

Cocoa and Chronicles

There was a small shop on the corner of Um and Nagalensky street. It wasn't everyone's favorite shop; only the people who mattered liked going there. Complicated people. People who could dissolve into an imaginary world better than they could live in their own. The people who needed to find this shop, found it. Those who were boring and present in reality usually did not find this shop. It was called *Cocoa and Chronicles*.

Some people who found the shop stayed there, making their life revolve around its activities. Some spent an hour there, left, and forgot all about it, except for when they read the book they bought there. But they never found the shop again.

Normal people's eyes slid over the shop when they walked past it. Some could be overheard saying, "They need to repaint that building." But the Not Normals' eyes caught on the bright yellow of the door, the royal purple of the roof. *Those* people realized that within the building was something special. Some approached the door cautiously, some waited a week before they went back to the shop that had first caught their eye, and some sprinted away from their giant group of friends and threw open the door.

A bell tinkled merrily anytime someone crossed the threshold. Not once everytime the door opened: once for every person who entered. Those who walked into *Cocoa and Chronicles* immediately noticed the change in atmosphere, from dismal and boring to cozy and exciting.

On one side of the shop was a waist-high display of delicious delicacies. Any kind of donut, macaroon, fudge, or pastry imaginable was there, with many more besides. Behind the table there was always one to three workers waiting to help customers. One could never find such polite employees. It helped that they had the best job they could ever want. Behind *them* was another counter with about a dozen coffee-cocoa-tea makers. The shiny contraptions

whirred as they spit out various creamy drinks that plopped gently into the short, fat, mugs awaiting them.

Round glass topped tables with their pedestals painted in bright colors sat haphazardly in a sitting area, surrounded by their matching chairs. People who sat there had a perfect view out the front window. Each person saw something different out the window. Some saw what was actually there, a busy street and a plain department store across from *Cocoa and Chronicles*. Others had a view of a dark forest, a glittering waterfall, a far-off castle. Though those people hadn't known that they'd been craving adventure, when they looked out the window they wished they were in whatever vision they saw.

On the wall opposite the ordering counter was a series of booths with multicolored marble tabletops. Torch brackets lined the walls with sparkling flames that spit flecks of glitter as people walked by.

The rest of the shop was dedicated to books. A huge maze of shelves extended way past where the back of the shop should have been. Some of the shelves reached the ceiling, and some were only two feet tall. There were shelves that hung from the ceiling and some that stuck out perpendicular from the walls, something constantly fighting gravity to keep the books in place. Some twisted and curved, others formed straight pathways. The shelves themselves were all made of rich mahogany, but what they were carved to look like varied. Many were regular bookshelves. A few looked like they should belong in an old manor, with their elegant decorations and unnecessary flourishes. Others were carved to tell stories, a dragon slaying a knight, a princess rescuing a dragon, a lawyer winning his case. The biggest bookshelf was carved to resemble an enormous tree. Everyone had a different idea about this shelf.

They said it held only the oldest and most loved books. They said the carpenters had tried to carve it normally but the shelf had stubbornly reformed into the tree that had been cut down to make it. They said that when the shelves liked someone that person could climb its

branches to reach the rest of the books. No one knew which rumors were true and which weren't, but there were some things everyone did know.

1. The longest branches of the shelf reached the top of the building and draped down the walls, making it possible for the shelf to access all the books.
2. For the rest of the bookcases, visitors had to search for what book they wanted, taking some off the shelf and putting them back, but this shelf always had the exact book they needed, even if it wasn't the one they were originally searching for.
3. If anyone bought more than three books off this shelf, the books melted into ash.
4. The shelf stood in the very center of the bookcase maze.

There was more to the bookstore part of *Cocoa and Chronicles* than interesting shelves, though; different sections of the maze had different *special* qualities. When people entered the children's nook they inexplicably felt lighter. They found that they could jump higher, and even float lazily to the top shelf if they wanted to. The fantasy shelves stood in the form of a great castle, although people disagreed as to which castle it was supposed to be. Around the castle fireflies of all different colors flashed to a melody only they could hear. Luminous silver moths landed on people, coating their skin with a fine, glowing dust after they left. Bright tongues of flame raced along the shelves of the historical corner, somehow not burning the wood. Multicolored steam hovered over the science fiction section, making it nearly impossible to see what books were there.

Countless other enchanting Happenings happened all through the book maze, too many to count. It is doubted that even the owner of the shop--whoever that is--knows all the secrets of *Cocoa and Chronicles*. Everyday a visitor will rush to the front counter, gasping for breath as they recall what magnificent things they encountered. Some people congratulate them on finding something new, and some people immediately abandon their coffee to see if they can follow directions to the undiscovered location in the store. The workers occasionally write down

directions for the maze and the special Happenings that happen in certain areas, but they usually don't bother. The problem was, the maps never seemed to be just right. The bookcases seemed to like to shift and move around. Those who came back would swear that mystery row was closer to the front of the shop than it had been the last time they came...but no one could prove anything.

So will you enter the shop? Come in, we'd love to have you. Hear the bell tinkle as you walk in. Order our peppermint cocoa; it's available all year round. Get a sweet treat too! Pastries that melt in your mouth and feel like clouds floating around your stomach, or fudge that tastes like a childhood memory mixed with the flavor--double dark chocolate--that you actually ordered.

Sit down over here, since you seem like a booth person. Your tabletop is light orange marble with deep red threaded through it. Sink into the squashy purple booth and gaze out the window. Look at the bubbling river rush past the giant tower, a lonely blot on an otherwise green landscape. Eat your cinnamon roll; what an interesting choice! Thin layers of pastry flake off as you eat, and you can see the cinnamon moving in lazy swirls along the bun's sides. With each bite you feel the cinnamon glide along your tongue.

