

# The Dunes of Àrd-Dhìthreabh



Wim Vanderbauwhede

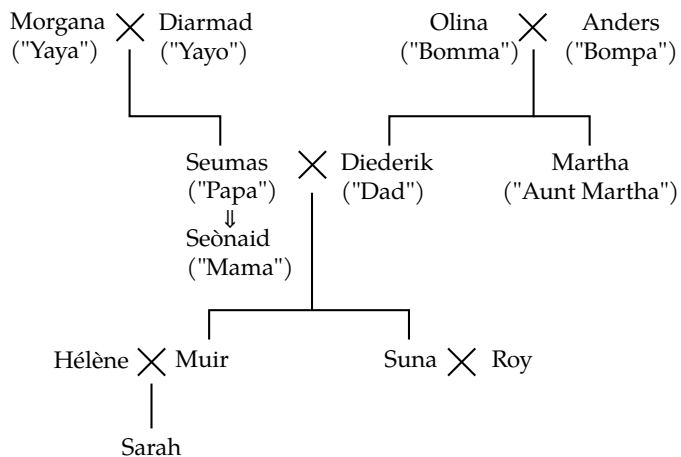
# The Dunes of Ard Dìthreabh

Wim Vanderbauwhede

## **Contents**

<b>Chapter 3. Summer</b>	<b>5</b>
--------------------------	----------

## Family tree



## Location map



## Chapter 3. Summer

*Inbhir Èireann, July 2061*

Seònaid stood on the beach near the remains of the forest of Roseisle and looked north over the Morray Firth towards the distant low lying land of the Tairbeart peninsula. It was a beautiful day and quite hot, and the far-off land was shimmering in the haze.

Apparently, where she stood had once been a sizeable forest, planted on top of the dune system to stop it from shifting and engulfing the homesteads. With the rise of the sea level, part of the forest had flooded and the trees had died. The rest of the forest had burned down repeatedly and in the end no more attempts at reforestation had been made. The dunes were magnificent now. It might have been her imagination but they seemed even taller than when she was a child. And the forest was not quite dead: everywhere small conifers were shooting up through the sand, and in sheltered dune slacks there were already some small groves.

The dark roiling pall of smoke from the moor fires in Srath Uairidh obscured most of the northern sky, but luckily the wind carried it off into the east. It reminded her of a scene from *Yokohama Kaidashi Kikō*, an old manga that she and Diederik loved. When it was published in the 1990s, the scenario in that story had seemed implausible, but it had turned out to be prophetic. Floods and fires. The rise in sea level had been much steeper than any of the models had predicted. But then people had behaved a lot more stupidly than the model designers had dared to assume.

Diederik. Going home to Inbhir Èireann inevitably made her feel his absence more keenly. The house brought back the memories of that fateful night. But she didn't want to dwell on it. That was more than ten years ago, and a lot had happened in the meanwhile. The concrete rot had changed everything. Within a span of barely five years, almost every major concrete structure in the world and countless others had collapsed or crumbled. Any concrete construction still standing was deemed unsafe. The consequences had been devastating: long-distance transport became impossible, even shipping was severely affected. Concrete wind towers had also collapsed.

Luckily, most wind towers were steel, so electricity generation was not all that much affected. And fortunately, most large dams were not made of concrete, and those that were had survived, for as yet unknown reasons. Another stroke of luck was that the high-density concrete of nuclear power plants had also remained unaffected. So there had been no disasters, but all plants had been shut down because of safety concerns.

The main damage had occurred in the early years, when it was not clear, or rather not widely accepted, that there was a common cause to the events. But scientists, civil engineers and actuaries had caught on really early. Even in the first year, when only a handful of bridges had collapsed, it had been clear to them that the odds were enormously against it being coincidence. Soon, a fungus had been identified as the root cause. Further investigations showed that the spores were windblown but that the main vector of the rapid global spread had been via the tyres of airplanes.

