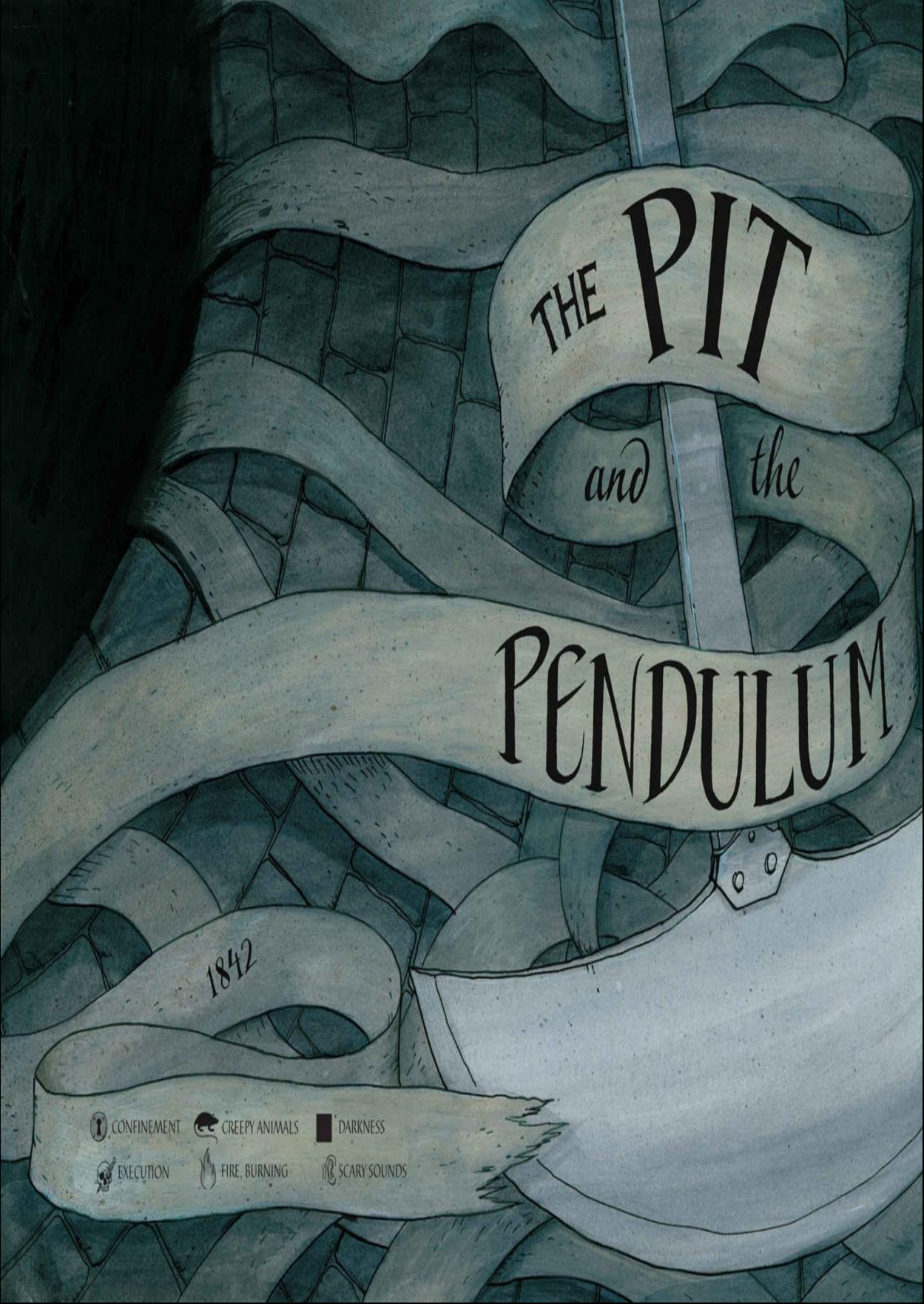




THE PIT

and the

PENDULUM

1842

CONFINEMENT



CREEPY ANIMALS

DARKNESS



EXECUTION



FIRE, BURNING



SCARY SOUNDS

I awoke to impenetrable darkness. I could see not an inch. Was I blind? Was I dead?

