

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Thread Of Grace

Mary Doria Russell

A THREAD OF GRACE

Mary Doria Russell



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Alla mia famiglia

*with thanks to Susa and Tomek,
who made me reach for more*

A palaeoanthropologist known for her work on cannibalism and craniofacial biomechanics, Mary Doria Russell is the author of the acclaimed novels *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*, which earned her a number of awards and have been translated into thirteen languages. She lives in Cleveland, Ohio, with her husband and their son.

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ALSO BY
MARY DORIA RUSSELL

The Sparrow
Children of God

For more information on Mary Doria Russell and her books, see her website at www.marydoriarussell.info

Quello che siete, fummo.

What you are, we were.

Quello che siamo, sarete.

What we are, you shall be.

—FROM AN ITALIAN CEMETERY

Characters

ITALIAN JEWS

Renzo Leoni, a.k.a. Ugo Messner, Stefano Savoca, Don Gino Righetti

Lidia Segre Leoni, his widowed mother; *la nonna* (the grandmother)

Tranquillo Loeb, her eldest daughter's husband

Iacopo Soncini, chief rabbi of Sant'Andrea

Mirella Casutto Soncini, his wife

Angelo, their young son

Altira, their first daughter, deceased

Rosina, their second daughter

Giacomo Tura, elderly Hebrew scribe

JEWISH REFUGEES

Claudette Blum, Belgian teenager; Claudia Fiori, *la vedova* (the widow)

Albert Blum, her father

Duno Brössler, Austrian teenager, partisan

Herrmann and Frieda Brössler, his parents

Liesl and Steffi, his younger sisters

Rivka Ivanova Brössler, his paternal grandmother

Jakub Landau, organizer for the Italian CNL (Committee for National Liberation); *il polacco* (the Pole)

ITALIAN CATHOLICS

Suora (Sister) Marta, middle-aged nun

Suora Corniglia, novice, later nun; Suora Fossette (Sister Dimples)

Massimo Malcovato, her father; *il maggiore* (the major)

Don (male honorific) Osvaldo Tomitz, priest, Sant'Andrea

Don Leto Girotti, priest, San Mauro; *il prete rosso* (the red priest)

Santino Cicala, infantryman, Calabrian draftee

Catarina Dolcino, the Leonis' landlady; Rina

Serafino Brizzolari, municipal bureaucrat, Sant'Andrea

Antonia Usodimare, proprietress, Pensione Usodimare

Tercilla Lovera, *contadina* (peasant woman), Santa Chiara

Pierino, Tercilla's son; *il postino* (the postman)

Bettina, his sister

Battista Goletta, Fascist farmer, Valdottavo

Attilio Goletta, his cousin, Communist sharecropper

Tullio Goletta, Attilio's son, partisan

Adele Toselli, elderly housekeeper, San Mauro rectory

Nello Toselli, her nephew, partisan

Maria Avoni, partisan; *la puttana tedesca* (the German whore)

Otello Rollero, partisan, interpreter for Simon Henley

BRITISH

Simon Henley, signalman, Special Operations executive

GERMANS

Werner Schramm, deserter, Oberstabsarzt (medical officer)
Waffen-SS

Irmgard, his sister, deceased

Erhardt von Thadden, Gruppenführer (division commander)
Waffen-SS; the Schoolmaster

