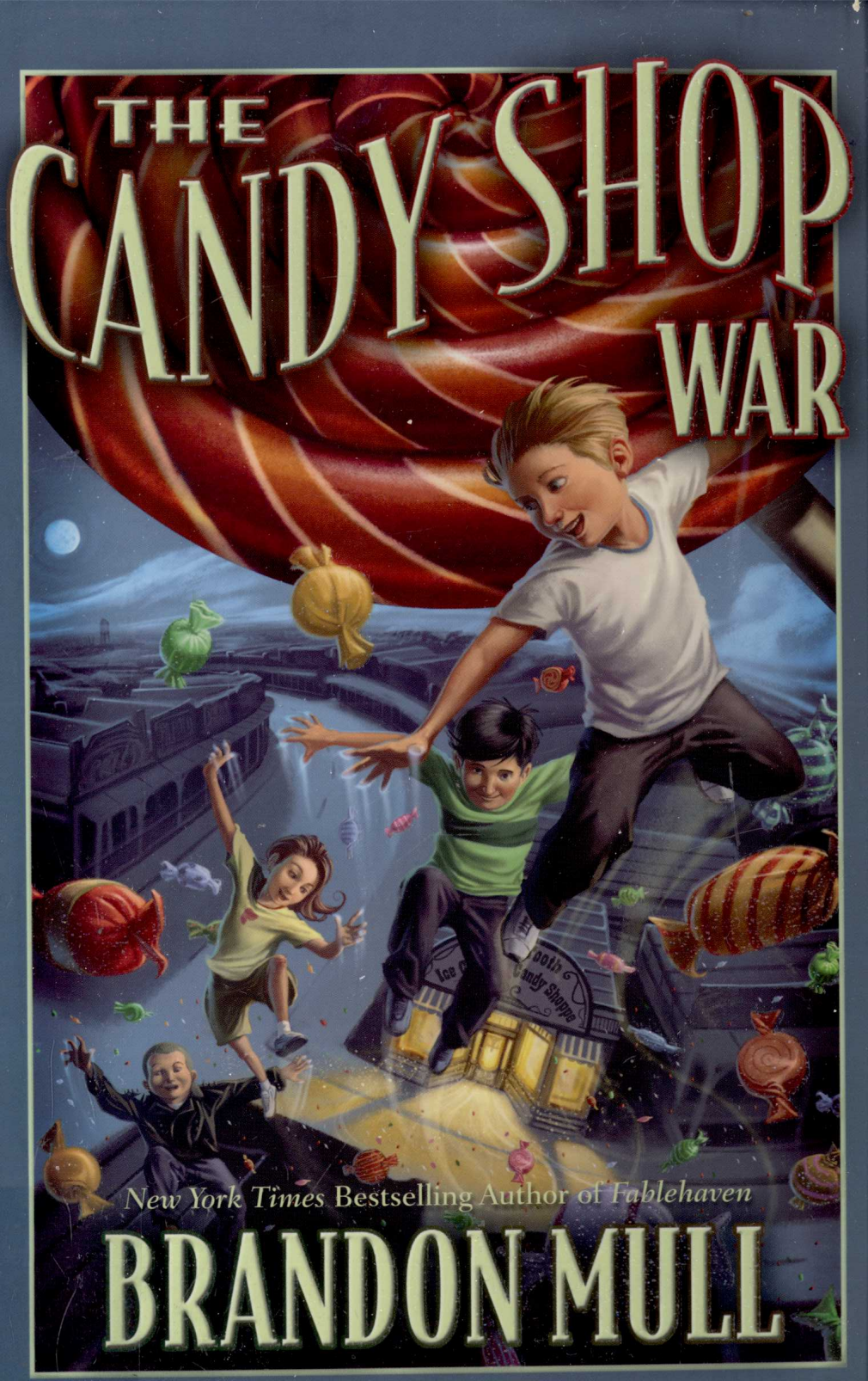


# THE CANDY SHOP WAR



*New York Times Bestselling Author of Fablehaven*

**BRANDON MULL**

# THE CANDY SHOP WAR

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藏书章

BRANDON MULL



SHADOW  
MOUNTAIN

*For Sum and Bry—the adventure we hoped to find.*

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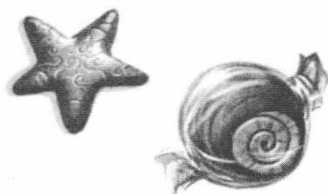
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PROLOGUE

# JOHN DART



The airport shuttle squeaked to a stop in the parking lot of Leslie's Diner. The generic building looked like hundreds of other cheap restaurants where you could get breakfast all day. Judging from the outdated exterior and the heavysset man in the window attacking a syrupy waffle, John Dart concluded that most items on the menu, although filling, would taste mass-produced.