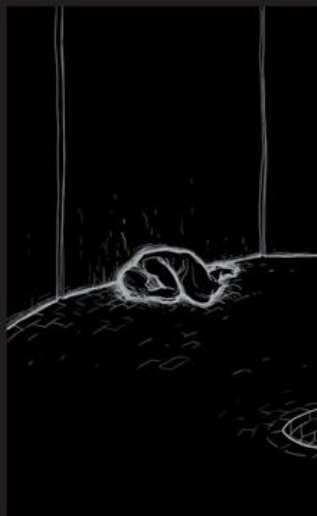


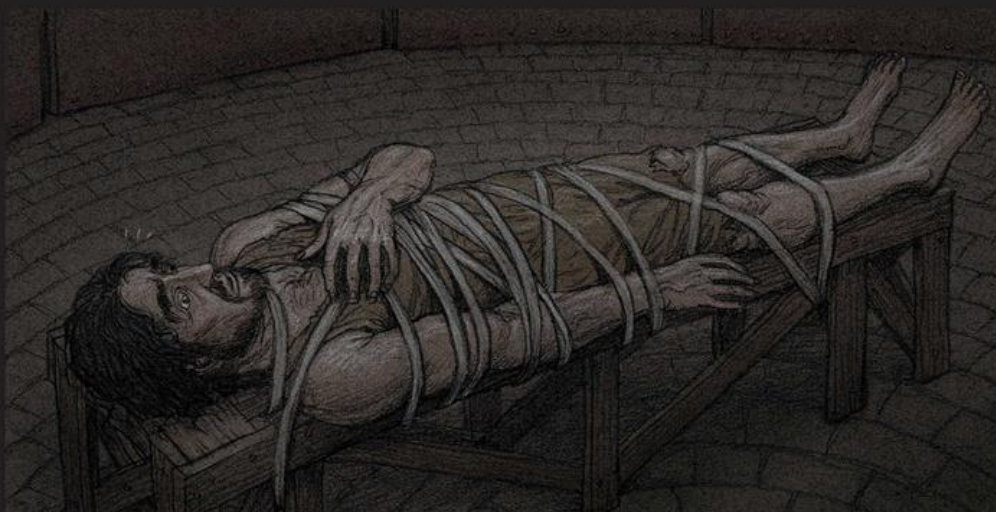
I could recall blurry images of the Inquisition, the robed figures passing judgment upon me.



