

THE PHOENIX IMAGO

By **Sharkchild**

I had heard the sound of a key many times—the way it clicked when it slid into place; the way it, whether softly or quickly, depending on the hand which guided it, crashed into the perfection of angle and craftsmanship of its make. It was the sound of power; it denoted the ability of authority and ownership over property. And it was also the sound of revelation. There was no other sound better than the prophetic vision and uncanny capability of success a method, even in madness, to the inner kingdoms of divine thought and realization.

The key had never been linked to the construct of the lock. The key, in fact, and if of the right kind, created the locks and the boundaries thereafter. Treasures were to be made, not unlocked, and rare keys held the responsibility to make it so. It was this type of key that I longed to behold: the key that had a purpose of unlocking the universe. Only one place had this key ever been found, and that was in the mind—where it was formed by aspiration, devotion, and imagination, a collection of heterogeneous parts interlocking to summate a revolutionary relationship.

I had never been satisfied with the present and primitive delusions of advancement—scientific, technological, medical, explorative. I wanted the deluge of impeccability: a change so tremendous that it would devastate all normality of life. There were certain benefits to the ephemeral pleasures of living, but my view of the eternal had a pungent taste and so I could bear no speculation of lifestyle.

My youth was wasted on education—education that taught me how only to conform and disappear into a society, becoming nothing more than a successful government-funding machine. For years I thought I had treaded the right path. I thought I had sank my roots into a foundation of lifelong nutrients and meaning, but really I had soaked myself and weighed myself down with poison and empty dreams. I was midway through life when I realized my horrible mistake, and I quit my job—I quit being a pawn of illusionary prestige.

I retreated to the embodiment of my apartment, rarely leaving other than for the purchase of food. In the loneliness, I found a meaningful and pivotal position within mankind reading books of all kinds, learning of things I had never dreamed of, hoping to find that key I so fiendishly hunted for. I became the greatest mind never to be known. Jobless and short on money, I sank into the abysmal shadows of life while at the same time growing into the intellect that would launch me into the nether regions of accomplishment.

I turned to a rationale of evolution and genetic engineering, but not in such a manner that would be outside my abilities to understand and work with. There were many creatures that I found remarkable, especially how in many ways traits of theirs were superior to that of humans'. I concluded that there would be a remedy to my longings within the vestiges of anatomy.

My experiments began and ended with the caterpillar, and the fascinating and phenomenal transformation of one form to another was only the beginning of my reasons. The chamber of the cocoon protected and influenced a remarkable event, a magnificent homeostasis of individual evolution, molecular and biological. Living matter was manipulated within the simple creation of a

small insect's labor. I wanted to duplicate this miracle; I wanted to inhibit and control the ability of histogenesis—the ability of undifferentiated cells to spawn into different tissue. I wanted to harness the raw and unique power of metamorphosis.

In order to create metamorphosis, I first needed to capture the process of histolysis, or, in simpler terms, cell death. Cell death occurred for insects by the excretion of digestive juices, which destroyed much of a larva's body, leaving only a few cells intact. It was from these remaining cells that an adult, or imago, of an insect would grow through the nutrients in the fluid, causing histogenesis.

Within the one bedroom that I had, I began to collect moth caterpillars. In large, sturdy jars, I placed dozens of caterpillars and watched them undergo their extraordinary changes. I took note of their habits while learning the compositions of their cocoons, their molecular makeup, and the assortment of nutrients used to form those fluids that initiated the inevitable process of transformation.

When a caterpillar would first enter its cocoon, I would extract it and dissect it, putting those fluids I found on Petri dishes to culture the results I would need. I would perform this same process throughout the caterpillar's timeline of entering its cocoon and emerging as a completely different creature. I took note of every difference in substance, in percentage, and in volume, and asked several questions of my findings. What portion of the caterpillar was left to grow into an adult? Where was the "memory" of architecture derived from, the cells, or the nutrients? How was the end result, the imago, controlled in appearance, size, and shape?

As I began to formulate my own serum of digestive material, I would separate a caterpillar from its creation before it could enter it, leaving for me the vessel of its transformation to use with my own fluid. I then took myriads of other tiny insects and put them in the cocoons in the stead of the caterpillars, allowing me to test their susceptibilities to the enzymes of my test formulas.

I had many failures and many delusions. I worked for days straight without sleep and grew monstrous with impatience as I waited for long durations before results could be known. However, eventually, a breakthrough was accomplished.

I remember staring blankly at a jar of cocoons I had filled with spiders, each cocoon containing a slightly different compound of my experimental formula, combined also with elements of the spiders' DNA. It had been one week since I had placed the spiders in their encasements and injected them with my serums. My eyes began to fade with exhaustion. Colors blended and blurred, and I almost fell asleep at the most crucial moment of my unproven existence. I held onto my wavering consciousness long enough to behold the slight movement of one of the cocoons. My awareness burst into the ferocity of fire and a headache surged through me as my body achieved a state it had no energy left for. I looked on intoxicatingly as the cocoon vibrated ever so lightly, growing slowly in intensity. Without blinking, I looked upon it ever more intently, waiting for the creation within to emerge anew, and it did.

What came forth was not spider, nor anything the world had ever known. I lurched back at the sight of it and cringed instantaneously. A dark red apparition of hate sprung forth with fierce wings and raging mandibles. It flapped wildly about the jar, sputtering blood from its newly spread wings while

its legs writhed with life and strength.

Whether of my own authority or some unknown entity's lurking behind my mind, I arrived at a product and method of my labor. Part of me wished to take all of the credit, but I knew that I was aided and guided through the complexity of equations by a strange overwhelming not of my own. What should have been beyond any grasp of limited knowledge was compounded into the simplicity of a nursery rhyme lulling me to sleep. I felt, I grasped, I held the infant of new generations to come and brought it into the light from a darkness thought not to exist.

Fastidiously, I prepared my apartment for the evolutionary manifold of enlightenment and transfixion. Throughout the months of testing my serums, I was also preparing a different experiment, an experiment at which I would only have one attempt. It was this experiment that held the key to the universe.

I sat at my kitchen table the evening of this ultimate foregoing. The table contained an amount of food of which I had never prepared before. There were two platters, one full of steak and the other full of garlic bread. I sat at that table for an hour, eating every last bite. My body filled with enormous heat as it attempted to digest all that it had been stuffed with. My skin became damp. I checked my thermostat, made sure the temperature would remain warm, and entered the bedroom. It was time, my time.

Silk made up the composition of a cocoon, but I had constructed my own cocoon, and of a much larger scale. It stood inside my closet, attached in the corner upon three walls. After my feast, I stepped inside of it and sealed it shut. It fit tightly against my flesh. I slid my arm up along my body until my hand reached the top of my head and released the small seal that was affixed above me. Immediately, serum modified accordingly, seeped into the cocoon with me, trickling tightly between my skin and the surface surrounding me.

The sound of the key in my head at that moment was different—it was much more noticeable and thick with its resounding fit; success was but days away. My skin began to burn and boil away from me, but I held my tongue. My legs gave from beneath me, but the fit of the cocoon held me up. I felt like screaming, but I did not give in. The pain scorched throughout and within me unbearably until I lost consciousness and disappeared within the confines of my transmogrifying imprisonment.

Several days later, I rose from those ashes of my fragmented self. I broke free from the chambers of worldly restraints. I entered my own universe. As a demon, I altered the very veins of life and became the mutant of distant truths. With a new mouth, I smiled.