

PRIOR FORCE

A SEVERIN FORCE SHORT

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The Severin Force Political Thriller Series

PRIOR FORCE (prequel)

INITIAL FORCE

NECESSARY FORCE

LUNCH RUMINATIONS

OCEAN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

September 2001

Tuesday, Around 1230 Hours PDT

LUNCH WAS ALMOST OVER. His bento box was empty.

The girl he was talking to stopped talking for a moment and sniffed the air around her.

Her name was Matah, and she was a senior. *The* senior. The girl that every guy in Promontory High wanted to get to know. And then get to know better.

And he was talking to her. And she was talking to him. They were talking to each other. But he still didn't know her last name.

But she was talking to him – a sophomore. And making an observation about him, too.

"You smell like spice," she said, "and coconut."

"That so?" he said.

She leaned in a few inches closer and inhaled his personal fragrance again.

"And tropical wood."

"That's pretty close."

"Pretty close?" she echoed to him. "I nailed it. Spice, coconut, and wood. You can't smell it in class, but you can from this distance. Where'd you buy it?"

"I didn't buy it."

"So you boosted it? From where?"

"I made it."

Matah, with the as-yet undisclosed last name, shifted her weight ten percent more onto her left hip, the hip where about sixty percent of her weight already resided.

"That's funny. You made it? Right. How'd you know how?"

"I read a lot. Came across a few specifics, and experimented."

He hadn't shifted his weight one way or the other. He was standing evenly, balanced and relaxed, unable to look away from her face.

"Man is as man smells," he continued. "Heard that somewhere."

She smiled, did Matah, and curled the end of a section of smooth, dark hair around her finger.

She inhaled his scent again. Slowly.

Why was she talking to him, anyway? She was a senior. He was a sophomore. She didn't know anything about him either.

But it was nice to have someone, especially a someone who looked like she did, to talk to.

His family had just moved there. From New York. Just ahead of the attacks as it turned out.

He didn't mind being alone, but for the last week or so thoughts had been tumbling around in his head. He probably wouldn't tell her what they were, but there was no harm in a delightful conversational diversion, because the thoughts were hard to shake off.

He wouldn't tell her his thoughts because, right now, everyone had thoughts.

And his weren't unique. At least not completely.

The whole last week, he wondered if he had been spared, if his family, even, had been spared, for some reason.

His mom was already in Los Angeles, on rotation, when it all had happened. And his dad had had an appointment scheduled in the Twin Towers. An appointment for his work. He was going to tag along that day, and see what he thought of his dad's work.

But, the move west had gotten complicated.

So his dad had had to reschedule the appointment and they flew to Los Angeles. His dad was even planning to fly back on the twelfth. For his appointment. The one he'd had on the eleventh. But now he wasn't sure when he could get back. No one really wanted to fly at the moment.

And since that day, he couldn't figure out how to come to terms with all that had happened a week or so ago. To New York. To the country.

And he couldn't come to terms with what didn't happen to his family.

Were there reasons for sparings like that? For the just-misses? Were there reasons?

On the verge of offering up another question, or maybe reading his thoughts, Matah paused a moment, almost imperceptibly, then began what was either the question she had been about to ask, or else a different one.

"So, you moved here from --"

Severin Force, newly relocated sophomore at Promontory High School in Ocean Valley, California, spared for some reason from the deadly suicide plane on the 11th, engaged in conversation during the first week of school with a desirable senior object of desire named Matah, raised his hand and cut off her question.

Force sniffed the air around him.

Matah looked at him with an angled glance, her head inclining right and counterbalancing the canted leftward hip.

"Excuse me," said Force.

Showing no visible strain or exertion, and moving fast enough that

it seemed he'd just been standing not the way he had been, but instead in the just-adopted position, he turned one hundred and eighty degrees, his senses heightened, and his knees now slightly flexed.

A tall, muscular senior rushed at him.

The senior seemed agitated.