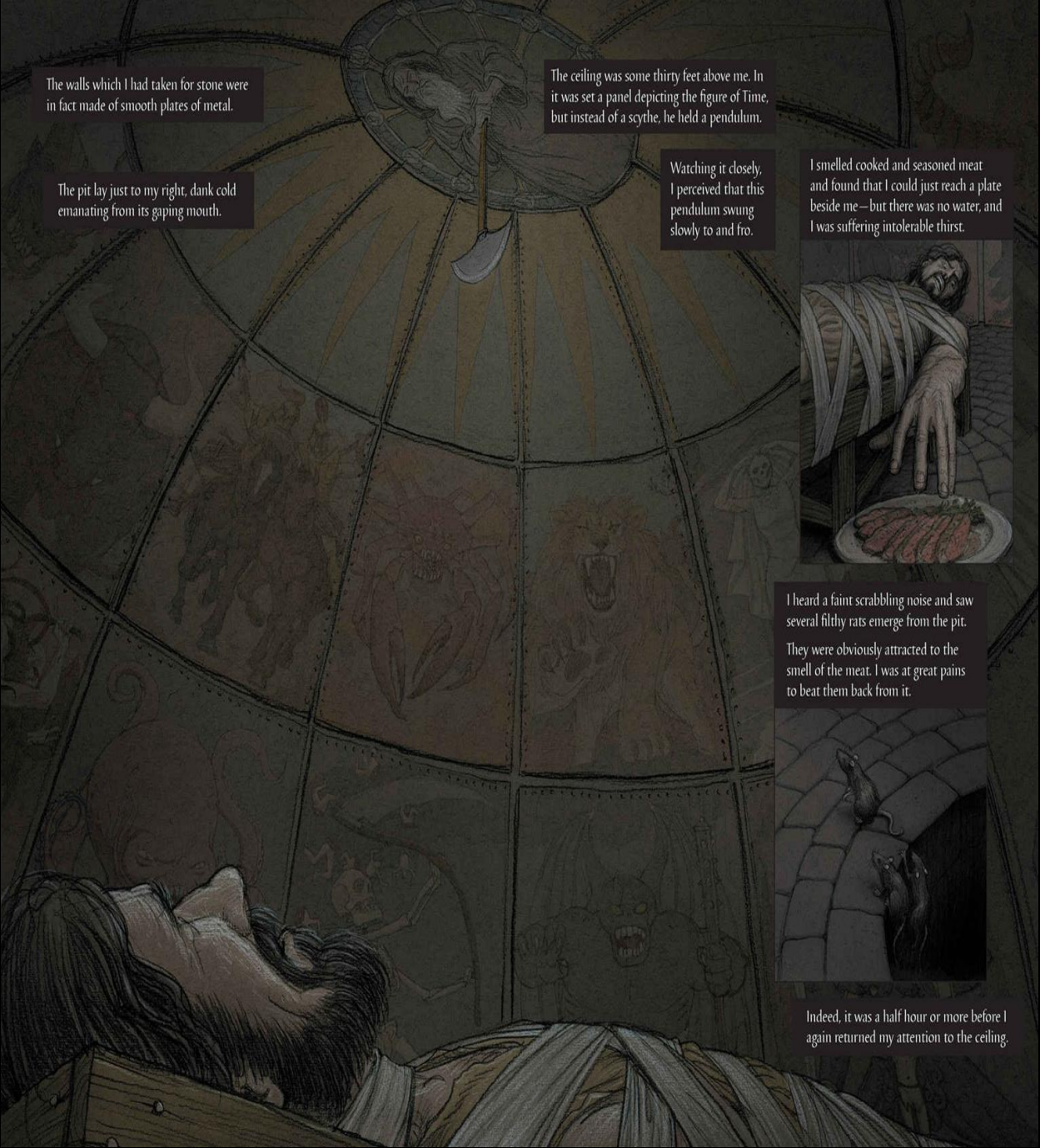








Light! It was dim, but at last I could see my surroundings.



The walls which I had taken for stone were in fact made of smooth plates of metal.

The pit lay just to my right, dank cold emanating from its gaping mouth.

The ceiling was some thirty feet above me. In it was set a panel depicting the figure of Time, but instead of a scythe, he held a pendulum.

Watching it closely, I perceived that this pendulum swung slowly to and fro.

I smelled cooked and seasoned meat and found that I could just reach a plate beside me—but there was no water, and I was suffering intolerable thirst.



I heard a faint scrabbling noise and saw several filthy rats emerge from the pit.

They were obviously attracted to the smell of the meat. I was at great pains to beat them back from it.



Indeed, it was a half hour or more before I again returned my attention to the ceiling.

The sweep of the pendulum had increased by nearly a yard, and its velocity was much greater. But what mainly disturbed me was the idea that it had perceptibly **descended**.



Also, I now clearly perceived that it ended in a crescent of glittering steel, its bottom edge evidently as sharp as a razor. The whole heavy arm **hissed** audibly as it swung through the air. I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me.



Having by chance escaped plunging into the pit, now a different and a milder destruction awaited me. Milder! I half smiled in my agony as I thought of such an application of that term.



What use
to tell of
the long,
long hours
of horror
more than
mortal,
during
which I
counted
the rushing
oscillations
of the steel!

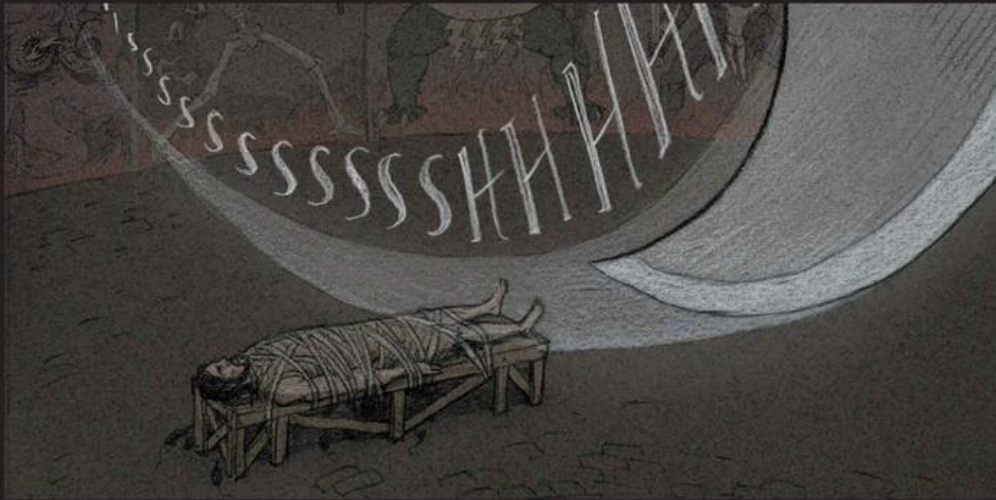


Inch by
inch—with
a descent
appreciable
only at
intervals
that seemed
ages—down
and still down
it came!

