

He and his men come from Riga, recruited by a "Bishop Oakenfort" as muscle.

I've heard the rumors--armed men roaming the countryside offering work building churches. Christian silver spends and the churches will get built regardless, so they had no problem finding labor.

But there never was any silver, and the men never returned home.

"Only men?"
Julia asked.
"No women?"

The man recoiled at the idea. Pious Christians can be a bit funny when it comes to women.


THEN REPORTS ARRIVED. CARDINAL FARINA WAS IN NORSSK, FOLLOWING THESE SAME RUMORS.

OAKENFORT HIMSELF ORDERED HIS MURDER.


Right, then.
Oakenfort.

The gods know I love a good fight. But the kill is my least favorite part.

Pagan and Christian, there is a joy in death, the idea of going to a better place.



But I just feel empty.




But it was not
always that way.



FIRST
TIME IN A
SHIELD
WALL?


NO.




LIAR.
I CAN SMELL THE
IN YOUR
BRITCHES.




ONCE THE
FIGHTING STARTS,
IT WON'T MATTER.
WE'RE ALL UP TO
OUR █████ IN
BLOOD, █████
AND VOMIT.



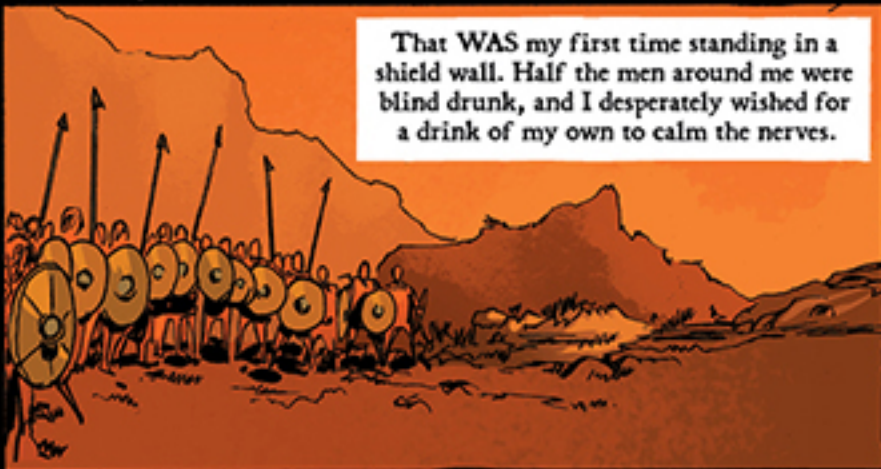
He wasn't wrong.



That **WAS** my first time standing in a shield wall. Half the men around me were blind drunk, and I desperately wished for a drink of my own to calm the nerves.



But when the fighting started, it was fine. It was beautiful.



The skalds call it the "battle calm."



Time slows. You bask in the utter certainty that you will survive the battle. You will survive, you will go home and bed a woman and whelp children off her. You can see their faces. They grow up strong and healthy and make you proud.



But mostly you survive the battle.