

*THE SYLVAN  
CROSSER*



*« Δεῦρο, δένδρον γενναῖον, ἄνοιξον τὰς πύλας τοῦ χρόνου,  
Κόρμος Βαρκάρης εἰμί. »*

*« Deuro, dendron gennaion, anoixon tas pylas tou chronou,  
Kormos Varkaris eimi. »*

*« Come, noble tree, open the gates of time, I am the Kormos  
Varkaris. »*

## Chapter 1 : The Ming Family

Xavier Ming dropped his gray controller after pausing his game and went down to the table. His mother had just called him, and he knew perfectly well that he wasn't allowed to make her wait, otherwise a scolding was inevitable. He raced down the narrow stairs of his house. The Ming family lived in a small village house in the south of France, in a place called Rosan. It was an old, narrow terraced house of three stories, renovated several times, with a certain charm—if you liked old stone, that is.

Xavier's father, Ryota Ming, was already at the table. Ryota, in his forties, was of Japanese descent and worked as a department manager at a Mammouth hypermarket, responsible for the electronics section. For the past few months, Ryota had been worried. His bosses had informed him that the future of the store was uncertain. They didn't know yet if they were going to be bought out by another large group or if they would end up having to sign up for unemployment after ten years of loyal service. His wife, Françoise Ming, did her best to reassure her husband, cooking delicious meals to lift his spirits.

- “Your eyes are red!” Ryota remarked to his thirteen-year-old son, who had just sat at the dining table. “Have you been playing all day again?”
- “Yeah! But I'm almost at the end! Crash Bandicoot is so hard!”
- “Did you do your homework?” his mother asked while bringing a dish of lasagna to the table.
- “It's the end of the year, Mom! There's barely any homework left!”

Ryota tucked his napkin neatly under his collar. Françoise cut the lasagna into portions. Xavier poured

himself a large glass of water; he had spent easily eight hours on his PlayStation and realized he was parched.

- “So, is it settled? Are you moving up to ninth grade?” his father asked proudly.
- “Yeah, I hope I’ll still be in class with Casimir next year!”

Ryota leaned discreetly towards his wife, who had just sat down after serving herself a good portion.

- “Who’s Casimir?” he asked, trying to be discreet.
- “Oh, come on!” she exclaimed openly. “Casimir! That’s what he calls his friend Hugo.”
- “Why not just say Hugo then?” Ryota complained.
- “It’s fon pseudo, Dad!” Xavier said, his mouth full of hot lasagna.

He half-burned his mouth. He tried to put out the fire with his glass of water, but he had already emptied it. He grabbed the jug in a panic and spilled water all over the table.

- “Kiwotsukete!” his father exclaimed, immediately dabbing at the liquid with his napkin.
- “See?” Françoise said. “You’re so eager to get back to your Nintendo that you’re not even paying attention!”

Xavier apologized and helped clean up the table. He ignored the fact that his mother had confused two competing video game brands.

- “You’re seeing Casimir tomorrow, right?” his mother asked.
- “Yeah, we’re going to check out the flea market in Rosan at eight o’clock!”

Xavier and Casimir liked going bargain hunting at the village’s Sunday morning flea market. They often found gems, like video games for a third of their original price.

- “And what’s your nickname?” his father asked.
- “Mine’s Asterix! But I didn’t pick it. It’s because I brought an Asterix comic last year during the

school trip, and since then everyone calls me that. It's cool, though. Asterix is great!

- In my opinion, you've got your nicknames switched!" his father tried to joke.

Françoise and Xavier looked at Ryota, not understanding. Feeling the weight of their stares, Ryota had to explain his joke, something he absolutely hated doing but often had to, given that his coworkers frequently called his humor "unique."

- "Well, because Hugo is tiny, and you're a bit... round and yellow..."

Xavier looked at his mother as he finished his lasagna.

- "Isn't that racist?"
- "It's borderline," she said with a smile.
- "Hey, it's okay, I'm Japanese. I can make that joke," Ryota laughed.