Without a curse at Force or any accusation, the big, presumably eighteen-year-old, full-size-plus male ran at wind sprint speed at the lean, fifteen-year-old Force, pulled up, spread his feet, settled his weight, and swung a furious roundhouse right at Force's jaw.

Force ducked.

The duck wasn't a particularly deep duck. Not the duck of a scared individual, either. But it was a fully sufficient duck.

The swing missed his jaw by one inch.

The reassuring, recently-hired private security guards at each end of the hall didn't move.

The senior, however, had committed so much weight transfer and energy to the missed air-punch that he lost his balance and had to stutter step and splay his arms to regain it. Matah lunged forward and helped him from falling onto the poured concrete hallway walkway.

"She," said the senior, pointing at Matah as he stood, with her help, and reassembled himself and reestablished some of his lost equilibrium, "she's mine."

"You're a lucky man," said Force, sincerely.

"Are you, though, my friend?" queried the big senior. "Are you lucky?"

"I don't know how to answer that. But I do think that we're probably using the word lucky in two different senses."

"Could be we are. And this is just a hunch, but I don't think you're going to enjoy either of them."

The large upperclassman, his apparent rage apparently escalating after the linguistic whipout interlude, but simultaneously also strangely containing his movements, swung again, harder, added in some martial arts moves, added in some MMA patterns,

added in some street fighting highlights, and Force ducked and parried it all.

Never too early.

Never with any evident fear.

And even though he was decidedly a lean sophomore decidedly facing a beefy senior, never out of control in any way.

Nothing initiated by the arms or legs of the senior connected with Force's body in any decisive way.

"Ben," said Matah, finally, moving in between the refined slugger and the artful dodger, "Ben, that's enough. I don't think he wants to fight."

"Or doesn't want to get hit." To Force, "That it, sophomore? You don't want to get hit?"

"Of course that's it. You want to get hit?"

And before the substantial senior could react, Force had directed a fully extended, rigid right hand at the bigger boy's chest with a speed and power sufficient to collapse him, but stopped it millimeters from impact with breathtaking stopping speed.

"I don't want to get hit," said Force. "And I don't want to hit you."

"And why don't you want to hit me? I just came at you."

"Because I'm not in full control of this yet. My technique. I stopped my fist just then, but I might not be able to do that yet, consistently. I may kill you. We don't want that, either of us."

The senior stared at him.

"Ben!"

"What?"

"Leave him alone."

Without answering the young object of desirability who might have been his girlfriend, but seemed also to be something like his handler, or something, the big boy turned away. He was still strangely controlled and constrained, the rage that still seemed to be simmering was difficult, therefore, to believe and was not, therefore, fully credible.

Something more than boyfriend jealous of girlfriend talking to another guy was going on here, thought Force.

But what was it?

The full-size-plus senior took two steps forward up the hallway toward the classrooms. Then, without warning, violently pivoted, and charged again at Force.

The security guards checked their phones and continued to make no move to intervene or do anything that would have halted the new attack.

Severin Force, the sophomore, stood his ground, loaded his weight onto his left leg, and then kicked out his fifteen-year-old right leg at full speed at the oncoming senior named Ben.

The accelerated lower limb shot straight toward the senior's eighteen year-old cranial area.

But Force's leg didn't create a deadly, jaw-jarring contact, but instead, decelerated at the last instant, like it was on rails, and came to rest harmlessly under the assailant's chin with just the slightest pressure exerted upward by his outstretched right tennis shoe.

Ben couldn't continue forward.

He stopped.

His eyes narrowed.

He looked down at the extended foot, the attached shoe and applied pressure propping up his head two or three degrees.

Looked at Force.

"Okay, where'd you learn that?"

"I read a lot."

"Uh huh. Well, if you like books, maybe you'd like a little test after school. We'll see how much scholarship and independent study protect you when I'm actually trying. And not under the cameras in the hallway. This was just round one, sophomore. I'll see you later."

