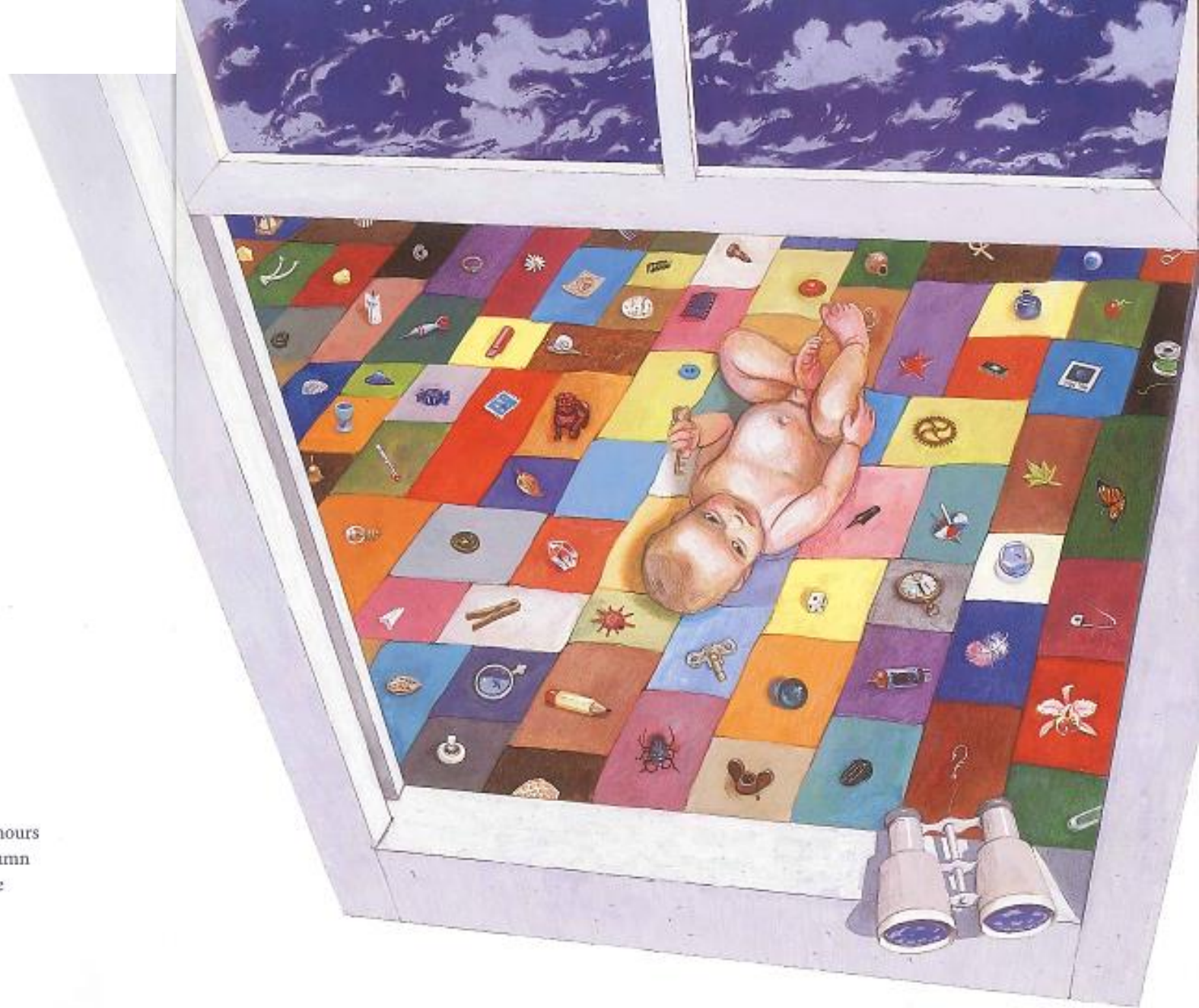




Tristan was curious from birth.

This is not to say that he was different from other babies; in fact he was rather ordinary. But from the moment he opened his eyes, he seemed to be examining the world.

