. This one was shorter than the guy who had me. So, I tossed the guy away when Miri elbowed hers so we could get out of there and find help. All of a sudden, another robed goon appeared out of nowhere. Now this one was huge. He had to be about eight feet tall."

Maverick ignored the sarcastic sounds of awe coming from Jeff during his tale, continuing the story, "Miri was paralyzed with fear, so I grabbed her by the arm and dragged her down the alleys behind the place. After a minute or so, I noticed a man standing beside a wall not far from us. When I tried to get his attention, he disappeared; like a puff of smoke vanished. Miri yelled to tell me another robed person coming up behind me. Miri tackled the fourth robed guy so we could get away. I dropped her off at her house before I ran home."

Jeff audibly held back laughter prior to giggling and blurting out, "So, your date was so boring that you had to make up a story to entertain me! That's the only explanation for a story that ridiculous. Just tell me if Miri is still on the market."

"If you don't believe me, turn on your radio!"

Once again, Jeff refused to hear if Maverick's story was true, telling Maverick that he'd rather let his friend rest and talk about "the situation" tomorrow.

Maverick angrily left his friend's residence before starting to question himself on the way back home, *Maybe I'm already dreaming. Maybe this is just some crazy dream. Wake up, Mav!*

The sound of Maverick's hand smacking his own face echoed throughout the area and brought an even louder, "Ow!" out of him upon impact.

The next day, Maverick decided to prove his story true by taking Jeff to the restaurant.

Jeff finally gave Maverick the benefit of the doubt upon seeing the slight destruction of a missing trashcan that was visibly removed by inhuman means, but couldn't believe his friend missed such an opportunity, "You're telling me Miri was all like, 'Oh, Mav, you're my hero. Please, take--'"

"Jeff!" Maverick interrupted his buddy as they left the location. "The last thing I was thinking about was being some creep."

Explaining himself, Jeff posed a reasonable question, "So how do you know if Miri's really alright if you didn't spend some time with her afterward?"

Though Jeff's slight perversion irritated him, Maverick knew his friend was completely right about Miri's mental status – deciding to head toward her home. Miri's father met Maverick and Jeff in the yard, informing them that his daughter went for her morning jog at a nearby park almost an hour earlier.

On their way to meet Miri, Jeff still had some questions about what Maverick told him regarding the previous day's incident, "You said all of those guys were wearing robes? And you couldn't see their faces? So how do you know it was four of them and not three?"

"I don't really know," Maverick admitted. "But the smaller ones felt different. It's hard to explain."

"You know what, this whole thing is hard to explain. So let's just think about Miri and make sure she's okay."

The first thing Maverick and Jeff noticed when they arrived at the park was Miri sitting on a bench instead of running with her head facing the ground.

Jeff slowly approached Miri to ask her, "What's going on?"

Jeff's query shook Miri out of whatever mental quandary distressed her.

“I don’t know anymore,” Miri replied following several seconds of silence between the three. “I couldn’t sleep at all last night. I can’t concentrate on my run.”

Jeff assumed Miri’s lack of focus was courtesy of the robed men meant. Miri confirmed Jeff’s belief as the truth, stating that whatever Maverick told him was fact.

With a coy smile, Jeff asked, “Even the part about you two making out after getting away?”

Miri’s head and eyes quickly moved from their initial position as she yelped in Jeff’s direction, “What?”

A bewildered Maverick spoke up, “I never told you that! Tell her! I didn’t say anything like that!”

Jeff’s growing laughter made Miri believe what Maverick was saying. When Jeff’s humorous moment ended, Maverick and his best friend sat with Miri in an attempt to get her mind back in order. Before anyone could say anything else, the three friends heard someone scream from the wooded area behind them. They turned to see a woman exiting the woods, begging for help. A sickle suddenly flew behind the fleeing female.

The woman almost reached Maverick when the weapon pierced her left shoulder. A chain attached to the blade’s end suddenly shook, yanking its capture back into the forest. Maverick, Miri, and Jeff couldn’t believe what just happened; rising in stunned silence. Before the three could say or do anything, a giant of an individual stepped from the wooded area wearing a black robe.

For the first time in nearly a minute, Maverick was able to make a definitive statement, “That’s the guy who grabbed me!”

When Jeff asked how Maverick recognized this obviously shrouded man, Maverick told his friend, “I don’t know. I just feel it.”

To Jeff and Miri’s astonishment, Maverick jumped in front of them to prepare for a fight.

Maverick yelled at the approaching man, “Who are you? And what did you do that lady?”

This unknown man introduced himself when he halted his movement, “My name is Ove. I am one-fifth of an order not made for this world. And I’m here for you.”

Ove began pointing at Maverick.

“Why me?” Maverick had to know.

“You are the last piece of the puzzle.”

Uncharacteristically shaking with anger, Jeff shouted, “Puzzle? This isn’t some game! You just stabbed someone!”

With his attention still on Maverick, Ove replied, “The puzzle’s meaning is of no concern to your companions. Just come with me and everything will be explained.”

Maverick, unlike his best friend, kept his disposition calm as he asked, “And what if I don’t wanna go?”

“Then you’ll be forced to come with me.”

As Maverick and Ove commenced nothing short of a tense standoff featuring the two slowly inching toward each other, Jeff slipped behind this mysterious man in an attempt to grab him by his waist.

Jeff demanded Maverick to, “Get Miri outta here, now! I got this!” when Ove started shaking like an upset bull with Jeff’s arms latched around his torso.