Days passed—it might have been that many days passed—ere it swept so closely over me as to fan me with its acrid breath. The odour of the sharp steel forced itself into my nostrils. I prayed—I wearied heaven with my prayers for its more speedy descent.



Still its hissing vigor increased with each lengthening sweep of the steel.



I saw that the crescent was positioned to cross the region of my heart. It would fray the cloth of my robe; it would return and repeat its operations—again—and again.

For a time I grew frantically mad and struggled to force my breast upward against the deadly scimitar.



Then I fell suddenly calm and lay smiling at the glittering death as a child at some rare bauble.

There was another interval of utter insensibility. It was brief, for upon waking, there had been no perceptible descent in the pendulum.



Or were there watchers who had paused its descent while I swooned?

Notwithstanding the terrifying speed of its swing, its descent was so slow that there would be some minutes in which it would cut only my robe, without reaching my flesh.



I forced myself to ponder upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment—upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth produces on the nerves.



Down—steadily down it crept, approaching my heart with the stealthy pace of a tiger!

All the while it swung more fiercely to the right—to the left—with the shriek of a damned spirit!



A new thought struck me. The strap which tied me down was of a single piece. One stroke of the razor edge would free me!

But could my executioners truly have missed this fact? I studied the precise path of the blade, which was now only a few inches above me.



The strap enveloped my limbs and body tight in all directions save in the path of the destroying crescent. I was doomed.

Or was I . . . ? I had been mechanically waving the rats away from my food, yet they had devoured nearly all, and bitten my fingers as well. Now I wiped the oils and juices from the meat, as well as the blood from the bites, upon the strap that bound me.

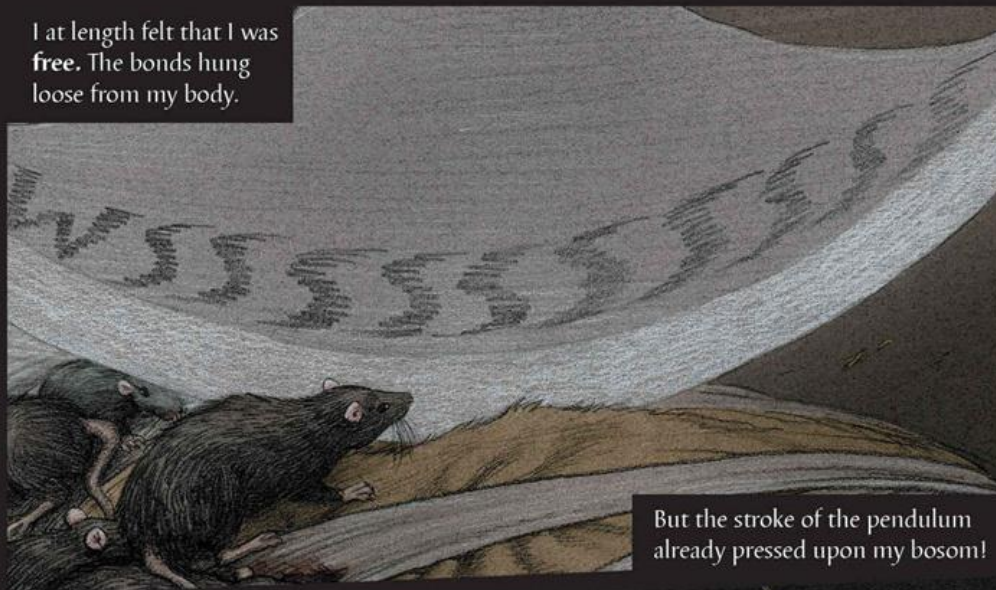


I had not counted in vain upon their voracity. As soon as I fell still, they swarmed upon me in a hideous multitude. The pendulum disturbed them not at all. Avoiding its strokes, they set hungrily upon the strap.



They pressed upon me in ever-accumulating heaps. They writhed upon my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure. Yet I perceived a loosening of the strap. I knew that in at least one place it must be already severed. With a more than human resolution I lay still.

I at length felt that I was
free. The bonds hung
loose from my body.