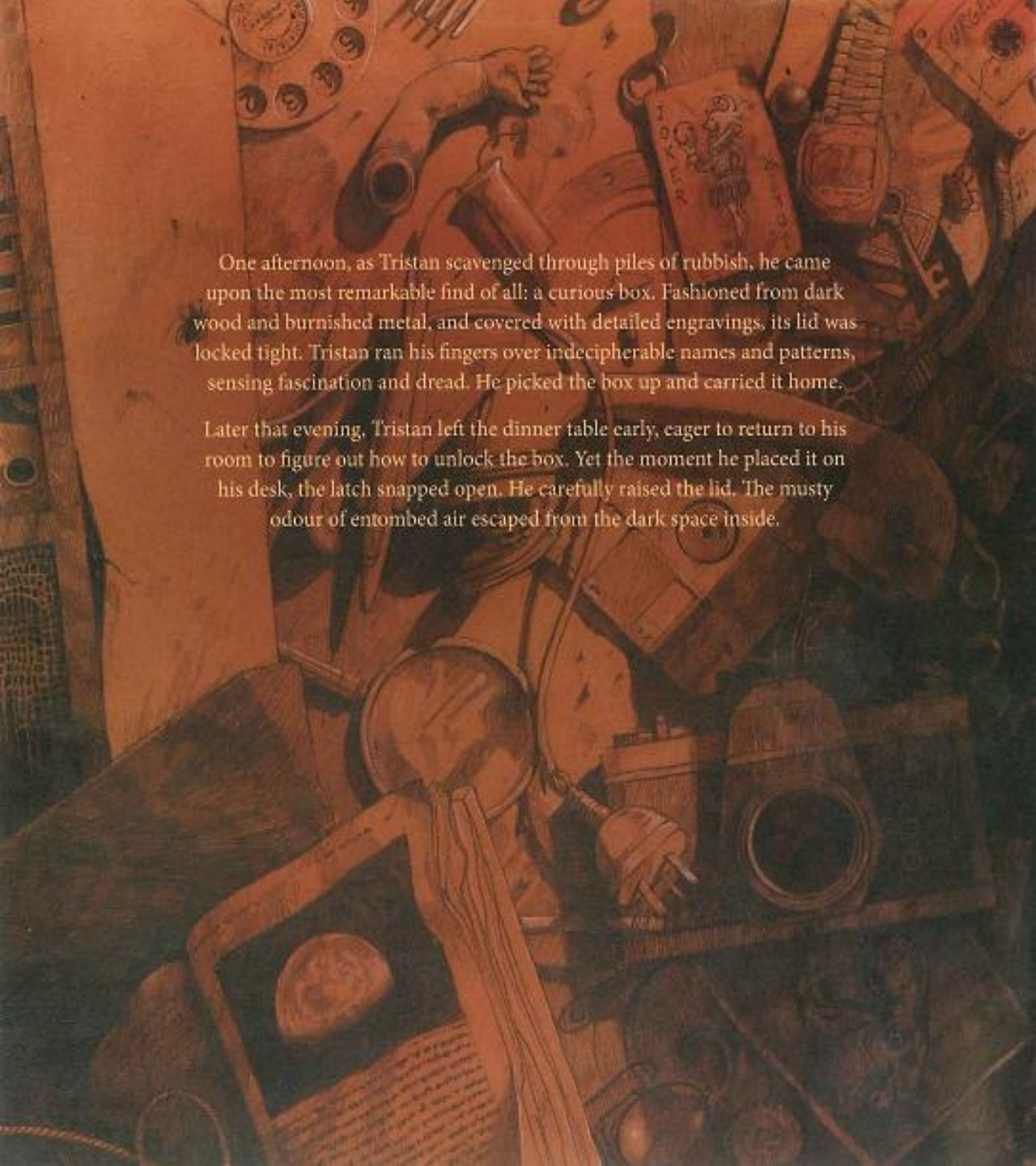
As he grew older, Tristan would wander from his parents' house, to be found – hours later, miles away, and always alone – staring up at a cloudless sky, gathering autumn leaves in a city park, or crouched by the seashore, peering at some long-dead life form washed up there.



One place attracted Tristan more than any other. The city dump stretched over acres of drifting sand, a vast crescent littered with the detritus of a careless people. But to Tristan, the dump was nothing short of a museum.

Every afternoon he searched for interesting objects to take back to his room until curiosity led him to examine them again, as if they might reveal another world.