“Are you sure?” Maverick feverishly asked.

Jeff nonchalantly winking while holding as tightly as possible gave Maverick his cue to take Miri away from this altercation. Maverick and Miri were running hand-in-hand as fast as possible until a loud scream resonated throughout the area. Miri tried to free herself from Maverick’s grip to go back, but Maverick refused let her go.

Maverick immediately said, “If you go back something will happen to you, too!”

Miri’s inability to understand Maverick’s reasoning made her ask, “Don’t you care?”

Maverick refused to answer, pulling Miri behind him so they could run to her house once again. Tears were streaming down Miri’s cheeks by the time they arrived at their destination.

The first thing Miri asked when they stopped moving was, “Why did we leave him?”

Maverick’s voice trembled during his response, “Miri, I don’t know how to say this, but I know Jeff’s still alive; but he’s hurt. You go in and lock all your doors. I’m going back to find him and help him.”

Miri wanted to go with him, but Maverick verbally refused, “No! If something happens.... I would rather have it happen to just me.”

Finally relenting, Miri slowly turned around to reenter her house. Maverick returned to the park to find officials taping off the area that Maverick, Jeff, Miri & Ove once occupied.

Maverick barked in the direction of those cautioning the growing crowd, “Let me through!”

Upon pushing his way into the heart of the commotion, Maverick had a question for those in charge, “Is that my friend?”

Unfortunately, Maverick’s belief that the person surrounded by medics was Jeff proved true when he saw his friend’s unconscious body.

Maverick asked the nearest medical technician, “What happened to him?”

“He’s your friend,” the medic replied. “I was hoping you’d tell me. We found him strung up by his legs from an enormous tree after a family heard him screaming. I think his skull and ribs are cracked. The family said they saw a teenage boy and girl running from the area when the initial scream stopped. Do you know who would’ve done something like that to your friend?”

Maverick wanted to tell the truth, but realized that he was the boy running from the scene with Miri.

Instead, Maverick opted to lie so Miri and himself wouldn’t be taken in for questioning, or worse, “I can’t think of anyone, sir.”

The official ordering Maverick away from the scene allowed Maverick to run back home so he could make sure this wasn’t some elaborate dream.

Slowly stepping onto his front porch, Maverick said to himself, “This has to be a weird nightmare. I’ll go into my house, go right into my room, and see myself sleeping; just about to wake up.”

A disturbed Maverick collided with his parents rushing him at the front door.

His mother immediately asked, “What happened? We heard there was an attack on a young man at the park you said you might take Miri to today.”

Once again, Maverick had to play dumb with his answers to avoid suspicion, though his voice was unsteady, “Really? Must’ve happened after we left.”

Maverick moved past his parents after confirming everything was all right, entering his room before shutting the door.

Taking a seat on the edge of his bed with his hands cupping his chin, Maverick asked himself, “What should I do? That guy said he was from ‘an order.’ What could that be? And they want me? I can’t stay here. My parents, my friends... Miri; they’ll be in trouble around me.”

Maverick packed his satchel with three days worth of clothes when his mother and father went to bed. Maverick’s bedroom window made for the perfect escape point. For some reason, the only person on Maverick’s mind as he exited his home for this journey to wherever was Miri. Maverick decided to make a stop at Miri’s house to say goodbye to his friend.

Quietly, Maverick asked from the other side of Miri’s bedroom window after knocking on the glass pane, “Miri? Miri, are you awake?”

A lack of response gave Maverick the incentive to peak inside.

“Are you decent?” Maverick said while slowly opening the window. “Miri? What?”

To Maverick’s shock, Miri’s room was completely empty with the dim moon being its only light.

On Miri’s bed lay a note that read, “Young Maverick, Your escapes have caused problems, altercations, and injuries that could have been avoided. If you want to help her you must help us. Come to the park where your friend’s body was found. You must hurry though. Time is a valuable thing. The longer you wait, the more we believe you value her life less and less.”

Maverick adhered to the message without a second thought, running to the park and only stopping upon the spot where Jeff’s injured body was discovered.

After standing around for what seemed like an eternity, Maverick began yelling toward the sky, “Come on! You said if I’d show up, you’d do the same! Where’s Miri?”

A masculine voice almost too quiet to be heard from any distance longer than a yard away suddenly sounded, “She’ll be delivered in due time.”

Out of nowhere stepped another man robed in black and his face hidden by a hood. This apparent member of the “order” Ove spoke of was actually shorter and emanating an aura not as intimidating as his predecessor.

Maverick immediately asked upon seeing this figure, “Where is Miri?”

“She’s being taken care of,” was the response from this low-toned individual. She’s almost like royalty. By the way, my name is Casimir.”

Maverick looked at Casimir’s covered face before noticing that Casimir had his hand extended for a shake.

Smacking Casimir’s hand away was a precursor to Maverick’s follow-up statement, “I don’t care about your name! Where is Miri?”

“You’ve already met Ove, and myself, of course. But you need to be introduced to all of my friends to understand why we need your help. Come and you’ll see your precious friend.”

Casimir turned around, walking between two adjacent trees until he disappeared as if he never existed. Maverick couldn’t believe his eyes. Taking a few steps toward the same trees, Maverick reached where Casimir vanished to discover his arm dematerializing as well.

Maverick muttered to himself, “Well, here goes nothing,” walking into the nothingness to leave the forest as well.

...to be continued