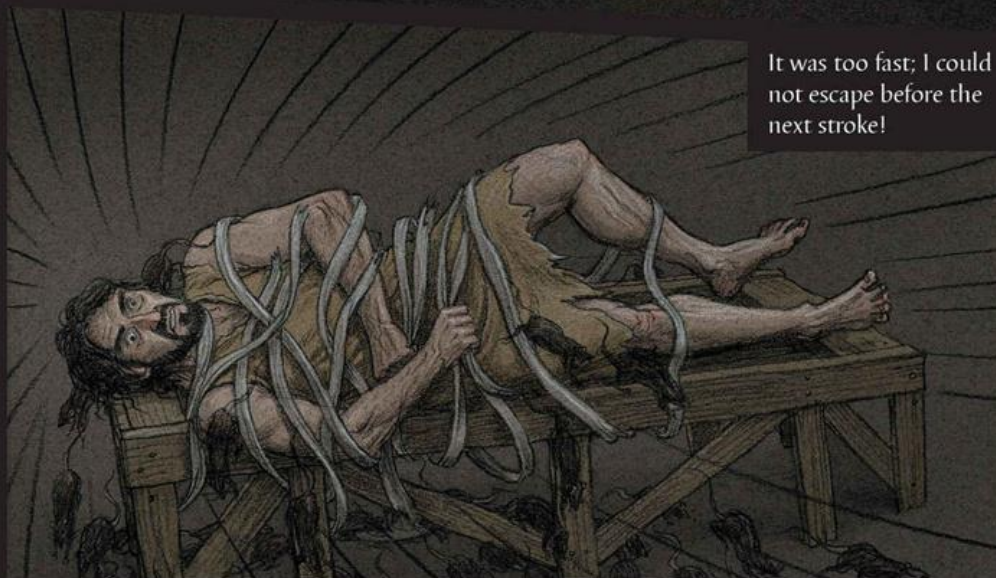


But the stroke of the pendulum
already pressed upon my bosom!

I tore at the
loosened straps.