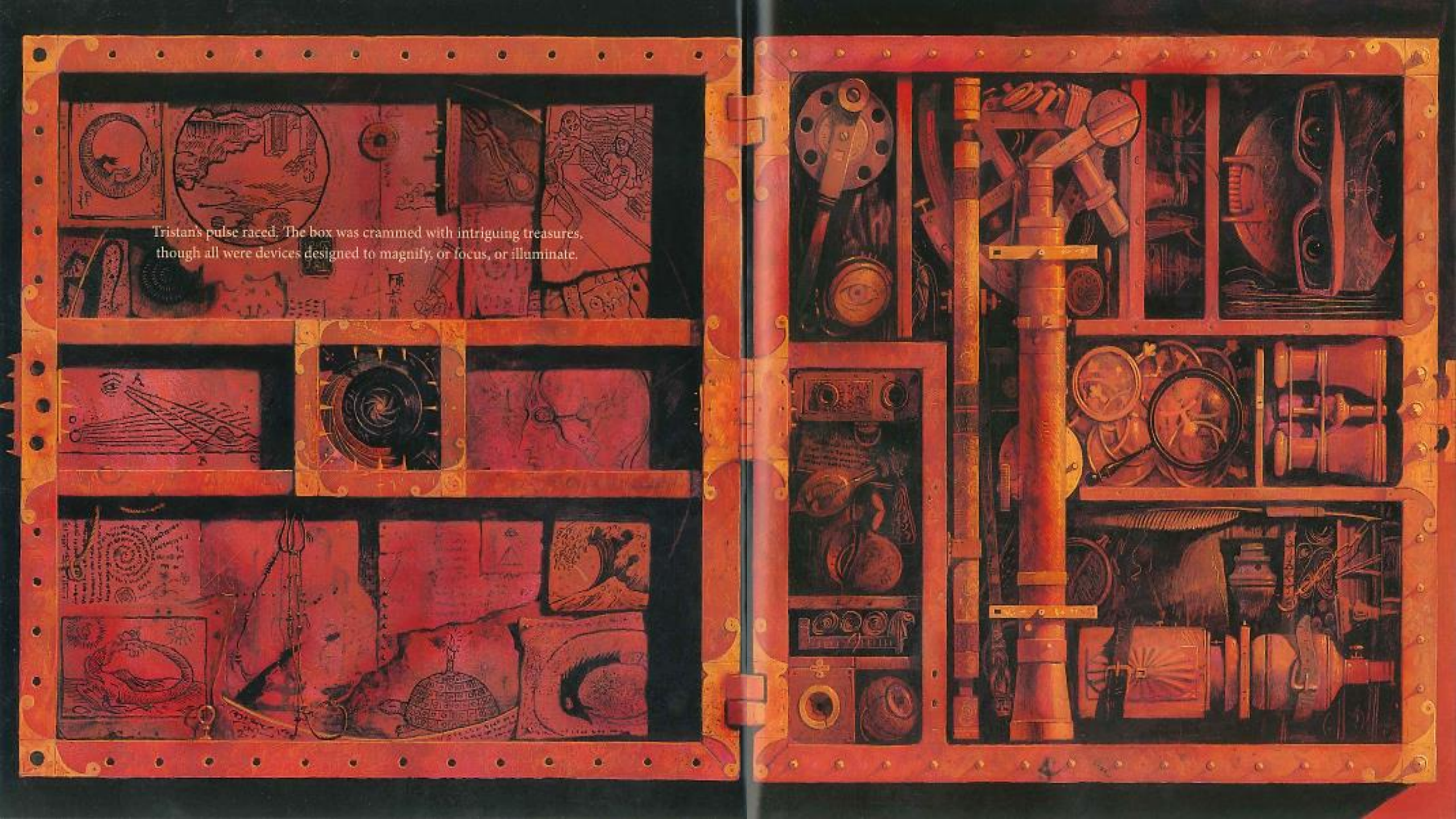




One afternoon, as Tristan scavenged through piles of rubbish, he came upon the most remarkable find of all: a curious box. Fashioned from dark wood and burnished metal, and covered with detailed engravings, its lid was locked tight. Tristan ran his fingers over indecipherable names and patterns, sensing fascination and dread. He picked the box up and carried it home.

Later that evening, Tristan left the dinner table early, eager to return to his room to figure out how to unlock the box. Yet the moment he placed it on his desk, the latch snapped open. He carefully raised the lid. The musty odour of entombed air escaped from the dark space inside.