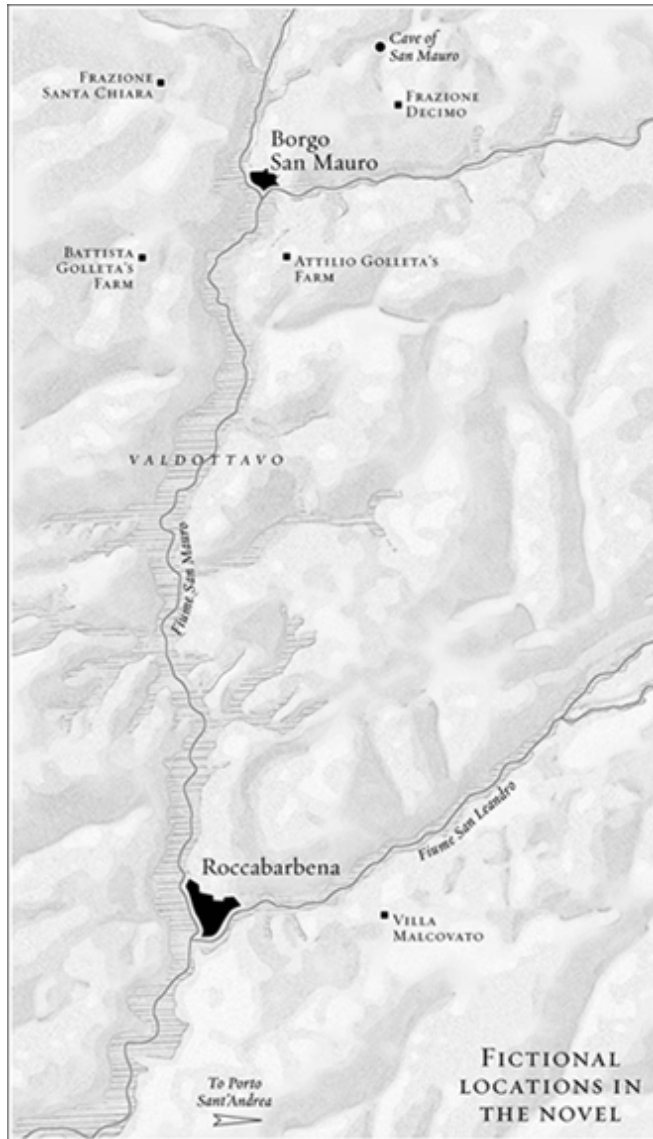
Martina, his wife

Helmut Reinecke, his adjutant, Hauptsturmführer (captain),
later Standartenführer (colonel, regimental commander)

Ernst Kunkel, Oberscharführer (staff sergeant), aide to von
Thadden

Artur Huppenkothen, Oberstpolizei (police colonel),
Gestapo

Erna, his sister



Preludio

AUSTRIA
1907

This is what everyone would remember about his mother: her home was immaculate. Even in a place where cleanliness was pursued with religious zeal, her household was renowned for its faultless order. In Klara's mind, there was no gradation between purity and filth.

She had sinned as a girl, made pregnant by her married uncle. Adultery stained her soul black, and God punished her as she deserved. Her sin child died.

So did her aunt, and Klara became her uncle's newest wife, dutifully raising her stepchildren, keeping them very clean and very quiet, so her uncle-husband would not become angry and bring out his leather whip. Her husband was no more merciful than her God.

Her second son died, and then her small daughter. Soon after she buried little Ida, Klara became pregnant again. Her fourth child was a sickly boy whose weakness her uncle-husband despised. Klara was ashamed that her children had died. She hovered over the new baby anxiously, told him constantly that she loved and needed him, hoping that her neighbors would notice how well he was cared for. Hoping that her uncle-husband would come to approve of her son. Hoping that God would hear her pleas, and let this child live.

Her prayers, it seemed, were answered, but the neighbors were bemused by Klara's mothering. She nursed her little boy for two years. He'd squirm away, or turn his

face from her, but she pushed her nipple into his mouth regardless of what troubled him. She fed and fed and fed that child. Food was medicine. Food could ward off numberless, nameless, lurking diseases. "Eat," she'd plead. "Eat, or you'll get sick and die." It was immoderate, even in a village where mothers expected children to swallow whatever was put before them, and to clean their plates.

In adulthood, Klara's son would have nightmares about suffocation. He would suck on a finger in times of stress, or stuff himself with chocolates. He was obsessed with his body's odors and became a vegetarian, convinced that this diet reduced his propensity to sweat excessively and improved the aroma of his intestinal gas. He discussed nutritional theories at length but had a poor appetite. He could not watch others eat without trying to spoil their enjoyment. He'd call broth "corpse tea," and once pointed out that a roast suckling pig looked "just like a cooked baby."

Whenever he looked in a mirror, he would see his mother's eyes: china blue and frightened. Frightened of dirt, of her husband, of illness, and of God. Klara's son was frightened, too. Frightened of priests and hunters, of cigarette smokers and skiers, of liberals, journalists, germs and dirt, of gypsies, judges, and Americans. He was frightened of being wrong, of being weak, of being effeminate. Frightened of poets and of Poles, of academics and Jehovah's Witnesses. Frightened of moonlight and horses, of snow and water and the dark. Frightened of microbes and spirochetes, of feces, and of old men, and of the French.

