

## **Excerpt from Part IV of *Hephaestus***

*Stanovich flicks the light off and slips outside, carefully shutting the door behind him. He goes to his room and lies down on his bed. Twenty minutes pass. A pounding on the door.*

VOICE OUTSIDE DOOR (*urgently*) Is there a doctor in the house?

STANOVICH (*perturbed*) Let me be. I'm not a doctor.

VOICE Do you have any medical skills? First Aid? CPR? AAA?

STANOVICH Some. But they've expired.

VOICE (*screaming*) Nevermind! Come immediately to the kitchen. The lady is in labor!  
(*voice recedes*) Hurry!

*Confused, Stanovich rushes to the kitchen. Madame is lying supine on the floor, bloated belly bulging from her emaciated frame, dress hitched up to her pantyline, pallid varicose legs exposed, her squalid eyes staring helplessly upwards. She is surrounded by cats of all sizes. A crouching blinking orange-eyed black cat offers her left hand a supportive paw while a bowtied cat with vascillating jewel-eyes does the same for her right. Much mewing.*

STANOVICH (*hastens to Madame's side, gingerly avoiding tails*) Madame! What's happened? Why are you down?

MADAME (*breathing heavily, grey hairs pasted to her glistening forehead by a film of sweat*) I'm having a baby.

STANOVICH (*joyous*) A baby! (*mortified*) A baby! (*aroused*) Oh baby! (*his ear on her bulbous belly*) Let me hear it.

MADAME (*blows a fart, guffawing*) Hear that?

STANOVICH (*quickly lifts his face off her belly*) But I tucked you into bed... How did you end up on your back in the kitchen in childbirth?

MADAME I was sleeping and I had a dream. (*her voice echoes majestically, thronging over feline crowds*) And in this dream a lion with a mane of fire spoke to me and told me where my incense was. (*dropping to a whisper*) You see, somebody stole my incense --

STANOVICH (interject) no

MADAME --oh yes they're always stealing from me. I think it was one of these cats, always sneaking behind my back, snatching my belongings. You know I've never stolen from anybody, not even a pin. (*motions Stanovich closer, her voice barely audible*) Lately they're even conspiring to murder me. I'm keeping an eye on them. (*her voice grows louder again*) And so I woke up from my dream, went to the drawer the burning lion pointed me to, and there it was, sitting innocently up in the highest drawer, next to all the baby photo albums. You see, the lion was St. Fanourios. He often comes to me in my dreams to help me find things lost or stolen from me. And when he so honors me, as a gift in return, I bake him a cake made of seven ingredients. That's how I ended up in the kitchen.

STANOVICH It all makes perfect sense now. And the labor pains?

MADAME Parthenogenesis. (*her face suddenly distorts in a state of dementia*) It's pushing, it's pushing!

CATS (*mewing, scratching, tearing, chasing tails, sniffing catnip*) Somebody somewhere somehow do something!

STANOVICH (*whistling*) Fiiouwiiit!

*A three-legged golden-wheeled table with golden sun disks and an engraving of the island of Cyprus comes rolling in. Madame is lifted onto the table and Maria the cat administers four pills to Madame: Mellaril, Accupril, Pepcid and Erythromycin. Stanovich runs to his room, returning with a stack of photos to further mollify Madame's pain. He shows her a photo of Larry mooning the camera on the Cliffs of Moher.*

MADAME Sodomite! (*Turns to a photo of himself and his sister, age five and three, together in an outdoor portapool*) Sibling incest!

*(Stanovich puts the photographs away. Madame is screaming, face clenched)* Take me to my living room! *(she is rolled to the living room)* Take me to my bedroom! *(she is rolled to the bedroom)* Take me to my hallway! *(she is rolled to the hallway)* Take me to my kitchen! *(she is rolled back to the kitchen)* Take me to... Ahhh, it's coming!

BLINKING-EYED CAT Go on doctor, let's see you deliver!

STANOVICH *(rises to the occasion, drops to his knees, his head between her outspread legs)* Don't see much activity here...

MADAME *(crying out)* What use are all those eyes?

BLINKING-EYED CAT Perhaps you should remove the panties.

STANOVICH *(contemplates suggestion)* Yes, perhaps that would be a good idea. *(removes panties)* Ah yes, very interesting. *(briefly looks up at Madame, attempting to bolster her sense of well-being)* Impressive for 91.

MADAME *(flattered, squirming, waxen face clenched in agony)* Hurry... hurry...

STANOVICH *(probes delicately)* There's not enough light in here. Flashlight anyone? Matches? *(A matchbook is handed to him. He strikes a match with no results. He looks closely at them.)* Idiot, these are all used! *(Another matchbook is handed. Stanovich lights it on the first try, holding up the flame near the mouth of her urethra.)*

MADAME Ow, ow! Not too close.

STANOVICH You're just going to have to bear with me Madame. Please, don't act like a child. Act your age.