Xavier rolled his eyes. He finished his third glass of water and asked:

- "I'm done, can I go back to playing?"
- "Don't you want dessert? I bought some Flamby!"
- "No, never mind," he said, getting up and starting to leave.

He took a few steps towards the stairs and added:

- "Anyway, Dad said I'm already round and yellow..."

He laughed and dashed off.

- "What are we going to do with this kid?" Ryota Ming said into the void as he went to fetch the Flamby puddings.

## Chapter 2: The Man in the Hat

Xavier Ming's alarm rang at 7:45. "Fifteen minutes is more than enough to head down to the village," he had thought before setting his alarm clock. Of course, that was before attempting to pass the terrible level on Crash Bandicoot, which had kept him up until 2:30 in the morning. He had proudly defeated Dr. Neo Cortex and had fallen asleep almost immediately after turning off the console.

It was with great effort and several twists and turns in his bed that he finally managed to extricate himself, put on clothes, grab a cereal bar, and head out of the house. Normally, he was supposed to meet Casimir at the flea market's entrance, but his friend was already waiting in front of the Ming family house.

- "Oh, Casimir, you're already here!" Xavier said in surprise, locking the door.
- "Hey, Ast'! Yeah, I know you. I figured you'd be late! C'mon, the best stuff goes first!"

The two friends headed down through the narrow streets of Rosan to the annual flea market.

- "How much did you bring?" Casimir asked.
- "All I had: sixty-eight francs! I hope we find some games!"

Xavier patted his pocket to make sure he had indeed taken his wallet.

- "Apparently Manu is selling stuff; he might be getting rid of his games.
- Oh, awesome!"

Manu was the richest kid in the entire middle school. He had the fanciest snacks during recess, wore a Swatch watch, and had Air Jordan sneakers. He had boasted several times about having both the PlayStation and the Nintendo 64 on release day. Xavier and Hugo envied him, even though

they had no idea what shady businesses his father was involved in.

The two friends arrived at the flea market, which was already bustling with people. Sellers and bargain hunters exchanged their old items for a few coins. Immediately, the two kids were drawn to the most colorful stalls, filled with old toys and some vintage video games. The vendor, used to seeing them rummage through his stock at each annual flea market, greeted them:

- “Hey, kids! Still looking for Gameboy games?”
- No, I have a PlayStation now!” Xavier said proudly.
- “Ah, I don't have anything recent for that! But I've got a 'Legend of Zelda' still in its box if you still have your NES.
- No, I sold everything to buy the PlayStation! Zelda's old and ugly; no one would want that...” Xavier mocked, with Casimir sharing in the joke.

They glanced at the few Disney VHS tapes and other DuckTales magazines before moving on to the next stall.

- “Did you see the new 42-inch Philips screen?” Casimir asked, flipping through a computer magazine. "It's a flat screen!"
- “Whoa, that's awesome! It's so futuristic!” Xavier exclaimed.
- “It costs 120,000 francs!”
- “Oh, wow, that's a lot! We'll never have one of those at home...”
- “When I grow up, I'll have them all over my house! I'll be super rich!” Casimir imagined.
- “For now, it's one franc for the magazine! Or, if you want to read, go to the library, kids!” the old woman running the stall shouted.

Casimir closed the magazine and scampered off. If he wanted to be rich, he wasn't going to blow his savings on magazines.



The two kids eventually made their way through the entire flea market without finding anything worthwhile. Even Manu's stall wasn't as interesting as they'd hoped. He was indeed selling PlayStation games, but at a price far too high for Xavier and Casimir's meager combined funds. They were a bit disappointed to be leaving empty-handed. They were about to make another round to make sure they hadn't missed a hidden treasure when they heard shouts from further away!

- "Hey! What are you doing?!"
- Get lost, you lunatic!
- Someone call the cops!"

Curious, Xavier and Casimir ran towards the commotion. They saw a man in his fifties wearing a somewhat outdated beige outfit with a matching hat being pushed away by vendors and passersby. He had a shoulder bag and was holding some kind of metal rod in his hand.