The very blood in his veins was dangerous. There were birth defects and feeble-mindedness in his incestuous family. His uncle-father was a bastard, and Klara's son worried all his life that unsavory gossip about his ancestry would become public. He was frightened of sexual

intercourse and never had children, afraid his tainted blood would be revealed in them. He was terrified of cancer, which took his mother's life, and horrified that he had suckled at diseased breasts.

How could anyone live with so much fear?

His solution was to simplify. He sought and seized one all-encompassing explanation for the existence of sin and disease, for all his failures and disappointments. There was no weakness in his parents, his blood, his mind. He was faultless; others were filth. He could not change his china blue eyes, but he could change the world they saw. He would identify the secret source of every evil and root it out, annihilating at a stroke all that threatened him. He would free Europe of pollution and defilement—only health and confidence and purity and order would remain!

Are such grim and comic facts significant, or merely interesting? Here's another: the doctor who could not cure Klara Hitler's cancer was Jewish.

Greater Italy

1943

Anno Fascista XXII

8 September 1943

PORTO SANT'ANDREA, LIGURIA
NORTHWESTERN COAST OF ITALY

A simple answer to a simple question. That's all Werner Schramm requires.

"Where's the church?" he yells, belligerent and sick—sicker yet when his shout becomes a swampy cough.

A small crowd gathers to appreciate the spectacle: a Waffen-SS officer, thin, fortyish, and liquored up. He props his hands against his knees, coughing harder. "*La basilica!*" he gasps, remembering the Italian. "*San Giovanni—dove è?*"

A young woman points. He catches the word *campanile*, and straightens, careful of his chest. Spotting the bell tower above a tumble of rooftops that stagger toward the sea, he turns to thank her. Everyone is gone.

No matter. Downhill is the path of least resistance for a man who's drunk himself legless. Nearer the harbor, the honeyed light of the Italian Riviera gilds wrecked warehouses and burnt piers, but there's not much bomb damage inland. No damned room for an explosion, Schramm thinks.

Jammed between the Mediterranean and the mountains, the oldest part of Porto Sant'Andrea doesn't even have streets—just *carrugi*: passages barely wide enough for medieval carts. Cool and shadowy even at noon, these masonry ravines wind past the cobblers' and barbers' shops, apothecaries, vegetable stands, and cafés wedged at

random between blank-walled town houses with shuttered windows.

Glimpses of the bell tower provide a sense of direction, but Schramm gets lost twice before stumbling into a sunny little piazza. He scowls at the light, sneezes, wipes his watering eyes. "Found you!" he tells the Basilica di San Giovanni Battista. "Tried t'hide, but it didn' work!"

San Giobatta, the locals call this place, as though John the Baptist were a neighborhood boy, poor and charmless but held in great affection. Squatting on a granite platform, the dumpy little church shares its modest courtyard with an equally unimpressive rectory and convent, their builder's architectural ambition visibly tempered by parsimony. Broad stripes of cheap black sandstone alternate with grudgingly thin layers of white Carrara marble. The zebra effect is regrettable.

Ineffective sandbags surround the church, its southeast corner freshly crumpled and blackened by an Allied incendiary bomb. A mob of pigeons waddle through the rubble, crapping and cooing. "The pope speaks lovely German," Schramm informs them. "Nuncio to Berlin before he got his silly hat. Perhaps I ought to go to Rome and confess to Papa Pacelli!"

He laughs at his own impertinence, and pays for it with another coughing fit. Eyes watering, hands trembling, he drops onto the basilica staircase and pulls out the battered flask he keeps topped up and nestled near his heart. He takes small sips until brandy calms the need to cough, and the urge to flee.

Prepared now, he stands. Squares his shoulders. Advances resolutely on massive doors peopled with bronzed patriarchs and tarnished virgins. Curses with surprise when they won't yield to his tug. "I want a pries'!"

he yells, rapping on the door, first with his knuckles and then more insistently with the butt of his Luger.

Creaking hinges reveal the existence of a little wooden side door. A middle-aged nun appears, her sleeves shoved into rubber gauntlets, her habit topped by a grimy apron. Frowning at the noise, she is short and shaped like a beer keg. Her starched white wimple presses pudgy cheeks toward a nose that belongs on a propaganda Jew.