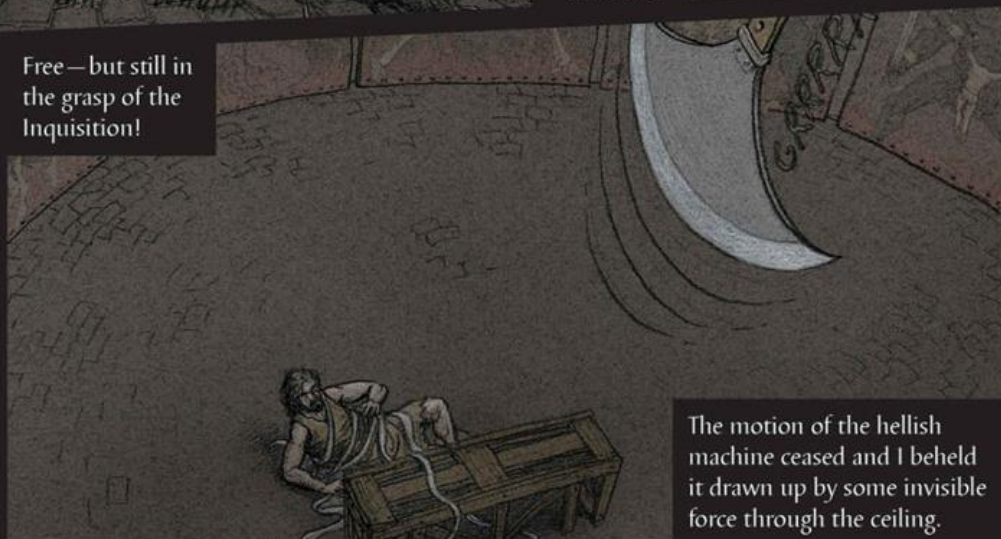


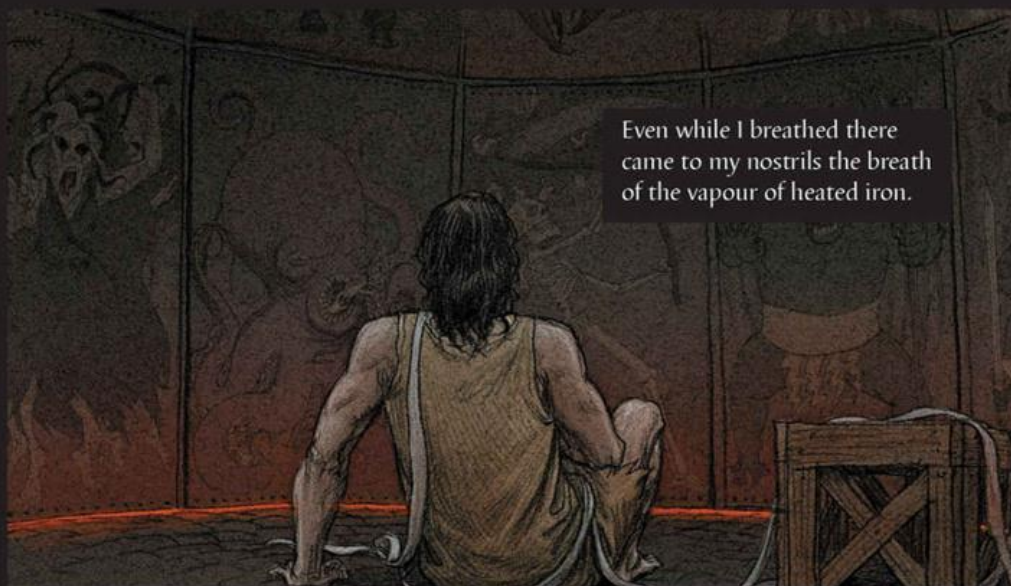
It was too fast; I could
not escape before the
next stroke!





Free — but still in
the grasp of the
Inquisition!





Even while I breathed there came to my nostrils the breath of the vapour of heated iron.

A suffocating odour pervaded my prison.

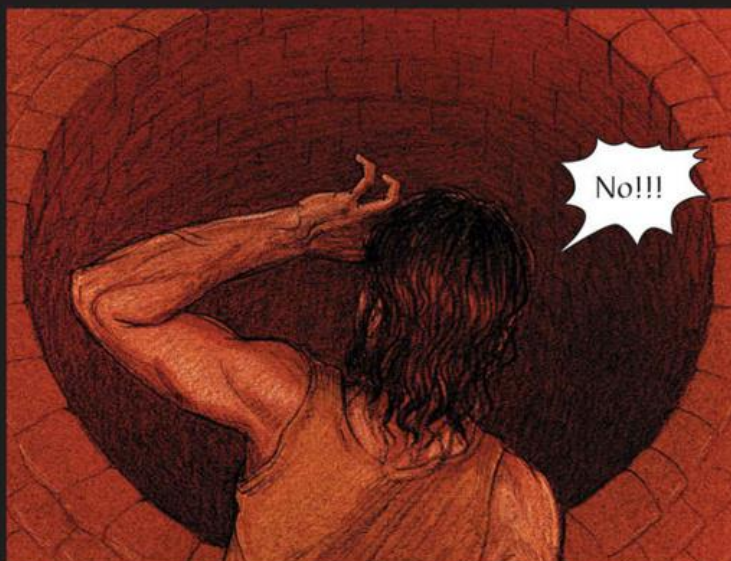


The air grew warm, hot, stifling!

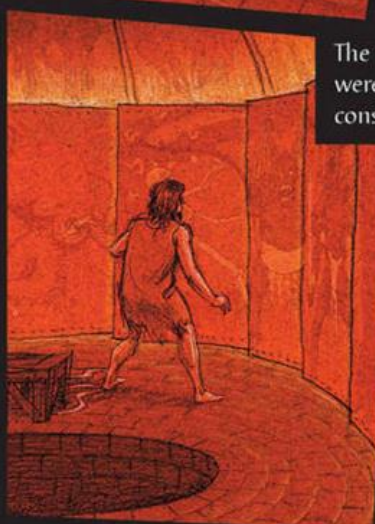
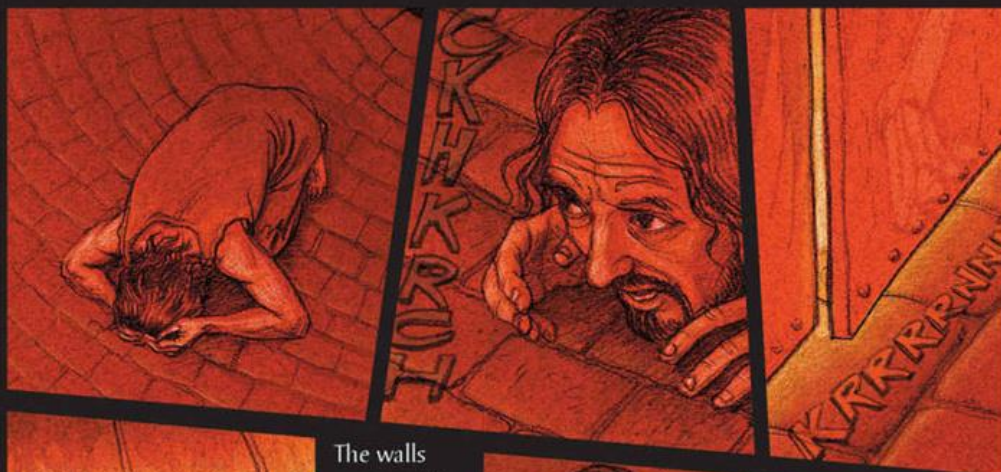
I panted; I gasped for breath.