The shuttle driver trotted around the front of the van and slid open the door. John stepped down. He wore a weathered overcoat and a brown fedora with a black band. John handed the driver a twenty-dollar tip.

"Thanks. No luggage, right?"

"No luggage."

Had there been bags to carry, John, tall and broad-shouldered, would have seemed a better candidate than the slight Filipino driver.

"Sure you want to be left here?" the driver asked, studying the dim parking lot.

John nodded.

"There's no lodging nearby."

"I like pancakes," John said.

Shrugging, the driver got back into the van and roared out of the parking lot. John had been the last passenger. The driver used his blinker when pulling onto the road, even though the world seemed deserted.

The hour was late. There were not many cars in the lot. A couple of pickups, a gray sedan, a battered minivan, an old Buick, a little hatchback, and an SUV. A man with his hands in the pockets of a faded windbreaker exited the diner and made eye contact with John. He had disheveled hair clumsily parted on one side and the beginnings of a goatee on his chin.

The man sauntered over to the old Buick, which was flecked with rust and marred by numerous nicks and scratches. John joined him, and they shook hands. The man winced slightly at John's crushing grip.

"I set up a room for you in Barcelona six years ago," the man said with a slight Spanish accent.

"I recall," John said. "How are things here?"

The man licked his lips. "A new candy shop opened in town today."

"We may have a regular convention on our hands before long," John said. "You have my supplies?"

"All the things you can't bring on a plane," the man said with a wink. He thrust a key into the trunk's lock and opened it. A

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dozen straitjackets of varying size were stacked inside, along with a large suitcase. The man opened the suitcase, revealing a variety of weapons: crossbows, knives, brass knuckles, truncheons, slingshots, tranquilizer guns, customized toxins, throwing stars, boomerangs, explosives, and canisters of tear gas. John picked up a heavy crossbow and examined the firing mechanism. The weapon held a pair of quarrels. He replaced the crossbow and pocketed a can of Mace.

"Looks good," John approved.

"The Council wanted me to deliver this as well," the man said, holding out a sizable seashell with vivid markings.

John accepted the shell, blew into it gently, and whispered, "John Dart, in person and in truth." When the seashell began to vibrate, he held it to his ear. At first John heard a faint whisper, like distant static. The sound progressively became more like waves heaving against a sandy shore. The deep call of a foghorn added to the sea sounds, along with the cry of gulls, and then a voice began speaking. The man who had handed John the shell strolled away to a respectful distance.

"John, we're grateful you were able to arrive so promptly," said a dignified masculine voice. John recognized it as his mentor's. "We trust that Fernando has provided you with the pertinent equipment. Samson Wells has joined the other two magicians in Colson. We now feel certain that the secret has been revealed. We must proceed under the assumption that all three are aware of what has been hidden in town, and are in pursuit of the prize. As you know, we cannot afford to allow



any of our order to lay hands on it. The consequences would be catastrophic to our common interests.

"All three magicians involved have neglected warnings from the Council, so the hour for enforcing our mandate has arrived. You are hereby authorized to drive our greedy associates from the area by any necessary means."

John shuffled his feet. He was seldom authorized to confront a magician directly. Such action could provoke serious retaliation.

"Samson arrived in town only this afternoon," the voice in the shell continued. "He is spending the night at an abandoned quarry. You'll never get a better chance to catch him off guard. He may be the least experienced of the three, and strategically the least important, but apprehending him outside of a permanent lair is an advantage we cannot ignore. He will have apprentices with him. Do not underestimate his abilities. Do not enter his lair, temporary or not. Use every available precaution. Once you subdue Samson, start working on the other two.

"We cannot stress enough the crucial nature of this assignment. Success is the only option, at any cost. Work swiftly. If the secret continues to spread, nothing will stop Colson from being overrun. Mozag, signing off."

"I'd better get over my jet lag quick," John muttered. He raised the beautiful seashell high and smashed it down against the asphalt.

Fernando approached, shaking his head. "I don't envy your job." Kicking aside some shell fragments with his foot, he

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handed John a map. Leslie's Diner stood at the intersection of Perry Avenue and Tower Road. From that point on the map, a red marker had traced a path to a quarry not far outside of town. "Quiet place for so many weapons," Fernando sighed.

John took out a tin of Altoids and popped several into his mouth, savoring the piquant tang. "Shame," John said. "Colson isn't their kind of town. Not big enough to get lost in the crowd. Not small enough for true isolation."

"I don't need a shell to tell me something big is going on."

John gave a slight nod. "Too bad Colson wasn't built elsewhere." He offered Fernando an Altoid.

