

# The Dunes of Àrd-Dhìthreabh



Wim Vanderbauwhede

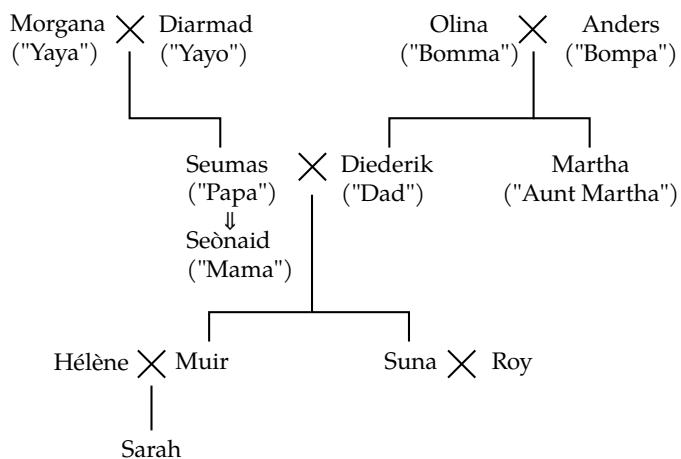
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## **Contents**

<b>Chapter 7. Spring</b>	<b>5</b>
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## Family tree



## Location map



## Chapter 7. Spring

*Inbhir Éireann, May 2062*

Out of the blue but not unexpected, Diederik called at the house, one morning when the hawthorn was in full bloom. They had breakfast and made small talk, then went onto the beach. There was a smell of coconut in the air, wafting over the beach from the thickets of gorse at the foot of the dunes, so dense with flowers that they looked like deep yellow clouds.

“Well, Rico, I am so glad you made it back in time.” He’d always been ‘Rico’ to her. She could see the name triggered a flood of memories.

“I’m very glad for that too, Morgana. And to find you so well too. I’m sure you’ll be with us for a long time yet.”

Morgana thought Diederik had aged surprisingly well. He was older and a little greyer but seemed mostly wiser. His face was more lined but they were the lines of one who smiled frequently. Long ago, in his younger years in Belgium, Diederik had for a while worked as a life drawing model in one of the art schools. A student had gifted him a portrait, and much later, Diederik had in turn given this portrait to her. It was a large drawing in thick graphite pencil, executed deftly on grey paper with minimal highlights in white chalk. It showed the profile of a lank young man with very pale hair and a pale thin face with a long, sharp nose. He was sitting on a Thonet chair, wearing a slim-fitting dark suit, legs crossed, barefooted, chin on hand, looking pensive.

Somehow, this portrait had over the years become Morgana’s mental image of Diederik. If that portrait had aged like that of a wholesome Dorian Gray and come to life, it would be his spitting image. “You look well too, Rico. I see your travels must have agreed with you. We’ve of course all read your letters, but you clearly left a lot unsaid. Want to tell me about it?”

“I guess so, but I don’t know where to start. Let’s just amble for a while.”

From the village, the beach ran due north for a few hundred metres and then curved sharply eastwards before returning to a

shallow upward sweep towards Roseisle. It was low tide and far out in the water the remains of the flooded village once known as Findhorn were visible. When they were past that point, Diederik spoke out.

“I’m very sorry I couldn’t be here for Diarmad.”

Morgana countered, “We knew that’s how it would be. He knew that as well.”

“Still.”

Morgana didn’t reply but asked instead, “What are you going to do next?”

“I have to go and see Muir and Suna. Especially Muir. From what I gathered from Seònaid, Suna has practically worked it all out by herself. But Muir . . . I feel very guilty –”

“Don’t do that. You did what was best for all of us. I think we should all be fine now. I don’t think the tide will turn again before you and Seònaid are my age, and by then none of it will matter anymore. Muir’s all right, with Hélène and Sarah he has to live in the present. I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you.”

“I hope you’re right,” Diederik said heavily. He fell silent again, pondering.

They continued past a stretch of dunes that had calved off, exposing a steep bank of compacted sand. Diederik observed the characteristic holes of sand martin nests. He felt his mood lift. He’d always been very fond of those birds. Their flight was endlessly fascinating. They sped over the waves, nearly touching the foam; they wove patterns over the beach like swallows; they formed and reformed into threes or fours, fluttering like butterflies and touching down on the sand for a fleeting moment.

They watched the birds for a while in companionable silence. Then he said, “I’ll tell you something about the last part of the trip.”

“When I reached the Mediterranean at Iskenderun, I sailed to Cyprus and then from one island to another until I got to Spain, to the fishing harbour of a place called La Vila Joiosa. It’s very close to Benidorm, so I went there. It was really strange. That famous high-rise skyline has completely turned to rubble. The tall buildings had mostly been hotels and holiday flats, so now the

tourists have nowhere to stay. Of course they can't even fly there any more either, so it doesn't matter. It has become a ghost town. But nature has already reclaimed the rubble mounds, and now they are largely covered in a kind of maquis with oleander, bougainvillea, olive, orange and palm trees."

Morgana nodded, "You didn't pick Benidorm at random, did you?"

Diederik shrugged, "It was a kind of pilgrimage, if you like. I felt I had to visit the place where my parents died. But it was just luck that took me to La Vila Joiosa, I couldn't have planned it. Anyway, it wasn't all bad. Most of the old town is still intact and life just goes on there. From what I heard, the esplanade had always been several metres above the beach. When the sea level started to rise they'd raised the beach as well. Now it's full of tall palm trees. Most of the buildings on the waterfront are still standing; but they are all closed and many are boarded up. The sunsets were beautiful."

"From there I walked north and your friends took me from a beach near Bilbao all the way to Lorient. Then I sailed from Paimpol to the Isle of Man, and from there to Am Ploc. There I just took the train to Farrais."

He stopped and smiled at her, looking genuinely happy, "It's so good to be back."