Force slowly lowered his leg.

The formidable senior brushed off the area under his chin and

trudged off, looking angry but curious and maybe even buoyant at the same time.

Force asked himself again, what was going on with these two? And now with him as well?

The security guards looked up from their Motorola phones as Ben passed them.

"Better get to class," one of them said.

"Yeah," said Matah. "I'd better get to class,"

"I'd better get to class too," said Force as he started off in the opposite direction. "Think lunch is over." He nodded to the guard at his end of the hallway on the way out, "Gentlemen."

AFT OUR SCHOOL

PROMONTORY HIGH SCHOOL, OCEAN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA
Tuesday, Around 1530 Hours PDT

BRIGHT WAS THE SEPTEMBER AFTERNOON. Sun-baked. Glowing. Sea air tinged. A step or two away from summer. A step in the direction of fall.

The industrial-education day was over, the guards and their phones seemed to have left, and Severin Force was headed home for his own, personal workout.

He walked across the parking lot to the road leading away from the school, reading a dirty, creased copy of *The Sound and the Fury*.

Force wasn't on the football team. He didn't run cross country. But he wasn't aimless. He read books. He made his unique personal scent. He practiced executing his homegrown, self-taught self-defense movements.

And he always tried to stay on the home clock. His own clock.

But his schedule was about to be interrupted.

Blocking his way off of campus were Ben, the large senior who

charged him at the end of lunch and, on Ben's left and right, four other, larger, worse-tempered, tougher-looking accessory seniors. All five of them were wearing designer sunglasses for blocking out the Southern California sun.

Force did not wear sunglasses.

When Force had walked to within ten feet of the group, he stopped and sniffed once.

"Interesting," said Force.

"What?" said Ben.

"No fear," he said. "Because, you know, you can smell it. But I'm not picking up that scent in this parking lot. You lads have done this before."

"Indeed, we have," said Ben. "Indeed, we have."

Force walked forward until he was about five feet from them.

"And you," said Ben to Force. "No fear?"

"Don't know yet. Never done whatever this is we're about to do."

"No sunglasses, either."

"Don't believe in them," said Force.

"As a philosophical matter?" asked a treelike senior in a tank top. "Or don't believe they work?"

"Neither," said Force. "Just don't want anything in the way of seeing the world clearly."

"So," added the treelike senior, "actually a little bit of a philosophical matter after all?"

"You know, you're right," said Force. "Probably more than I thought. Thanks for pointing that out."

"I am a senior."

The assembled seniors closed on and encircled Force. Each one of them carried a different, dangerous, potentially-crippling implement. One, a length of pipe. One, a heavy rope. One, an ax. And one, a length of chain.

One of the security guards came back into the parking lot, saw the situation, and headed back the way he had come in.

"Can you see now," said Ben, "what I was referring to earlier?"

We, together, are going to test you. Most likely, reconstruct you, too."

"It does," said Force, "look like you are all intending to do something."

"We are. We are indeed."

There was no interval. No more dialogue. No additional time allotted for Force to get himself ready.

The five seniors, about one week after the crumbling of the Twin Towers, and at a time when the nation seemed to have found a cohesive national spirit, and seemed to be entering a time of communal mourning and a shocked, benevolent calm, all came at Force quickly, in combination and separately, swinging and rotating and hacking at his personal body with their implements.

But Severin Force had some elements about him that he had himself never been able to figure out. Some traits that the youth soccer, tennis, and basketball coaches that he'd already outgrown had praised him for. Some characteristics that no other fifteen year-old he had encountered had shown.

He was, among other things, fast.

Blindingly fast.

Hands, feet, reflexes.

And that wasn't all. But, at the moment, it might be all he needed.

Reflexively calling on his own, unique untrackable, unseeable quickness, he parried, blunted, or avoided each of the blows and each of the assaults.

The four continued trying to make contact with him, or upend him, or slow him down. But they didn't score any hits.