- "What's going on?" Xavier asked Manu.

They were back at their wealthy friend's stall.

- "I dunno..." Manu replied. "That old guy came over and started tapping the kid's head with his rod, then the woman over there too. Her husband didn't like it..."
- "No kidding..." Xavier said.

The man in beige was trying to explain himself, mumbling apologies through his bushy white beard.

- "Oh, it's the guy with the hat!" Casimir shouted. "I ran into him on my way to your place earlier. He was tapping walls with that rod and then putting it to his ear. I totally forgot to tell you!"

The "man in the hat" showed his little metal rod to the flea market manager, who had just arrived to help. The family who had been the victims of the head-tapping kept their distance, afraid that the man would act strangely again. The mother was inspecting her five-year-old son's head while the father yelled at both the man and the flea market manager. Then, with a quick movement, the man tapped the heads of

the two gentlemen, who were taken by surprise. He then brought the rod to his ear, but the old woman selling magazines, who Casimir had been talking to earlier, decided to intervene. She grabbed the rod from the man's hands and threw it as far as she could down an alley. Immediately, the man ran off to retrieve his rod and disappeared.

- "Honestly, not all of them are locked up! It's insane!" a passerby grumbled next to Xavier.

Xavier was fascinated by this man. He also felt a bit sad for him when the woman threw away the rod he seemed to care so much about.

The police arrived a few minutes later and took statements from the onlookers. No one had been hurt; the little taps from the rod seemed to anger people more than anything. Xavier saw it as a joke.

The crowd that had gathered to see the spectacle dispersed just as suddenly. Xavier went to fetch Casimir, who was unsuccessfully trying to negotiate with Manu to get Tomb Raider for twenty francs, but Manu wouldn't budge a single cent.

The two friends returned home empty-handed. Xavier decided not to mention the man in the hat during lunch, afraid that his parents would forbid him from going out in the village alone. They were quite protective by nature.

### Chapter 3: The Passage

Xavier Ming spent the rest of his Sunday playing PlayStation when he suddenly remembered that he did, in fact, have homework for the next day. He sat at his desk and opened his math book to work on exercises about areas and volumes.

It was already late, and Xavier sighed. He really didn't want to end his weekend doing geometry problems. His gaze drifted out the open window, letting in the cool summer air. The stars were starting to appear in the sky. One of the advantages of his small village was that there was very little light pollution. He began to daydream about leaving to explore the cosmos, embarking on interstellar adventures by going through a vortex like in the TV series he had been watching for the past year. Then, suddenly, he heard a high-pitched scream echoing through the neighborhood. A woman's scream.

Xavier snapped out of his space-bound thoughts and rushed to the window overlooking the small square. He stuck his head out and looked right and left. Nothing. Suddenly, a man's voice shouting something incomprehensible followed. It sounded like insults he had never heard before.

- "It's coming from the Dambourgs!" said the voice of an elderly woman.

Xavier noticed that the old lady across the street had also stuck her head out to see what was going on.

- "I swear, these foreigners..." she muttered before pulling back inside and closing her shutters.

Xavier frowned. To that lady, he was also a "foreigner," even though he had never lived anywhere other than Rosan.

A noise of breaking glass sounded, and the door to the Dambourg house flew open. A silhouette darted out quickly, fleeing across the small square. Xavier immediately

recognized the hat and the bag bouncing with every step. It was the man in the hat. What had he done now?

The man hid behind the large tree in the middle of the square, which had been there for decades.

Mr. Dambourg stormed out of his house.

- "Where are you? Where are you, you crazy bastard?"

The man had a strong African accent and was holding a metal bar much larger than the hat man's rod. His eyes were bloodshot; he was furious. Xavier could easily have given away the man's hiding spot, but he doubted the man in the hat would survive.

Mr. Dambourg took a few steps in the wrong direction before turning back past his own house.

- "Honey, call the cops!"

He then headed toward the large tree in the square. Uh-oh, it was over for the man in the hat. The square was a dead end; he had nowhere to run.