I thought of the coolness of the well. I stepped to the brink and looked into its depths.

The dull glare now illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. Oh, horror! Oh, any horror but this! With a shriek I threw myself back.



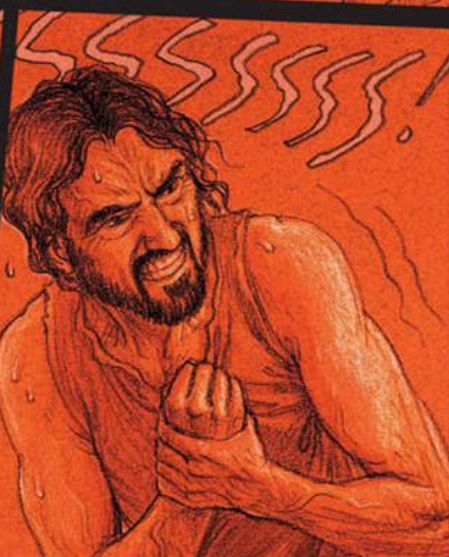
No!!!



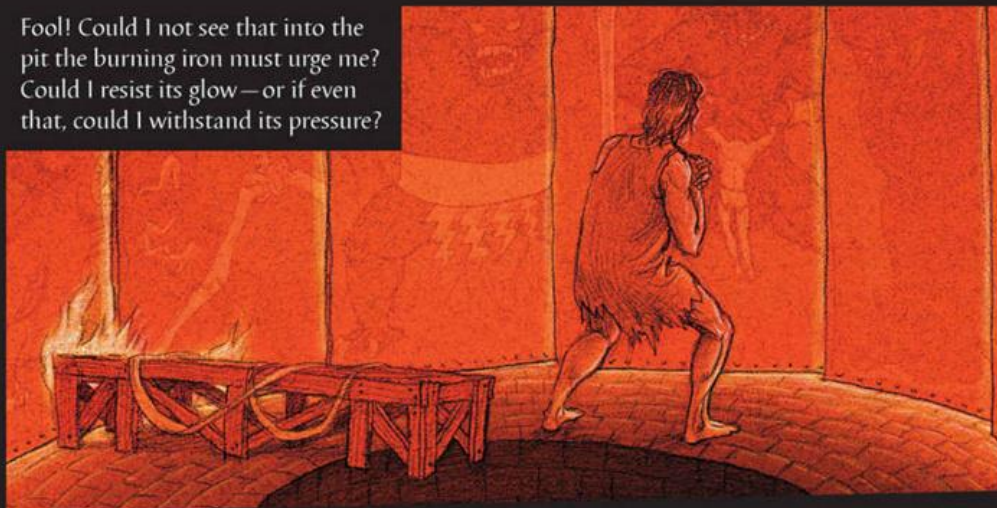
The walls
were moving,
constricting!



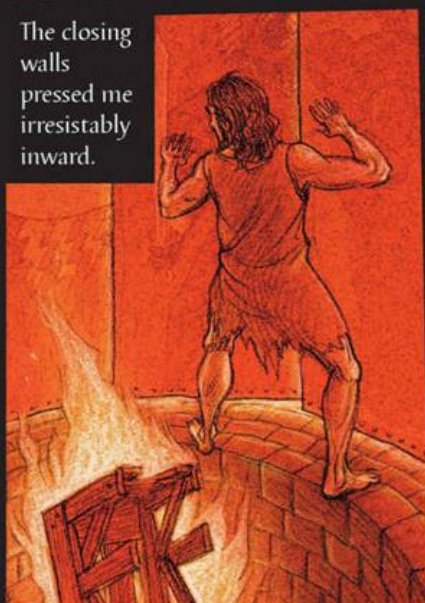
Any death was
better than
that of the pit.