MADAME *(southbearded singed, she farts, her belly deflating like an untied balloon)* KAA BOOOOOOOOMM! *(Stanovich's head is momentarily engulfed in a fireball)*

STANOVICH *(smoke curling up from his blackcharred Chihuahua head)* Madame, I don't think that was called for at a time like—

MADAME (*reaches out, grabbing his remaining tuft of hair and pulls malevolently on it, her lips curled back and teeth bared savagely*) Now deliver! (*she releases and turns to the blinking-eyed cat, her clenched face suddenly relaxing into a sadistic chuckle*)

STANOVICH (*rolls his sleeves up*) All right, here goes. (*thrusts his arm sloppily inside her*)

CATS (*in unison*) Well, what's in there, what's in there?

STANOVICH (*almost in up to his elbow*) Still nothing and no one.

MADAME (*moaning*) Then go deeper!

CATS (*in unison, gasping*) YES, DEEPER!

STANOVICH (*thrusts upwards with all his might, further into her uterine depths*) I still can't... can't seem to feel anything... (*pulls out his arm, sheathed to the triceps in a mantle of embryonic slimesludge*) How does one go further now?

DAYGLO CAT With a Cesarean

CATS (*clamoring*) A CESAREAN!

MADAME (*elated*) Cut me open! Cut me open!

CATS (*screaming*) CUT HER UP!

STANOVICH But with what? No surgical tools here.

*A serrated spoon is tossed to him.*

CATS With a spoon! With a spoon!

MADAME (*in throes of delighted anguish*) Start scooping!

*Stanovich begins gouging out Madame's abdomen, hewing out hoary spoonsized hunks of uterus and flinging them across the kitchen floor. In ritual, the cats purr, devour, and dance orgiastically around the histological sacrifice.*

STANOVICH I'm at the womb!

CATS (*clutching one another ecstatically*) He's at the womb!

STANOVICH (*exhausted*) But I can't get through. My arms have grown tired.

CATS Then EAT your way through. Go thou EAT!

STANOVICH But I can't aff--

CATS Then we'll FEED YOU! (*a cloth napkin is tucked into Stanovich's collar*)

MARIA THE CAT (*lifts the first spoonful to his mouth*) Just a taste. Now be a good boy, Stanovich. Open wide.

*Enervated, Stanovich barely moves his jaw. A spoonload is released into his mouth, fetal discharge oozing down his chin. Mouthload after mouthload is dropped in.*

MADAME (*lifting her head with concern*) Now make sure you eat all of it, Stanovich. Remember, if you don't eat all your food then the devil will come and befriend you. Every little bit of it (*drops her head back down*).

MARIA THE CAT There's too much amniotic fluid here.

*She takes a straw and plunges it into what remains of Madame's belly. Any leftover maverick gases sputter out in a fetid jet. She places the straw in Stanovich's mouth while gently stroking his baldscorched head.*

Now drink up sweetie.

CATS Yes, quaff quaff!

*Stanovich suckles at the straw. The doorbell rings. A cat answers it and returns with a portrait artist.*

MADAME (*looks up, pleased*) Marvelous of you to make it, sir, especially on such short notice. Perfect timing. Please make yourself comfortable.

PORTRAIT ARTIST (*looks around, impressed*) Fabulous. And what would you like me to paint, Madame?

MADAME This scene would be just fine.

PORTRAIT ARTIST Gorgeous. If you all can just hold that pose for two hours.

STANOVICH (*sputtering up wads of cervix*) Two hours!

PORTRAIT ARTIST Patience, Stanovich, patience. Just relax. Try to be natural.

*In pose, Stanovich forces a pathetic smile, a glistening strand hanging viscously between his mouth and the spoon. The portrait artist sets his easel up in the far corner of the kitchen and completes the portrait in under two hours. He displays the final product.*

MADAME (*clutches her organtorn bosom*) Oh it's grand! We will frame it and put it over the fireplace. It's a stately work! When did you first begin your craft?

PORTRAIT ARTIST As a young man.

MADAME Keep it up. I see you have much ahead of you.

PORTRAIT ARTIST Thank you ma'am. Goodbye now (bows, exunt)

MADAME (*turns back to Stanovich and Maria*) Okay, let's try wrap this up, it's getting late. By the way, I want my child born by Leboyer method.

*A vat of warm water is brought out.*

STANOVICH Aha! I see something. (*Yanks the napkin from his neck and reaches his hand inside the womb. He pulls out a chalky speckled object.*) Congratulations. It's an egg.

*General applause, three cheers, possible gifts are pondered.*

(*Without delay, Stanovich softly releases the egg into the vat of water*) A wonderful idea, Madame. Soothe its entry. You are the first lady in the Upper East Side to have birth by Leboyer.

(*Ten minutes pass. Stanovich reaches in the water to pull the egg out.*) Oww! (*the color drains from his face*) This water is almost at boiling temperature! (*He quickly plunges*

*his hand in the water, retrieving the egg. He carefully examines it.)* Madame... tragic news. Your child has been hardboiled.

MADAME (*leans up, stricken*) Are you sure the yolk isn't runny?