Christ, you're homely.

Schramm wipes his mouth on his sleeve, wondering if he has spoken aloud. For years, words have threatened to pour out, like blood from his throat. He fears hemorrhage.

Shivering in the heat, he makes a move toward the door. The nun bars his way. "*La chiesa è chiusa!*" she says, but Schramm pushes past her.

The baptistry reeks of carbolic, incense, explosives, and charred stone. Three novices scour its limestone floor. The prettiest sits on her heels, her face smudged with soot from the firebomb's damage. Calmly, she studies the Luger dangling in this German's right hand. Behind him, Sister Beer Keg snaps her fingers. Eyes drop. Work resumes.

Schramm shoves the pistol into its holster, pulls off his campaign cap, and rubs a sweaty palm over cropped brown hair. The nave is empty apart from a single man who ambles down the center aisle, neck cranked back like a cormorant's, hands clasped loosely behind his back. This personage studies the swirling seraphim and whey-faced saints above, himself an allegorical portrait come to life: Unconcern in a Silver-Gray Suit.

Distracted by the tourist, Schramm takes a step toward the confessionals and trips over a bucket of water. "*Scheisse,*" he swears, hopping away from the spill.

"*Basta!*" the fat nun declares, pulling him toward the door.

"*Io need ein padre!*" he insists, but his Italian is two decades old—the fading souvenir of a year in Florence. The Beer Keg shakes her head. Standing his ground, Schramm points at a confessional. "*Un padre, understand?*"

"*La chiesa è chiusa!*"

"I know the church is closed! But I need—"

"A strong black coffee?" the tourist suggests pleasantly. His German is Tyrolean, but there's no mistaking the graceful confidence of an Italian male who employs a superb tailor. "A medical officer!" he says, noting the insignia on Schramm's collar. "You speak the language of Dante most vigorously, Herr Doktor, but the people of this region generally use a Ligurian dialect, not the classical Italian you are—"

"Butchering," Schramm supplies, with flat accuracy.

"Striving for, one might have said. With your permission, I can explain to Suora Marta that you're seeking a priest who speaks German."

Schramm listens hard, but their dialect is as thick as an Austrian's head, and he gives up until the tourist translates. "Suora tells me Archbishop Tirassa's assistant speaks excellent German. Confessions, however, will not be heard again until Saturday." When Schramm begins to protest, the Italian holds up a conciliatory hand. "I shall point out that in time of war, the angel of death is more capricious than usual. Preparation for his arrival should not be delayed."

The man's voice becomes a soothing melody of persuasion and practicality. Schramm watches Suora Marta's face. She reminds him of his mother's sister, a Vincentian nun equally short and dumpy and ugly. "Like Papa used t'say, 'Christ'll take what nobody else wants.' "

"And so there is hope, even for pigs like you," the nun replies.

Schramm's jaw drops. A stunned laugh escapes his interpreter. Eyes fearlessly on Schramm's own, Suora Marta removes her rubber gloves and apron. Without hurry, she untucks her habit, straightens her gown, folds her outer sleeves back to the proper cuff length. Hands sliding beneath her scapular, she gives Schramm one last dirty look before gliding away with chubby dignity.

Schramm tips a mouthful of brandy down his throat. "*Verdamnte Scheisse!* Why didn' you tell me she speaks German?"

"I didn't know! As a general rule, however, courtesy has much to recommend it in any language. This is a small port, but many of us have a working knowledge of German," the man continues, deflecting the conversation ever so slightly. "We've done a fair amount of business with Venezia Giulia since 1918— Pardon! No doubt you would call the region *Adriatisches Küstenland.*"

"Mus' cost a fortune for new stationery every time the border moves," Schramm remarks, offering the brandy.

"Printers always prosper." The Italian raises the flask in salute and takes a healthy swallow. "If you won't be needing me anymore... ?"

Schramm nods, and the man strolls off toward an alcove, pausing to admire a fresco of the Last Judgment that Schramm himself finds unnecessarily vivid. Searching for a place to sit, Schramm gets a fix on some pews near the confessionals, takes another sip from the flask. "No retreat!" he declares. Probably aloud.