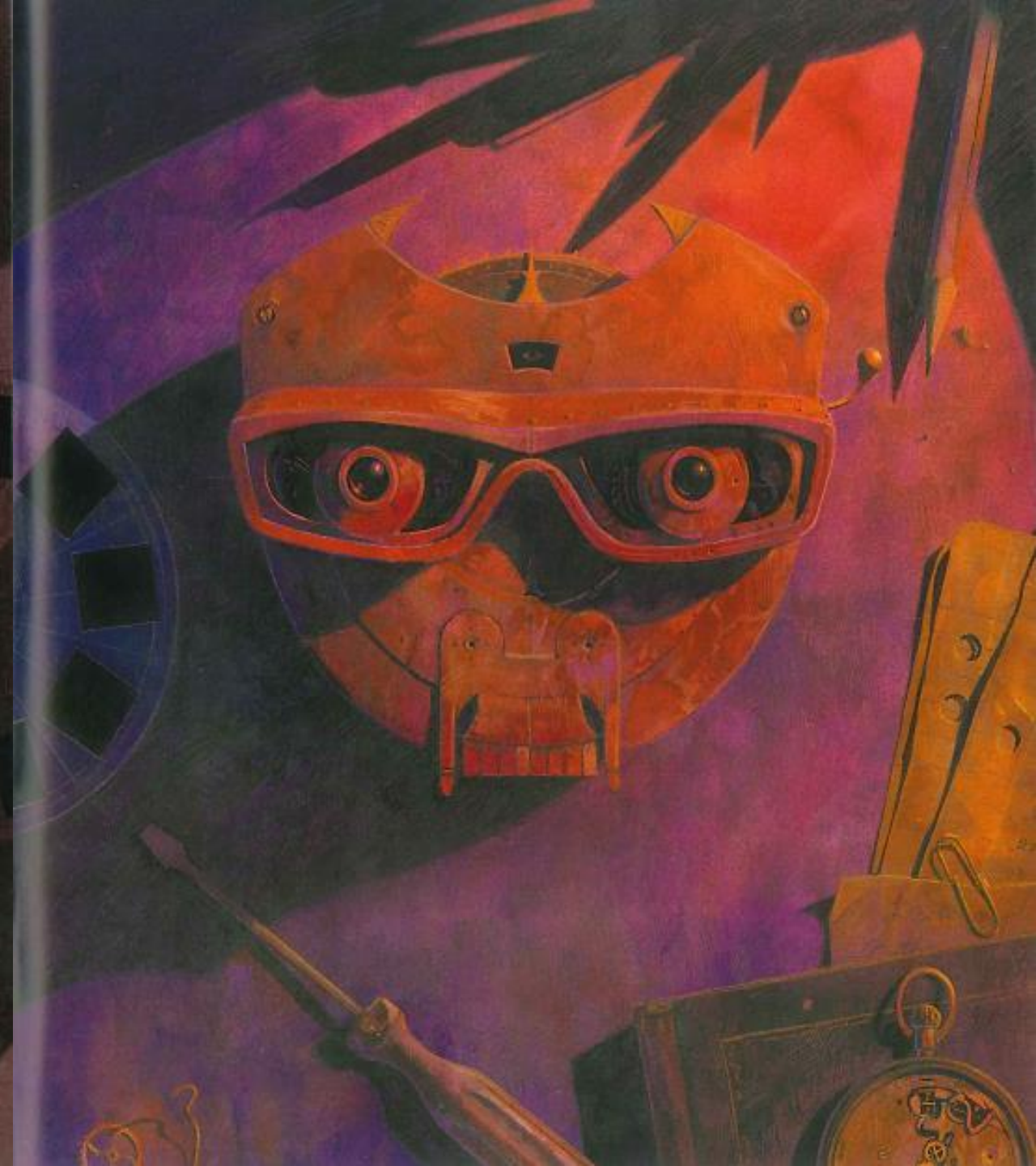


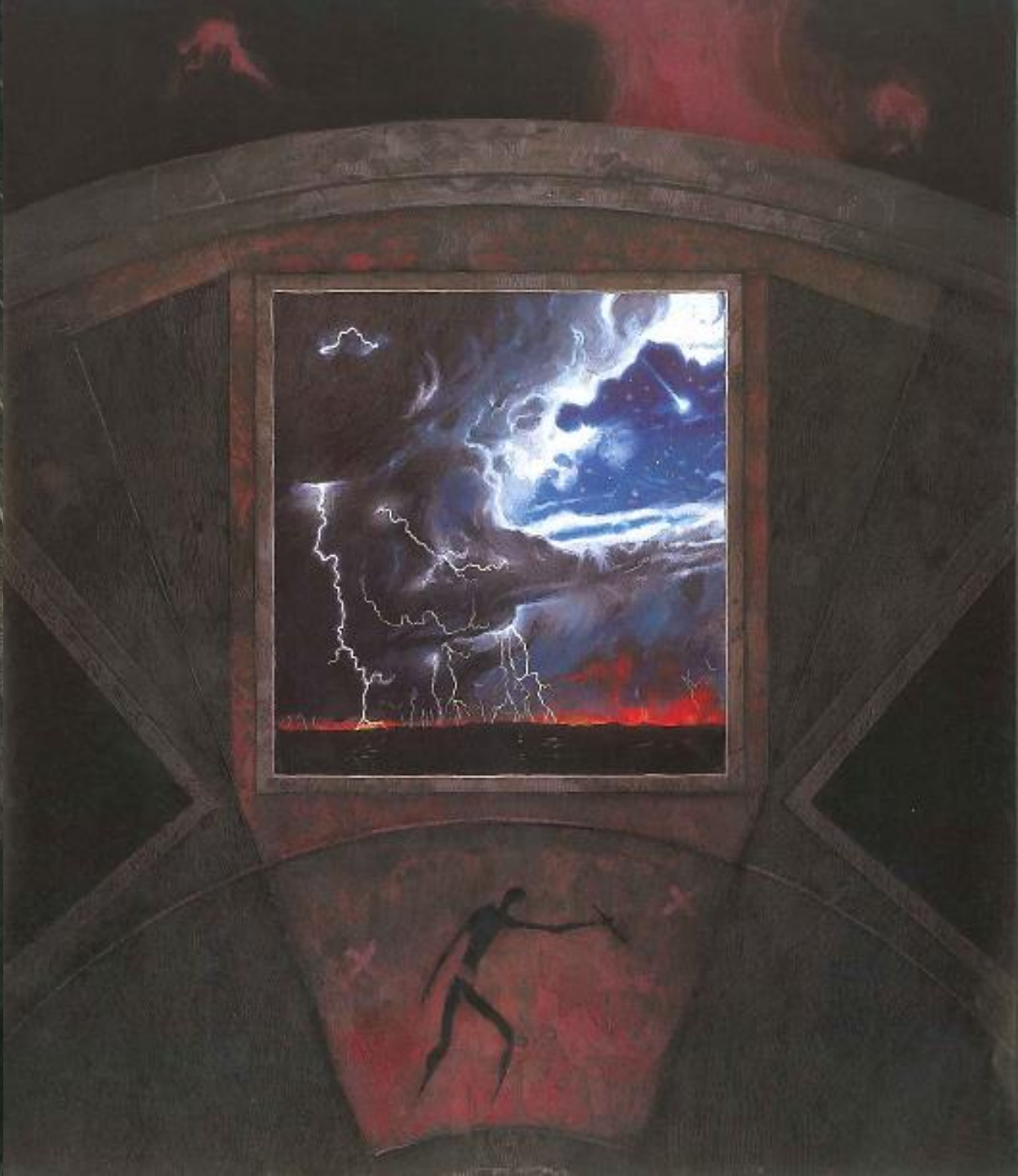
Tristan's pulse raced. The box was crammed with intriguing treasures, though all were devices designed to magnify, or focus, or illuminate.

What attracted Tristan most was an object that appeared to be an old toy, a simple machine that a child might use to view pictures. He picked it up and held it to his eyes. It fitted perfectly, as if custom-made, yet through the machine's tiny lenses, he could see nothing.

Searching the deeper recesses of the box, Tristan found three disks of thin metal, each framing a circle of black glass windows – each of them empty. He inserted the first disk into the machine, and held it to his eyes. Still nothing.

He pressed a lever at the side.
From somewhere deep within a light began to burn.
A delicate machinery clattered and chimed.
The disk began to turn...