"No thanks," he said. "Unless you're hinting that I need one."

John put the tin away.

"I suppose this is where I take my leave," Fernando said, handing John the keys to the car. "I noticed that my payment is already in my account."

"You have a good reputation. Where are you off to now?"

"A job in Cordoba."

"Argentina? Good beef down there, if you know where to look."

"I usually know where to look."

"That's why you make the big bucks," John quipped.

"Something like that. Tonight's chore should go well if you approach your target discreetly. Keep to the shadows."

"I always do," John said.

Fernando paused. "I hope you never come after me," he said. "Just send me a postcard and I'll turn myself in."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Do they ever see you coming?"

"Rarely. Colson may be different. They'll be on the lookout after tonight."

"Happy hunting," Fernando said with a two-fingered salute. "Watch your back."

"Watch yours."

Fernando climbed into the gray sedan and drove out of the parking lot. John entered the Buick, relieved as he cranked it up that the engine sounded healthier than the weathered exterior had led him to expect.

John followed the route on the map until he reached the outskirts of town, where buildings became scarce. Ridgeline Way wound around the shoulder of a hill, and his destination drew near. An abandoned quarry. Why was his work always taking him to abandoned quarries and deserted mines and seedy inner city bars? He needed a new occupation, a job that would entail extended visits to lazy tropical beaches and quaint woodland cottages.

Just over a mile from his destination, John pulled the Buick onto the shoulder of the road. If his targets were keeping a sharp lookout, they might have noticed the car heading up the road and seen the headlights go dark. Not probable, but he preferred to be ready for all contingencies.

Getting out of the car, John rummaged through the trunk, selecting gear. Handcuffs. Tear gas. A tranquilizer gun. A vial of neurotoxin. Four straitjackets. Among other things.

Taking a final peek at the map, John set off up the street.

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Another lonely road in the middle of the night. Not unsettling, except that it felt so familiar. Alone in the dark, he was at home.

His eyes adjusted until the moonlight seemed bright. The upkeep on the road was poor. Too many potholes. He reached an intersection where a dirt road branched out from Ridgeline. John stepped off the asphalt and paralleled the dirt road, treading silently through the brush, choosing a circuitous route in order to keep himself concealed.

After walking for several minutes, John peered into the quarry. Industry had transformed the side of the hill into a stony amphitheater. Below the chiseled cliffs sat a dilapidated school bus. John might have assumed it was derelict had he not known that Samson Wells had come to town earlier that evening. The rundown bus made for a shabby lair, but a lair nonetheless. Only a fool willingly entered the lair of a magician. But this lair was temporary—the defenses were limited. John would flush him out.

The guards posed a problem. Not unexpected, but still troublesome. John crept along the edge of the quarry until he ascertained that two guards stood watch, one at either end of the bus.

He would have to subdue them delicately. A sloppy attack would not suffice. John could not afford to seriously harm the guards, the consequence of an unusual condition he had dealt with for decades.

Due to a powerful curse placed on him years ago, John himself suffered any direct injury he inflicted on another. If he

broke someone's leg, his leg broke. If he knocked someone out, he went to sleep. If he killed a person, he would die. So finesse was always required.

One guard was tall and stocky, his face lightly pockmarked, his brown hair tied back in a ponytail. He held a wooden baseball bat. The other was a Vietnamese woman—young, short, and slim. No visible weapons. John had met Samson Wells once, and was generally familiar with his reputation, but had no idea what abilities these two apprentices might possess.

Ideally he would avoid finding out. Their positions at opposite ends of the bus kept them out of view from one another. If he disposed of one of them silently, he might overcome both without a fight.

The guy with the ponytail looked drowsy, so John opted to start with him. The school bus had come in along the dirt road and parked in a flat spot near the center of the old quarry. Boulders and rubble surrounded the bus on all sides, providing just enough cover for a stealthy approach. Staying low, moving when the man with the ponytail was looking in the wrong direction, John crept forward.

In some ways, the scarcity of decent cover was an advantage. To a less trained eye, the man with the ponytail appeared unassailable. John doubted whether his target could envision somebody successfully getting close.

John took his time, picking his moments, waiting to advance until a cloud dimmed the moonlight or the unsuspecting guard diverted his focus to pick at a hangnail. When John moved, he stayed low and silent, sometimes gliding

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quickly over the rocky terrain, sometimes inching forward with supreme patience. Eventually John crouched behind a meager rock pile less than fifteen feet from the man with the bat. It was the last decent piece of cover between himself and his target.

Picking up a pebble, John dropped it gently on a larger stone. The resultant sound was faint but suspicious. He heard the man approaching the rock pile, not with any urgency, just strolling over to take a closer look at what might have caused the unnatural click.