From his lookout, Xavier watched the scene. The man with the iron bar circled the tree, then returned to his house.

He hadn't seen the man in the hat? How was that possible?

Xavier stared at the tree. Had the man managed to climb into the branches while he wasn't looking?

This mystery intrigued Xavier so much that he couldn't resist going to see for himself. He put on his shoes, turned his cap backward, and sneaked down from his room, taking care not to get caught by his parents, who were engrossed in watching *\*The Usual Suspects\** on TV for the first time. Xavier opened the front door quietly and stepped outside.

He ran to the tree where the man in the hat had hidden. There was indeed no one there. He amused himself by recreating the scene. He hid behind the tree and tried to figure it out. It was a far more entertaining geometry problem than any he'd find in his schoolbook. Behind him was a window into a house, but the shutters were firmly closed.

In one corner of the square was the old lady's car, a gold Citroën Saxo. No one inside, and it was too low to hide under.

Xavier went back to the tree. Had the man climbed up? The tree was an old plane tree, and the lowest branch that could support a man's weight was at least three meters high. Xavier hadn't finished growing yet; he was only one meter fifty-two. But maybe, with some speed and a solid jump... "There was no reason a thirteen-year-old couldn't do what an old man had," he thought.

Though not very athletic, he warmed up a bit and took a running leap at the tree. As he did, his leg passed through the tree. The trunk seemed to liquefy—it was as if he'd put his foot into mud. Terrified by what had just happened, Xavier quickly pulled his leg out and inspected it. There wasn't a single mark. The inside of the tree seemed liquid, but his leg was perfectly dry. He reached out again, carefully touching the trunk with his finger. His fingertip sank into the wood. He withdrew it, and finding there was no danger, tried again—first an entire finger, then his hand, and then his entire arm.

Normally, if this situation could be called normal, his arm should have gone straight through the other side of the trunk; but when he leaned over to check, his limb was nowhere to be seen. So, this was where the man in the hat had disappeared? Was the tree a passage? Maybe a stargate?

He pulled his arm back and circled the tree, trying to understand. He had leaned against this tree before; he remembered spending hours playing in this square, either with Casimir or with his cousins when he was younger. The trunk had always been solid.

He touched the plane tree again on the opposite side from where he had tried before. The effect was identical, no matter which side he touched. Should he risk putting his head in to see what was on the other side?

He slowly risked his nose, closed his eyes, and then pushed his entire face through. When he opened his eyes again, Xavier was stunned. The place was bathed in green light. It was some sort of infinite space, with beams of white light crisscrossing in all directions. Xavier had no way to understand what he was seeing; it was a nine-dimensional space. But it wasn't his fault—there were simply too many dimensions for any human brain to comprehend. The vibrant colors inside the tree intoxicated Xavier with strange and new sensations. He first wondered if he could breathe, then if he even needed to. He pushed his head in further, and his right ear entered this new neon green realm. He heard sounds on frequencies usually impossible for him to hear. There were whispers in unknown languages, laughter, cries, and screams. The noise of wind, rain, bustling cities, as well as the deep hum of the ocean or even space. All of this created an intoxicating music that pulled Xavier to enter the passage more. But he wasn't foolish—he sensed that if he jumped in, he might never come back.

A few meters away, Mrs. Dambourg had indeed called the police to report the intruder.

She was still shaking—what was that man doing in her house? She had seen him earlier that morning while out with her children at the Rosan flea market. Was he going to go after her children? She had found him in her baby's room! Mrs. Dambourg was traumatized. Mr. Dambourg, however, was still angry. He had put his iron bar against the wall and was relieved to hear the police car's siren approaching.

But he wasn't the only one who heard that siren. Xavier, with his head still inside the tree, heard it with his left ear, which was still outside. The sound startled him, and he jumped.

A bad reflex. Xavier's body tipped forward, and he fell entirely through the plane tree trunk.

## Chapter 4: On the Other Side of the Trunk

Xavier Ming slipped through the nine-dimensional green space and immediately found himself on the other side of the plane tree.