He wasn't vulnerable to their attacks.

And he didn't attack them.

He simply defended as much as was necessary, but no more than that.

Then, suddenly, without any contact having been made by the other side, the group of five with their various weapons stopped the unsuccessful assault and let the matter go.

"How did I do on your test?" said Force.

"We'll let you know," said Ben.

"Okay," said Force.

Force sprinkled his head and sniffed each of them.

"I know you all now. Know your skills. Look forward to seeing you again. Even if I don't see you coming."

Unbowed, and with no anger or concern, Force walked away from the five-some. As he passed him, Ben handed him a piece of paper with a number on it.

"You'd do well to call," he said. "Might lead to something meaningful for you. Something you might find you need."

"Sunglass outlet?"

"No. You don't need sunglasses. But I know your story. Know what you might need to stop the questions."

Ben lowered his sunglasses, winked at him, replaced the glasses over his eyes, and he and his accompanying quartet walked away back toward the school.

WHEN FORCE RETURNED home and had completed his five-mile run and plyometrics and drank some water and ate some almonds, he called the number written on the paper.

Maybe it would stop the questions. Weirder things had happened.

A voice on the other end, disguised by a digital voice processor, said one word, "Verify."

"I just," said Force, "came into possession of a piece of paper."

There was a short silence.

"We will have someone meet you tomorrow. After school. Don't look for us. We are not who you think we are."

That was the end of the call. The line went silent.

Who did they think he thought they were?

What was going on at Promontory High?

SIGHTLINES

PROMONTORY HIGH SCHOOL, OCEAN VALLEY, CALIFORNIA
Wednesday, Around 1530 Hours PDT

FORCE WALKED through the school parking lot to the road that led away from the school. His book was at his side.

Today, the path was clear.

No seniors.

No axes, chains, or ropes.

No private security guards with their phones.

No one.

He waited, and thought for no reason about what it would be like to be an actuary.

But no one was after him or meeting him or, from what he could tell, watching him.

The altered voice on the phone had sounded serious.

So, who would meet him?

And where?

He idled for another few minutes, still didn't detect anyone, and started up the road to his house.

He opened the Faulkner novel and started to read.

Some paces down the road home, Matah drove up alongside him in a new BMW convertible and slowed to match his walking speed.

He stopped, closed the book.

She stopped.

She opened the passenger door.

"Come with me. There's something you need to see."

"Another psychotic friend?" he said.

"No. Just have the one. You'd do well to get in, though. Cars coming."

Force put his book in his backpack.

"Can I trust you in any way?"

"You know what they say. If you have to ask --"

"Right," he said. "Very reassuring."

Her mouth turned up in an almost-smile.

Force got in the car.

Matah handed him a length of opaque black cloth.

"Put this on. Like a blindfold."

Force assessed the dense, dark fabric.

"It is a blindfold."

She smiled.

"Exactly."

Force covered his eyes with the cloth and relaxed back in his seat.

Matah drove them on, in silence, for about a quarter of an hour to a remote ranch in Ocean Valley's eastern foothills.

She stopped the new car, stepped out, took off his blindfold, inhaled his unique personal scent again and said to him, "I did nail the scent, by the way."

"Yes. Very close."

"Okay, get out."

Force stepped out of the convertible, blinked once, engaged his senses, and took in his surroundings.

He smelled dry grasses and pine trees.

They weren't near the ocean anymore.

He tasted arid dust and the faint suggestion of an airborne peppery metallic taste he didn't recognize.

Was that gun powder in the air?

And he saw what presented itself before him.

A shooting range. An obstacle course. A stable.

The encampment looked like some high-end combination of a military installation and a dude ranch. And a spa.

Ben walked up to Force, silently, from somewhere undetectable, and extended his hand.

"Sophomore."

Ben hadn't been this Ben before. He had telegraphed everything before.

So, he hadn't wanted to hurt Force. Either time.

Force paused and regarded the proffered paw.