STANOVICH (*unshells the egg, and with careful incision, separates the egg yolk from the white*) Firm.

MADAME (*extends a waiting palm with melancholy*) Please hand me the yolk. (*Stanovich hands her the yolk*)

STANOVICH And the white?

MADAME Can that which hath no savor be eaten without salt?

Or is there any taste in the white of an egg?

(*tosses yolk in her mouth*) He wouldn't have wanted it any other way. (*masticating*) Mmmm I've always had a softspot for the yellow. (*suddenly collapses*) Pain in my stomach! Another one coming! No Leboyer this time!

STANOVICH (*quickly tucks the napkin back into his neck and valiantly excavates into the womb*) I see something... hold on... Got it!

*He rips the napkin away from his neck, triumphantly holding up a brownspeckled egg. Wrapping it in babecloth, he hands it to Madame. Congratulations. It's a twin.*

*General applause, three cheers, possible gifts are pondered.*

MADAME (*gushing with motherly joy, cradling it with boundless devotion*) Oh, I've always wanted an egg! (*pauses briefly*) Stanovich, my dear, could you do me one last favor. Could you hatch the egg for me? All you have to do is sit on it. I would if I could but I can't so I won't.

STANOVICH (*altruistically*) Whatever serves the greatest good. (*gently lowers himself on the egg*.) Oh, I feel something! I definitely feel something!

*The cats gather round, looking on the egglayer supportively.*

CATS (*feline chests heaving*) back back back back BADRAACK back back back  
BADRAACK back back back back BADRAACK...

STANOVICH Oh, oh oh!

*A crack. A golden baby chick wobbles precariously out from under Stanovich, feebly pipsqueaking. Tenderly raising the chick in the mammoth envelopment of his palm, Stanovich passes it over to Madame.*

CHICK (*peeps*) Alovo

MADAME (*aghast*) What! A chicken! But I wanted a goose! (*looks down at the yellow foofball in her hands*) It's ugly! (*she hurls the chippering chick out the window*)

BLACKROBED PRIEST (*materializes, whispering*) Ma takane me din kota? ADios. (*dematerializes*)

STANOVICH (*shocked*) But Madame, that was your child.

MADAME (*truculently raises herself on her elbows*) What's that McKeedes? Did you call me a chicken? (*jabbing a wizened finger at him*) You calling me chicken? (*falls back down*) I feel weak.

CATS (*screeching*) Food! She needs food! Someone! Take a littl *cheecken*, throw it in the ooven with some *potaato* and a little *alovoil*!

*A chef appears wearing striped baggy pants under his chef's apron.*

CHEF Waan Gree Saalah! Waan mbaymbee ngreeee!

MADAME No, I want chicken!

CHEF Waan Chicke Saalah... goood mahdame goooood.

*He makes a chicken salad and hands it to her.*

MADAME (*pushes it aside, nobly*) Give me grizzle or give me death.

*Rinds of fried chicken skin amid quivering nobules of blubberous greaselard are handed to her in a hubcap. With glistening fingertips, she crunches bones, slurps up gizzard guts. Licking the hubcap clean she throws it against the wall. Tropical birds chirp.*

mmmm MMMMM that was hobolicious!

BLINKING-EYED CAT She is bleeding profusely. (*turns to Stanovich*) How can we stop the bleeding?

STANOVICH (*sagaciously scratches his sac, pondering*) I have a plan.

*He makes a diagram with Xs and circles connected by lines. Stanovich motions over four cats. The cats interlock forelegs over shoulders with each other in a huddle around Stanovich who shows them the diagram.*

All right, each of you to a different bathroom. Muster up all the toilet paper you can and we meet back here on the downy. Any questions? (*stares each one in the eye*) Good. (*puts his hand out on top of which the cats stack their paws*) One two three, HEUHH! Go get 'em gents! (*with manly stoicness, he slaps their hinds as they dash off*)

*In thirty seconds the cats return with twenty rolls of toilet paper. Stanovich gives a lucid succinct toilet-paper stuffing seminar then steps back, looking on proudly, as the hundred or so cats nimbly pack Madame's abdominal region. In five minutes they are finished, nineteen cardboard cylinders scattered around her.*

STANOVICH (*hands out beers*) Good work, cats. Smoke if you got 'em.

*Cats lean sore worked bodies against the side of the kitchen wall in rich, satisfied silence. Stanovich rolls himself a cigarette. He places it in his mouth and retrieves the matchbook from his pocket. With one hand he bends one of the matches back till his thumb is pressing the tip against the strike strip. Once he is certain that eyes are upon him, and with cigarette dangling from his mouth, he casually strikes the match. The flaring match separates fortuitously from the matchbook, catapulting in an orange arc and landing on Madame's paper-packed belly, which erupts in conflagration.*

EVERYONE Fiya!

*Ghost stories are narrated, marshmallows are roasted on twigs, drums are beaten, painted bodies stomp, couples embrace, wet socks are placed to dry, fire walking is attempted, and hushed voices allege she wouldn't have wanted it any other way.*

[End of Excerpt]