Fool! Could I not see that into the
pit the burning iron must urge me?
Could I resist its glow — or if even
that, could I withstand its pressure?



The closing
walls
pressed me
irresistably
inward.



For my seared and writhing body there
was no longer an inch of foothold on
the firm floor of the prison.

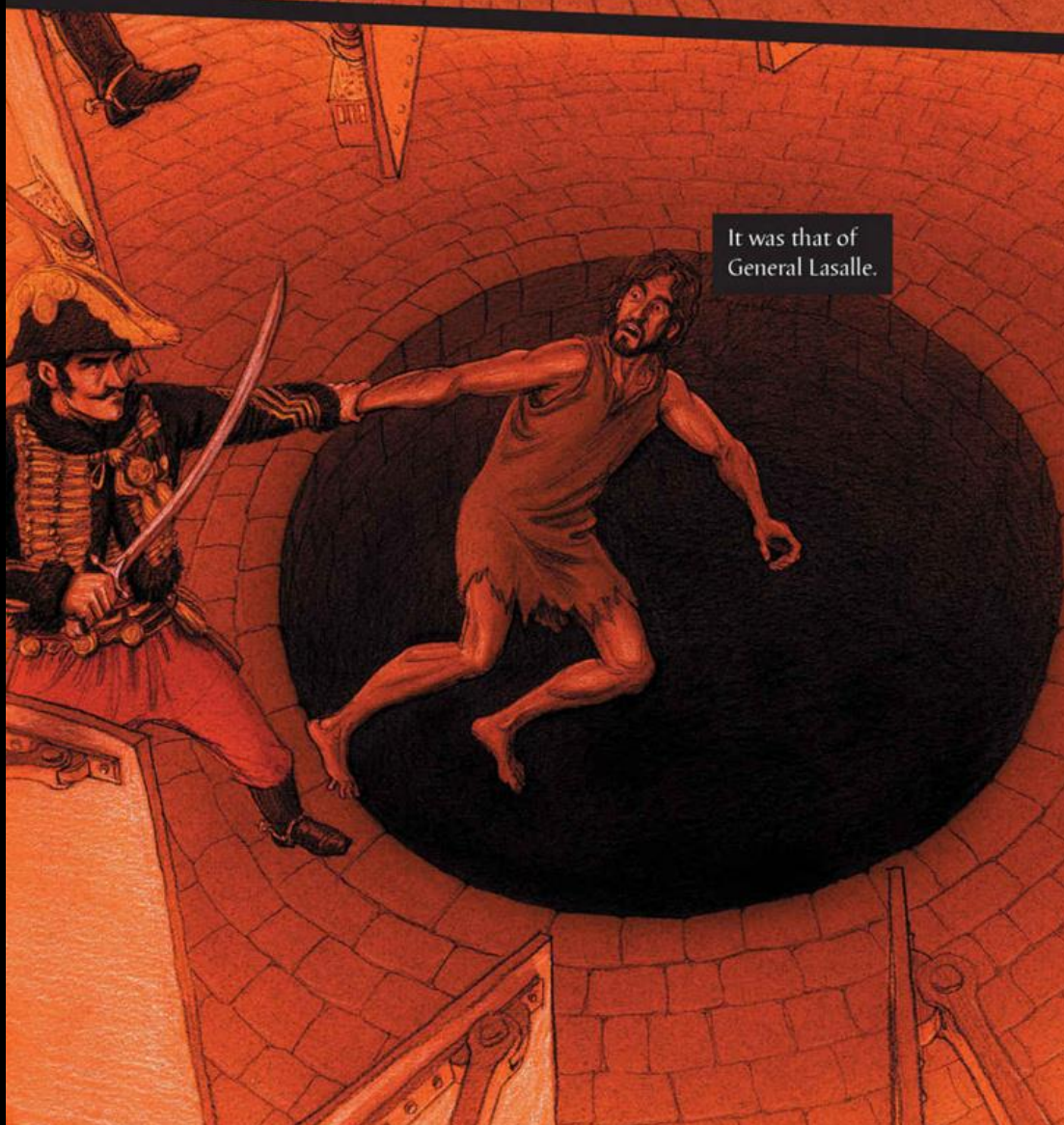


I tottered upon
the brink — I
averted my eyes —



With a harsh
grating, the iron
walls swung back!

An outstretched arm
caught my own, just
as I fell, fainting, into
the abyss.



It was that of
General Lasalle.