The tourist's slow circuit of the church is punctuated by murmurs of dismay. A fifteenth-century baptismal font is damaged. A colorful jumble of shattered glass lies beneath a blown-out window. "*Verdamm'* Tommies," Schramm mutters. "British claim're only bombing military sites, but Hamburg is rubble! Dehousing the workers, that's what

they call it. *Terrorflieger*, we call it. Leverkusen, München. Köln, Düsseldorf. Rubble, all of them! Did you know that?"

"We hear only rumor these days, even with the change in government," the Italian replies, declining comment on Mussolini's recent fall from power.

Schramm waves his flask at the damage before taking another pull. "RAF pilots're so fugging inaggurate—" Schramm tries again. "They are so ... fucking ... inaccurate." Satisfied with his diction, he swivels his head in the direction of his new friend. "They call it a hit if they aim at a dock and smash a church!"

"Very sloppy," the Italian agrees. "A shocking lack of professional pride!"

Slack-jawed, Schramm's skull tips back of its own accord. He stares at the painted angels wheeling above him until his hands lose track of what they're supposed to be doing and the flask slips from his fingers. He aims his eyes at the floor, where the last of the liquor is pooling. "Tha's a pity," he mourns. Laboriously, he lifts first one foot and then the other onto the pew, sliding down until he is prone. "Fat ol' nun," he mutters. Pro'ly never committed a sin in her whole life ...

A sharp noise awakens him. Coughing and crapulous, Schramm struggles to sit up. His confessor hasn't arrived, but chunks of stone have been neatly stacked by the door. Sweeping shards of colored glass into a pile, the Italian flirts gallantly with the novices. The pretty one flirts back, dimpling when she smiles.

Schramm slumps over the back of the pew in front of him, cushioning his brow on folded arms. "I'm going to be sick," he warns a little too loudly.

The Italian snaps his fingers. "Suora Fossette! The bucket!" The newly christened Sister Dimples scrambles to deliver it, and only just in time. "Allow me," the gentleman

says, courteous as a headwaiter while Schramm pukes into the dirty water.

Swiping at his watering eyes with trembling hands, Schramm accepts the proffered handkerchief. "Touris', translator ... now you're a nurse!"

"A man of endless possibilities!" the Italian declares, setting the bucket aside.

He has a face off a fresco: bent-nosed and bony, but with a benign expression. Old enough to be tolerantly amused by another's disgrace. Someone who might understand ... Schramm wants to tell this kindly stranger everything, but all that comes out is "I was tryin' t'make things better."

"Always a mistake," the Italian remarks. "Where are you staying, Oberstabsarzt? Would you like to come back another day?"

Schramm shakes his head stubbornly. "'*Damnte Schpageddi-Fresser*. Italians're always late! Where is that shit of a priest?"

"Lie down, Herr Doktor." Schramm feels his legs lifted onto the pew. "Rest your eyes. The priest will come, and then we'll get you back where you belong."

"No, thank you," Schramm says firmly. "Hell exists, you know. Any combat soldier can tell you that." The other man stops moving. "I knew you'd un'erstan'! So heaven's real, too! Logic, *ja*?"

Their moment of communion is over. "I myself am not a devout Catholic," the Samaritan informs him regretfully. "My opinions about heaven and hell needn't trouble you."

"Righ' ... righ'." Almost asleep, Schramm mumbles, "You're not a bad fellow ..."

Moments later, he is snoring like a tank engine, and does not hear the hoot of delighted laughter that echoes

through the basilica. "Did you hear that, Sisters?" his interpreter asks. "The Nazi says I'm not a bad fellow!"

"For a spaghetti chomper," Suora Fossette amends solemnly.

Musical giggles are quickly stifled when swift footsteps and whispering fabric announce a priest's approach. "*Grüss Gott, mein Herr,*" he says, shooting a stern look at the novices. "I am Osvaldo Tomitz, secretary to His Excellency Archbishop Tirassa."

"Don Osvaldo! *Piacere:* a pleasure to meet you!" says a well-dressed civilian. "I'm Renzo Leoni."

Tomitz's confusion is plain. Suora Marta undoubtedly told him that the man wishing to confess is an obnoxious German drunk. "How may I be of service to you, signore?"

"Ah, but I am not the one who sought your services, Don Osvaldo." Leading the way toward the confessionals, Leoni presents a Waffen-SS officer passed out cold on a pew.