The airline industry had tried hard to deny this, until their runways had started to turn to sand. It had been their worst blow ever. There was no slack in global air travel, even a single runway out of action at a major airport had worldwide repercussions. And it had been infinitely worse: the majority of runways became unusable. The irony was that a lot of these had been converted from asphalt to concrete in the previous decade, mostly because the cost of asphalt had rocketed but also because with rising peak temperatures in many places better heat resistance had become necessary. And so, one airport after another, and one airline after another, became insolvent. Nationalisation could not possibly save them all, especially as they could now only operate at a loss. There were technical solutions, like polymer-glass tarmac, but the airports could not afford them. Only the few that had been saved would eventually get back in operation.

Long-haul transport had been a similar story, mostly for the same reasons: motorways had increasingly been surfaced in concrete. At first, the vested interests had tried to downplay the damage to the bridges so the lorries could keep on running. Until too many bridges had collapsed, and too much of the motorway surface had turned to sand. The carcasses of countless lorries that had fallen

victim to this refusal to accept reality were still there today.

The railways had been the first to recover. In many places, and in particular in Britain, the damage was relatively minor because many of the bridges were so old that they didn't use modern concrete. The main damage had been concrete sleepers turning to sand, but these had quickly been replaced by metal or wood. As concrete roads were no longer an option and tarmac was too expensive, transport soon moved to rail. Initially, there had been reluctance to accept this state of affairs: people kept hoping for some kind of miracle that would restore the roads quickly and cheaply. But after a few years, common sense had won and new railways were built on the remains of the main motorways. Small-scale shipping had also experienced a renaissance.

There were many theories about the concrete rot. There was a rumour that the fungus was a genetically engineered weapon, but as it had affected the whole world that was so patently absurd that no amount of propaganda or misinformation could make it stick. Another theory was that it had in fact been caused by climate change – that otherwise the fungus could never have mutated like this. If that were true, Seònaid, thought, it was rather a sweet revenge. The world had been pretty much forced into what used to be called the solarpunk utopia. It was none of that, of course, neither predominantly solar, nor much to do with punk at all, and certainly not a utopia. She knew very well it wasn't true. Still, the collapse had taken the fash with it, and that was what really mattered. They had peace again, even if the price had been high.

Seònaid started to walk along the beach towards her rendezvous with Morgana. At first, the beach appeared completely empty. Then, the shimmering heat haze started to contain a hint of order and structure. The dancing patterns started to coalesce, slowly and waveringly; and then quite suddenly a person was there, as if teleported. Even though she was still a few kilometres away, Seònaid immediately recognised Morgana. How little did she change over the years, as if time had less hold on her than on ordinary people. Small and slim, even frail, but you could see the light of her inner fire shine through, even in the intense glare of the sunny beach.

Seònaid was immensely proud of her mother. She knew better than to tell her so to her face though.

Morgana saw Seònaid approaching in the distance: a tall, powerful woman with dark skin and very short, bright red hair, silver glittering in her ears, with a bright eye and a permanent ironic smile, and the bearing and composure of a martial arts master. To Morgana, she looked young and bright and beautiful, and she was quite happy that her erstwhile son had become a daughter. She wondered what she looked like to Seònaid. A frail, wizened but proudly upright figure perhaps, old but not bent by age. Not that she felt particularly old today. It was high summer in the sunniest part of Scotland, there wasn't a cloud in the sky and hardly any wind. The late afternoon sun was still high in the sky, but the UV was not too high for someone with her skin tone.

Her skin tone. It seemed to have gotten darker over the years, despite living so far up north. She remembered how her Rioplatense mother had called her *parda*, and she'd liked the sound of the word. Her Playero dad had nicknamed her "Morgana la gatoparda", and she'd loved that. She could imagine being a leopardess, or maybe a leopard woman, a female counterpart to those feared leopard men from the old stories her grandmother had told her. She and the other leopard women would be the opposite of those ruthless assassins. They'd work to make things better rather than rule by terror.

Even now, after more than fifty years living in Scotland, people would occasionally ask her where she was from. Her only solace was that even golden-haired Diarmad, who was only a shade darker than the typical Scottish pallor, got asked the question as soon as he opened his mouth. His years on Corisco had left him with a slight but immediately noticed Spanish accent.