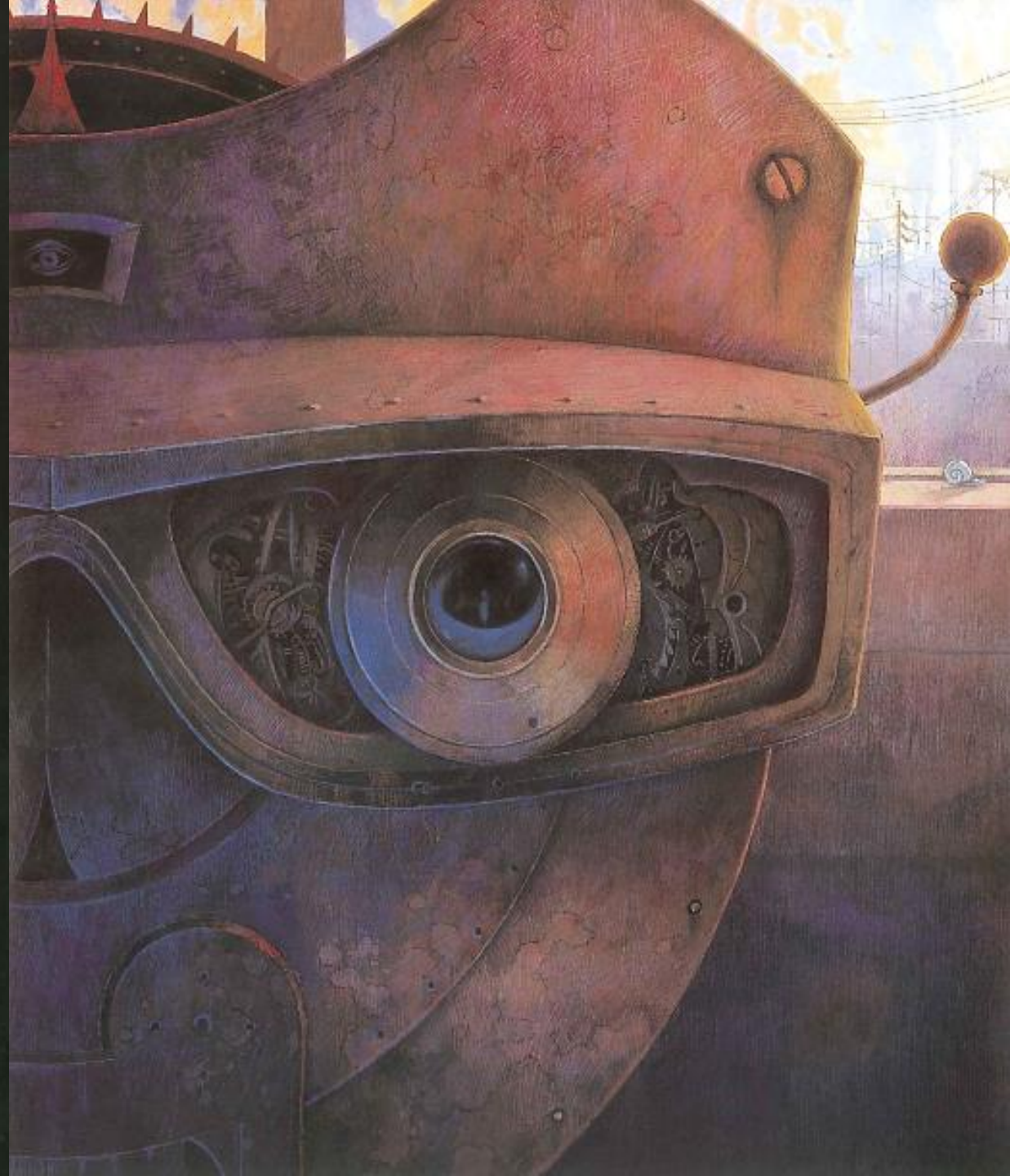
These sights left Tristan terribly afraid. After removing the third and final disk, he put the machine away. In bed, he descended into a restless sleep, all the while unable to dismiss the feeling of another presence in the room.

The next morning, Tristan could not stop glancing toward the machine, even as he left to go downstairs. It sat upright on his desk as if staring back at him – surely just as he had left it the night before?