The sun was up. The completely disoriented boy fell to the ground. What had just happened? His thoughts were racing: he had fallen, he was still in the village square. Sleepwalking? Had he dreamed of going through a "soft" tree trunk? Xavier got up and dusted off his clothes when an angry voice rose:

- "No, but I must be dreaming! Who are you? You have... No, but this cannot be true! Tell me I am dreaming! No, it isn't true... No, NO, NO! What have you done, kid?"

It was the man in the hat, sitting on the small bench in the square where the elderly of Rosan often came to sit and chat, smoking an odd large pipe.

- "Uh... Hello... said Xavier, still disoriented."
- "No, no, no! This is not right at all, it's terrible... it's a disaster! Oh, what a tragedy!"

Xavier didn't understand. This man was truly mad; in seconds, his expression had gone from surprise to anger, then to horror.

- "Calm down, sir... said Xavier, not knowing how to react."

The boy stepped back and bumped into the plane tree. The tree was solid again. He looked around, how much time had passed? The sun was already high in the sky, he hadn't gone to school! He panicked; his parents were going to scold him for running away all night and missing school.

- “You have the "Ponos Dendrous"... Well, wait, let's calm down, said the madman as he put down the instrument he was holding.”

It was a special pipe carved from a coconut shell with a bamboo tube attached. Xavier had never seen anything like it in real life, but he recognized the type of instrument he had seen in movies. The madman was actually holding a bong that was still lit.

- “You... you drugged me!”

Xavier panicked and ran home. He searched his pocket for the house key, but he remembered he had left without taking it.

He turned the handle, but the door was locked.

His father had probably gone back to work at Mammouth, but his mother was a housewife; she should be home... Unless she was at the police station making a missing person report? Xavier began to imagine all the trouble he was in and what would happen when his parents found him. Seeing that the madman was starting to gather his belongings in his satchel, his panic doubled. He knocked on the door. When no one answered within two seconds, he pounded harder. He even pressed the doorbell, which he knew had been broken for years, but strangely, it worked this time. A voice inside finally spoke up.

- “Yes, yes, I'm coming...”

The door opened to reveal an elderly Japanese man, about seventy years old. For a moment, Xavier thought it was his grandfather visiting from Japan, but he reconsidered. He had no idea who this man was and didn't know how to react.

- “Yes? asked the old man.
- I... I..., stammered Xavier.
- Are you lost, young man? he asked.”

His voice sounded familiar.

- “I'm looking for my parents... I... I live here...”

The man looked at him, confused. Xavier recognized that expression. It was the same look his father had when he



didn't understand Xavier's explanations about his video game achievements. Could it be that... no, Xavier couldn't have been gone that long...

- "No, there's never been a boy your age in this house; my daughter doesn't have one... Not yet! Haha."

That expression when he proudly told a bad joke! Xavier was now certain, this old man was his father!

- "Are you Ryota Ming?"
- Yes, do we know each other?" he asked.

Then, from the back of the house, an intrigued elderly lady appeared.

- "What's going on?" she asked.
- "Mom... Xavier began, immediately recognizing Françoise Ming, who had aged a lot overnight. Uh... No, I think I have the wrong address..."
- What's your name?" asked his mother, who didn't seem to recognize him.
- "I... Xavier..."
- Oh darling, how funny, that's what I wanted to name Jennifer if she'd been a boy! Where do you live, Xavier?"

Xavier didn't understand anything anymore. He looked around. There were usually photos of his family hanging on the entrance walls. These photos were different; his parents were there as he knew them, but there was a girl in his place. She was of different ages in the pictures; in the latest one, she looked over thirty.

- "Not here... Xavier replied. Sorry, have a good day, Mr. and Mrs. Ming.

Xavier left the porch of his not-home. He looked around as he made his way back to the square. The madman had disappeared again. The golden Saxo was gone, replaced by a larger car whose model he didn't recognize. DS3? He had never seen that kind of car before. The more he focused on the details, the more he noticed changes—antennas on

rooftops were gone, phone lines on the facades as well. The phone booth where he used to prank call with Casimir was also gone.