"Severin Force."

"Yeah, I know. Severin Force, from New York."

The two boys, the senior and the sophomore, shook hands.

"What's all this?"

"This is where we practice," said Ben.

"For?"

"For later. They can't take us yet. But they will. Soon, probably, too. They've already identified us."

"They? Who?"

"The good guys in the fight. They know your story. They want you."

"That doesn't make sense. I can dodge trouble. But if I use my moves, people might die. Or even worse, not die. Don't the good guys go through training?"

"They do," agreed Ben. "Just to get selected for the real training. Those are the walk-ons. That's not us. We've been drafted early. Identified early. Because, right now, there's no time. It's no secret that we're going to go to war with somebody because of those planes. But they need the most qualified to go in first. And who they are is secret."

"I'm flattered," said Force.

"You should be."

"But I'm fifteen. And I don't join teams."

"But you're wondering, aren't you, wondering why you're still alive when others have perished?"

Force didn't answer.

How could Ben, or whatever his name was, have known about his questions?

Were the questions Force asked himself possibly not unique at all?

"I don't know your answer," said Ben. "But maybe we could get back at, take care of, some of the ones who did it. You could. If you join. Give us a chance?"

"Not interested."

Another of the young operators-in-training snuck up behind Force. Force's nostrils flared. He leapt up off of the ground as the operator swung a length of rigid pipe at ankle height.

No contact was made.

The young operator smiled, dropped the pipe, and shook Force's hand.

"Heard about you."

"You did?"

"Heard about the reflexes, the super-awareness, the personal scent. Heard you might be our new superstar for the team."

"This is all very interesting. A window into something. But I like the individual events better."

"Understood."

"Too bad," said Ben. "They want you."

"We can't always have everything we want," said Force.

"That so?"

"Yep. Heard that somewhere."

"Will you just have a look around?"

"Not interested right now."

Ben paused a moment, looked at his teammate. The other young operator nodded at him.

Was everyone equally in charge?

"Well, then," said Ben, "we'll let you go. It has to be right for you."

"Appreciate it," said Force.

"You'll reconsider," said Ben. It was a statement.

"I will?" said Force.

"Yeah. I can tell. You're a born soldier. But you're also a patriot. You want us to win this fight."

"Of course I do, but I don't join teams."

"We'll see," said Ben. "And, by the way, Matah, she's mine."

"Good to know," said Force. "Well, then."

"Well, then," said Ben.

SECONDS LATER, Matah drove up, let Force into the ragtop and he blindfolded himself again.

She drove them out of the compound.

"Didn't quite convince you, did they?"

"They tried."

"It's your decision. You have to want to put your skills to this. Think about it, is all we ask."

"We?"

They drove for a few minutes in silence.

"Your last name," said Force, "it isn't Hari, is it?"

"Matah Hari?" said Matah, considering the sound of it. "Has a nice music to it. But it's Mason. Matah Mason."

"Uh huh."

"Yes?"

"That's not really your name."

She smiled.

"You know," said Force, touching the black cloth covering his eyes, "depending on how you put these things on, leave a gap in the right place, and you can see out of them."

"Good for you, then," said Matah. "You can find your way back there."

"And I can see what your face is doing."

"Again, good for you, Severin Force."

"Yes. Good for me."

They had driven most of the quarter hour required to get them back to Promontory High School and the parking lot, when Force asked, "Ben, is he really your boyfriend?"

Matah smiled.

"I can see that too," said Force.

"He is a friend who's testing you. We work together. That's it. Ben's married. And he's not in high school."

Blindfolded, Force cocked his head to listen.

"This is a different road," he observed. "Different route. Where are you taking me, Matah whoever-you-are?"

"I don't know, sophomore. School's out. The world's in crisis. Where would you like to go?"

THE END.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MARCUS COOTSONA is a lapsed playwright and occasional journalist who was born into a conspiracy-loving family. He may or may not live in Northern California.

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