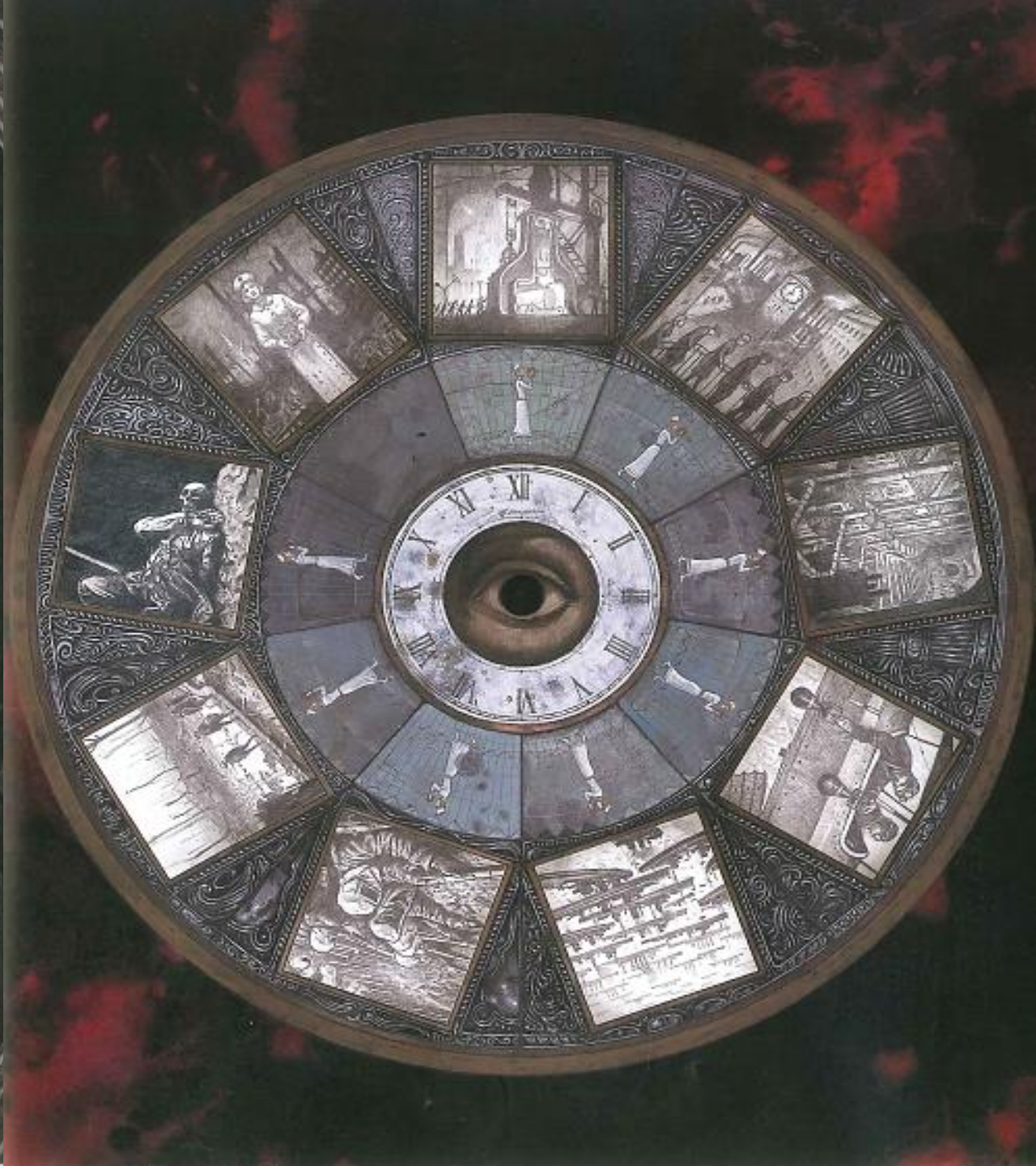


At school he could not concentrate. He stared all day at the clock, observing its slow, ticking circles, its relentless counting. He could only think about being back in his room, looking into that curious world of images.

That evening, he lifted the cold eyes of the machine to his own, and inserted the first disk again. He pressed the lever. The mechanism whirred and clicked. The light began to burn – and Tristan gasped. The images had changed ...











In the morning, when Tristan had not come to breakfast,
his mother called him. There was no answer.

When she opened the bedroom door the musty odour of entombed air spilled into
the hall. Tristan's bed was empty, the room unusually neat and tidy.
As if he had never been there ... As if he had never existed ...
As if things had always been this way.



The only thing that seemed out of place was a box of dark wood
and burnished metal on his desk, its lid locked.

Curious, she thought.

And forgetting why she had come to the room,
she returned to her breakfast.