As the man came around the low rock pile to glance at the far side, John slunk in a crouch, keeping the rocks between them. Stepping quickly, John looped around and got behind the long-haired guard, who was only an inch or two shorter than John.

In one hand, John held a strip of duct tape. The adhesive side was extra sticky, and the opposite side was extra slick. From behind, John slapped the duct tape over the guard's mouth with one hand while wrenching the baseball bat from his grasp with the other.

The startled guard whirled as John set the bat down. Making a low humming sound, the guard swung a fist at John, who intercepted the punch expertly and locked the man's arm into a painful hold. Moving decisively, John grabbed the guard's other arm and handcuffed his wrists together behind his back.

A third arm grew out of the center of the guard's back and seized John by the throat. A fourth arm sprouted and tore away

the remains of the guard's flimsy T-shirt, then started trying to peel away the duct tape covering his mouth. The arms that were cuffed together fell to the rocky ground and a fresh pair of arms took their place.

With a chopping motion, John broke the guard's hold on his throat and backed away. Shirtless, the guard now had six arms, two of which were clawing at the duct tape. The other four were clenched into fists.

John had not fought a Shedder in years. You didn't see many these days. They could sprout and detach limbs at will, which made them almost impossible to grapple with.

Before John could regain his composure, he heard a whooshing sound. As he turned to look in the direction of the airy noise, a sharp blow to his midsection doubled him over, and a second blow sent him reeling backwards. He only barely managed to keep his feet.

Dazed, nose bleeding, John saw the Vietnamese woman appear. She was obviously a Blur, capable of moving at tremendous speed for short periods of time, but requiring rest in between her bursts of superhuman velocity. With a Blur and a Shedder standing ready to fight, John knew that he was now in serious danger. Hand-to-hand combat was out of the question.

The Shedder lunged toward the fallen bat. John produced a crossbow from inside his overcoat. He did not mean to use it. The firing mechanism on the crossbow had a pair of safeguards, making it difficult to fire unless you knew the trick. As expected, the instant he produced the weapon, the Vietnamese

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woman streaked toward him and yanked it from his grasp. John lashed out with one leg along the path he expected her to take, and she collided with his shin. He spun to the ground, and she tumbled into the rock pile, dropping the crossbow.

The Shedder picked up the baseball bat while John pulled out a sleek pistol. John was frowning. He had hoped to avoid doing this the hard way. The darts in the gun were full of a sinister neurotoxin manufactured by his employer. For nearly an hour after the toxin was administered, any muscle contraction would cause a burst of excruciating pain, making movement intolerable.

As the Shedder charged with the bat raised, John tagged him in the chest with a dart. Rolling behind the rock pile as the bat swung, John put a dart into the young Vietnamese woman before she could recover. Muffled by the duct tape, the Shedder was trying to scream. John's employers knew their business. The effect of the neurotoxin was nearly instantaneous. The woman cried out as well.

"Hold still," John demanded, staying low, pain searing his jaw as he spoke. "Only movement will hurt. I want to hear you drop that bat."

Instead he heard more stifled screaming and the sound of a body slapping down against the rocks. The Shedder had tried to keep moving despite the pain, and had passed out. John had never met anyone who could endure that much pain and remain conscious. Anyone besides himself.

The toxin was one of John's most effective ways to subdue enemies. The pain kept his targets immobile or knocked them



unconscious. And since the unconsciousness resulted from movements the targets chose to make, it did not affect John.

But when *he* moved, John felt pain just as sharply as they did. Muscles protesting in dizzying agony, he walked around the rock pile and retrieved the fallen bat. He had learned to cope with pain through countless injuries, most of them sustained vicariously. Over the years, he had gained the capacity to tolerate just about anything.

The Vietnamese woman glared at him, caged by the prospect of unendurable agony. Her eyes blinked, tears pooling in them.

"Even hurts to blink," John said. "Sometimes life is unfair."

John walked around the side of the school bus. All remained dark inside. Teeth grinding together against the anguish in his muscles, John hurled the wooden bat through one of the windows. "Why not come out, Samson?"

"That you, John?" a voice called from inside.

"You know it is," John said. "And you know you're cornered. A temporary lair is not going to cut it."

"Come in and get me."

John removed a canister of tear gas from his coat, opened it, and tossed it through the window. When his eyes began to sting, he knew that Samson had no emergency gas mask stashed away in there. Tears streamed down John's cheeks, and he coughed uncontrollably, the spasms triggering waves of agony throughout his body.

Samson stumbled out of the front door of the bus followed by a cloud of caustic fumes. He held a bedspread to his face,