

The Phoenix of Florence

Philip Kazan

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In search of ultimate freedom, a broken young girl transforms after a devastating tragedy in Philip Kazan's *The Phoenix of Florence*. Choosing the path of a soldier and then a master swordsman, Onoria completely abandons her former life, running from the past and its ghosts. She goes to great lengths to mask who she is, hiding in plain sight for decades.

The story begins in sixteenth-century Italy, when Onoria is in her mid-thirties and an officer in Florence who has just discovered a complicated murder. A flashback consumes the story, amassing a twenty-year period in which Onoria's life changed irreversibly, including how Onoria became Onorio, addressed and understood as "he." Time lapses, yet Onoria remains an enigma, her personality and character shuttered to everyone.

Onoria works to solve the mysterious murder, tracking of evidence and clues through the streets of Florence even as she unravels her own enigmatic past. Uncovered clues make it possible to piece together the separate plot lines and arrive at conclusions. Onoria's faith holds strong throughout, and her prayer to Celava, the goddess of things that are lost, helps her to feel human. Hints of softness inside her tough exterior are few, yet they provide hope that she will find peace and rest.

The text often feels off-balance, though. Those aching for connection to the characters will find battle scenes instead—gory, graphic, and hyperrealistic. Flourishes and extreme details describe wars and years of travel that come to feel irrelevant to Onoria's tale.

Onoria's decision to become Onorio is the deep, aching secret that carries her through the entirety of her life. It is positioned as her destiny, but her change back to herself is equally as emotional and moving. Beautiful scenery and imagery fill the pages of *The Phoenix of Florence*, and Kazan's historical writing is both fascinating and informative.

KATIE ASHER (May/June 2019)

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