They sat down on the sand. Morgana had brought cooled segments of watermelon. "From Yayo's greenhouse. Still going strong after all those years." They ate them together, spitting out the pips and talking quietly about nothing in particular. After a while Seònaid fell silent and sat gazing at the sand. Morgana turned to her and said, "Well Seònaid, you must be glad that it will finally be over."



Without looking up, Seònaid replied thoughtfully, “But will it?”

“I don’t think the fascists will be coming back any time soon now. Not for twenty years at least.”

“That’s what we thought the last time, but they were back in charge after just fifteen years.”

“I really think this time is different. Last time, even though the network state collapsed and took all those other regimes down with it, the physical infrastructure was still there. But the concrete rot has totally beaten them this time. The world has completely changed and the people have laid the blame squarely on their shoulders. It all happened on their watch and they couldn’t shift the blame to some outgroup as before.”

Turning to face her, Seònaid replied, “I so hope you’re right. Maybe the people are still blaming them for the disaster. Maybe they even blame them for letting climate change happen. I really hope so.”

Morgana shrugged, “At least we have avoided catastrophic warming. Global emissions have really plummeted. That’s what really matters. But I think Diederik will be safe now. It’s been tough for you and the kids, isn’t it?”

“Aye, especially Muir. It think there’s going to be trouble when Diederik returns. But I know you’ve missed him too, Yaya. Diederik was always so fond of you.” With a mischievous look she added, “Sometimes I think you’re more fond of him than of me.”

Morgana laughed out loud, a surprisingly rich sound coming from such a wispy body. But she quickly grew serious again. “You’re right though, this whole thing has really messed up our family and I still feel guilty about it. I know what we did was for the best, and history has borne us out, but sometimes I think it might be easier to live with the weight of harm caused by inaction.”

Seònaid looked at her silently for a long time. She scooped up some sand and let it run through her fingers. “It has been hard, but I can’t really see it that way, not anymore. The only thing that really bothered me is that we couldn’t tell Suna and Muir.”

Morgana shook her head. “I’m not so sure. If I had done nothing, I’m sure I would feel bad about it a lot of the time. But seeing the

effect of your actions on the news is something else again. Killing people is wrong, and causing people to die is only a tiny bit different. We didn't intend them to die but we knew that statistically it was unavoidable. I think the main difference is that most people do nothing, and are not much bothered by the consequences of their inaction. It's dilution of responsibility. When you do something and you are confronted with the consequences, and you know you are responsible, it's harder to take."

"But your responsibility was also carried by many. It wasn't just you!" Seònaid retorted.

Morgana smiled thinly. "That's a bit like being in the firing squad for a fallen dictator, isn't it?"

But Seònaid wasn't having it. She dusted off her hands and made an impatient gesture. "I felt like that for a while after, but not anymore. After all, it was I who did the actual hacking. We brought down the network state and it caused mayhem, for sure. People died as a direct result of us crashing the financial systems. But we both know more would have died otherwise."

"It's not that," Morgana replied. "I know all that. By the calculus of suffering, our conscience is clear. But look at what it did to our family. That's what I feel guilty about. It makes little difference that we did what we did for the best of reasons." Seònaid looked at her mother with deep sympathy. "You know what they say, Morgana. Guilt is anger at yourself, and nobody is the better for that. It's all over now. You had to make hard decisions, and you made them. Think like Musashi: 'I will not regret anything'."

Now it was Morgana's time to be pensive. When she finally looked up, a rueful smile played on her lips. "I guess you're right," she said slowly. Then her smile broadened. She stood up. "Anyway, that's all in the past, and soon Rico will be back, for good."

They walked back along the beach, past the high dunes and then the sunken ruins of the old village. In the distance rose the incongruous structure that was Inbhir Èireann. It was a sight that always delighted Seònaid: a whole village raised on stilts, as if floating above the water. A symbol of inventiveness and resilience. Morgana saw her admiring it and laughed out loud. Seònaid looked

at her but wasn't surprised. It was just one of Yaya's happy attacks.

"You know, me being a Playera, I still find it funny that the best beach in the world is right here, in the north of Scotland. Of all the unlikely places."