Nose wrinkling at the sour smell of vomit and brandy, Tomitz snorts. "So that's the Aryan superman we've heard so much about."

"Yes. Disappointing, really," Leoni concurs, but his eyes are on the priest. "Tomitz, Tomitz ... You're from Trieste, aren't you? Your family's in shipping!"

Don Osvaldo draws himself up, surprised by recognition. In his early forties, of medium height and medium weight, with medium-brown hair framing regular features, not one of which is memorable, Osvaldo Tomitz must introduce himself repeatedly to people who have already met him. "My father was with Lloyds Adriatico. We moved here when the Genoa office opened a branch in Sant'Andrea. How did you know?"

"The name is Austrian. The German is Habsburg. The Italian is Veneto. Ergo: Trieste! As for the rest? I cheated: my father was a commercial photographer. Lloyds was a

good customer. I met your father when I was a boy. You must have been in seminary by then. How is Signor Tomitz?"

"He passed away last year. I was teaching at Tortona. I asked for a position here so I could be nearer my mother."

"My sympathies, Don Osvaldo. My mother, too, is a widow."

Satisfied to have established a connection, Leoni returns his attention to the drunk. With an almost professional efficiency, he pats the Nazi down and removes the man's wallet. "Herr Doktor Oberstabsarzt Werner Schramm is with the Waffen-SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, Hausser's Second Armored Corps, late of the Russian front ... Currently staying at the Bellavista. He's in Sant'Andrea on two weeks' leave." Leoni looks up, puzzled.

"Odd," Osvaldo agrees. "To come from such a hell, and spend his leave in Sant'Andrea?"

"Why not Venice, I wonder? Or Florence, or Rome?" Leoni glances apologetically at the frescoes. "No offense, Padre, but San Giobatta is not exactly a top draw." Leoni replaces the wallet and resumes his frisk. Withdrawing a silver cigarette case, he offers its contents to the priest with exploratory hospitality. "*Prego!* Take half," he urges. "Please—I'm sure the doctor would insist."

"He's not a bad fellow," one of the novices comments, "for a Nazi."

"Suora!" Don Osvaldo cries.

Dimples disappearing, the white-veiled sister scrubs virtuously at the mosaics, but Leoni's laughter fills the basilica. Disarmed, Don Osvaldo scoops his half of the cigarettes out of the case. Leoni offers a light.

"American," Osvaldo notes with some surprise, examining the fine white tissue paper. "I wonder where he —"

“Smoking in a church!” Suora Marta grumbles, trundling down the aisle. Already annoyed, she smells vomit, and her mouth twists. “Swine!” she snaps at the insensible German.

“Judge not, Suora!” Leoni reminds her piously. “I’m inclined to respect a soldier who has to get that drunk before confession. He must have an admirable conscience to be so ashamed.”

She holds out a hand. “Give me the rest.”

Leoni’s brows shoot upward. “*Santo cielo!* Do you smoke, Suora?”

“Don’t waste my time, Leoni. Tobacco’s better than gold on the black market. We’ve got orphans to feed.”

With a sigh and a shrug, and not so much as a glance at Tomitz, Leoni surrenders the cigarettes. Tucking them into a deep recess hidden in her dark blue gown, Suora Marta lifts the washbucket at arm’s length and waddles off to dump its contents. “If I find ashes on that floor,” she calls over her shoulder, “you’ll eat them!”

“*Sì, Suora,*” Don Osvaldo says dutifully. He waits until the nun is out of earshot. “Priest. Monsignor. Bishop. Archbishop. Cardinal. The pope,” he chants softly. “And at the pinnacle of the hierarchy? Suora Marta.”

There’s a muffled schoolboy snicker from his companion. “She hasn’t changed a bit. Taught me algebra in 1927. I’ve got ruler scars to prove it.” Leoni taps ashes into a cupped palm crossed with fine lines and gives Osvaldo a sidelong glance. “You looked convincingly innocent for someone concealing stolen goods.”

“A sin of omission.” Osvaldo takes his half of the loot out of a pocket and divides it with Leoni. “Are you also a soldier? Home on leave, perhaps?” Leoni stiffens, though Osvaldo cannot imagine why. “Forgive me if—”

“I am,” Leoni says coolly, “retired from military service.”