He wandered around Rosan, lost. This was no longer his village; buildings had changed, the cars he passed were larger and quieter.

He tried to understand as he sat on the edge of a fountain he had never seen before; he had gone through a tree, hadn't he? So, he had ended up in another universe? Was that it? In that case, how could he go back now that the tree was solid again?

- "Alright, kid, I'm sorry for what happened to you, I think... no, actually, there's no point in denying it, it's my fault. I'm really, really sorry."

The madman had found him again. But now he spoke normally. This man was the only link he had to his home. Xavier decided to listen.

- "I don't know exactly how long the passage stays open behind me, but you must have found it, right?"
- Yes... but who are you?
- Oh yes, my apologies, I lack manners. I am Aurélien Delacroix, pleased to meet you! And what is your name, young man?
- Xavier... Xavier Ming! At least I think so... My parents are old now, and they don't remember me...
- Alas, yes, that's what I feared... They've forgotten... The Ponos Dendrous...
- The what?
- Let's start from the beginning: I am a Kormos Varkaris, which could literally be translated as "trunk traveler," but I prefer the term "Sylvan Crosser," it sounds much more... poetic, don't you think?"

Xavier didn't understand what the madman in the hat was saying. A Kormos what? But he did understand that it was his fault he was here.

- “Where are we? What did you do?”
- “We're in the year 2025! I'm looking for... something... but what you need to know is that it's impossible to go back. Time only moves inexorably forward; time travel only works to the future.”

Xavier was horrified. He was stuck in 2025? So far and yet so close to home. He could never go back.

- “But that's not all...”

Xavier's heart sank. What was he going to say now?

- “When traveling through the sylvan network, it's necessary to chew a leaf from the tree used as a passage. It serves as an anchor for our soul, preventing it from getting lost in the depths of time.
- I... I don't understand...” Xavier stammered.
- “Your existence has been erased, Xavier... It's as if you never existed in this world. Everyone has forgotten you, and the past has adjusted. That's what we call the Ponos Dendrous. That's why your parents didn't recognize you. They never had you. They had a daughter later—Jennifer.”

The Mings had mentioned a Jennifer, and Xavier wondered how he knew that. He wasn't there, after all. He then thought of his friend Casimir—had he forgotten him too? He began to cry. Aurélien Delacroix didn't know how to comfort him; he was overwhelmed with guilt. It was his fault this child had gotten lost in time. He hadn't been careful enough when he left. He patted the boy's back to comfort him, but Aurélien had never been particularly paternal. Still, he offered him a glimmer of hope:

- “Since I've been traveling the world, I've witnessed many wonders I once thought impossible... Like the very idea of carrying music with you! Or traveling at speeds no creature in nature could reach...”

Xavier wiped his tears and looked at him, not understanding where he was going. Aurélien continued:

- “What I'm trying to say... is that for now, it's impossible to travel to the past. But who knows? Maybe one day, humans will be able to!
- You mean you're going to take me further into the future until we find a way to bring me back?
- Uh...”

Aurélien Delacroix had never considered traveling through time with a partner, let alone a child. It could interfere with his main mission. The Kormos Varkaris were solitary by nature. He felt caught off guard, and at the same time, he felt responsible for Xavier.

- “Yes, we'll do that”, he affirmed after silently thinking for a few seconds.

Then, in a solemn tone, he added:

- “Me, Aurélien Delacroix, swear on my honor to do everything in my power to bring you back to your time!”

Xavier instantly went from sadness to joy and hugged Aurélien, but seeing that the boy was crumpling his beige suit, Aurélien gently pulled away from his embrace.

- “Thank you, sir!” said Xavier.
- “You can call me Aurélien. Alright, I need to find a map!”

The Sylvan Crosser jumped up and left with a determined step.

To be continued...

Hello, thank you for reading my book. I tried to translate it with ChatGPT and manually adapt the puns. Sorry if you found any residual errors.☺

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