The frosting tastes like music. Your first bite is a lively march, making you feel like you're at the circus. The second bite is a gentle chorale, something you could fall asleep to. The third is the main song from your favorite childhood movie. You realize that your eyes are closed and you're swaying slightly, you quickly glance around to see if anyone noticed, but they're too busy enjoying their own sweets. Eat the rest quickly, you're excited to get to the maze. Throw away the wrappings, the trash can burps in thanks.

You pick up your peppermint cocoa, but you're not quite sure how it will taste after all that cinnamon. It's better than you expected. *Way* better, actually. The whipped cream is as light as wisps of clouds, homemade, and it's your new favorite. It's not a seasonal special, but it makes you feel like Christmas anyway. You envision a great Christmas tree and automatically

feel joyful and merry. The tension you didn't know you were carrying disappears from your shoulders.

Continue to sip as you pick a random bookshelf-path to go down. You pass an area where black and white geckos are crawling along the shelves, and then find yourself in a dead end. There's a stable enough looking ladder, use it to climb out. You climb over, but there's no ladder down the other side. Don't panic! How could a place this magical do anything bad to you? Walk for a little bit along the top of the bookcase. From up here you can see most of the store. You scramble down the first ladder you see, you're not a fan of heights. But you didn't realize that the ladder you chose is on a rail, so it slides.

Hold on tight as it keeps moving. The ladder whips around a corner and you feel your hair splay out behind you. You're surprised to hear your own gleeful laugh as the ladder picks up speed and turns another corner. Close your eyes and rely on just your feelings. You know it can't be real, but you feel as if you're moving in all different directions now, ones that don't make sense.

Diagonally up, sideways, backwards. Now you're traveling down in a spiral. You should probably open your eyes, but you're too nervous. Then the ladder jars to a stop. You open your eyes and see....

Fluffy, emerald green carpet with tall, straight bookshelves extending on either side of you. Turn around! The same stretches behind you. It looks as if you could walk forever in either direction and never come to the end of the passage. You turn back around and take a step. All you hear is silence. It's as if you're completely alone in the shop, in the world, in the universe.

Start walking. You know no passage can go on forever. You head down the hallway, taking note of the engravings in the bookshelves. A barren land in one panel gives way to a panel with shrubs pushing up through dirt. The third panel is a wild tangle of trees and vines. You're so busy looking at the bookshelf to your right that you trip when there's a bump in the carpet.

You look up and see a great tree. Its trunk twists around itself. Some of its branches reach the ceiling and some hang low enough that you could swing on them. Lanterns glowing yellow dangle from some of the branches. The effect might be to look cheerful, but you find that it only makes the spot more eerie.

Step closer. The tree won't hurt you. Look up, then take a step back as you notice how very *grand* the tree is. You think it looks like it's been standing for thousands of years. Like the store has grown around the tree. You can even see bumps in the floor where the roots are spreading.

Approach the giant shelf....maybe a little quicker than that. Your eyes dance across the tree, and you take in the little gaps all over it. Places where the twists in the tree don't quite connect; it looks very natural for the tree. You feel drawn towards a dark hole a few feet over your head. Study the tree. You can probably climb it. Its rough texture means there's many places to put your hands and feet while you climb. Reach up; a knot in the tree will be your first foothold. Climb a little higher, and reach into the emptiness. Your hands brush up against something mostly smooth and soft-ish. You recoil, but then tell yourself to have more gumption than that. Reach back in, grab whatever's in there, it's shaped like a book. You are in a bookshop after all.

You pull the book back towards yourself. Before you can read the title, your left foot slips. You flail for a second and then fall backwards. The carpet is so plush that it doesn't even hurt. A giggle slips through your lips, and it turns into a full-fledged laughing fit.

Once you pull yourself together, you look at the book you grabbed. It doesn't have a title. Just a worn leather cover. You flip open the cover, wondering if there's a title page, but there isn't. You turn through the thick pages, they're a gorgeous cream color. A note falls out and lands in your lap. You unfold it and it reads:

Cocoa and Chronicles: A History

How to open an endless bookstore

New York, London, Paris, Tokyo

The handwriting looks somewhat familiar, but you don't know from where. There must be a reason you found this book, though. You can assume some things about the book from the note; it must tell readers how *Cocoa and Chronicles* was built, the kitchen, maze, everything. The last part is what you find weird. What do the locations mean? The shop you're in now is in New York, although once you entered the shop it felt like you entered a whole new universe. Does that mean that there's 3 more *Cocoa and Chronicles* shops around the world?

You have to find out. The second you entered today you felt like everything in your life was leading up to this moment. You wanted to stay forever. And now it feels like the shop is telling you to find its siblings, or something.

You realize that you're standing up, a sense of purpose has flooded through you. You walk away from the tree, then turn around and jog back towards it. There's a new lantern dangling from a branch, but it's unlit. Reach into that hole by your hip. You find matches. Light one and watch it spark up into a bright purple flame. Lift it gently into the empty lantern. You take a half step back as the lantern accepts the flame, which swells bigger and brighter. Close the little glass door, and watch the lantern for a few more seconds. You back up a little more, admiring the huge tree with all its glowing yellow lanterns, and now its one purple lantern too.

You whisper, "thank you."

Then you turn around and walk back to the front of the store. You feel like you have an internal compass leading you towards the real world. With every twist and turn you automatically know which way to go to get to the the dining area.

Approach the right side of the counter, where a worker smiles at you. They raise their eyebrows at the book you offer them, then shrug and name a price. Smile and pay, then head back to reality. Once you're in the crowded street you glance back at *Cocoa and Chronicles*, relieved that you can still see it.

You tuck the the old, worn book into your satchel. It's time for you to go see if other shops exist. And if they don't, you clutch the strap of your bag, you'll just have to build more.