

***THE Pudding* (Food TF, Honkai Star Rail)**

Herta, *the* Herta, turned the curio around in her hands, hoping each revolution would reveal a facet she'd missed.

By the two-hundredth turn, she had to admit she wasn't making progress. Casting the strange book aside with a groan of despair, she slumped on her bed, wondering if she were starting to lose her touch. How could such a simple curio mystify her?! It should be as simple as reading the words! What kind of book didn't want to be read?

With a groan, she forced herself back to her feet and snatched the tome up again. On the surface, it looked like any normal cookbook—if not for the strange readings she'd picked up from it, she would never have guessed there was anything anomalous about it. Only when you opened it up and took a look at its pages did it become clear it was anything but normal. From the blurb, you'd surmise that it was an everyday book of desserts, but the recipes it contained were incomprehensible even to her. She'd never seen writing like it before.

It occurred to her that she'd yet to actually read the strange words aloud. Perhaps that might offer some insight into their meaning.

With a sigh, she opened the book again, and flipped to a page bearing an image of a custard pudding. Planting her finger on the recipe beneath (Ugh, what was she? A first-grader?), she started to read, or rather, to carefully pronounce the sounds her translation software had suggested:

"Gniddup suoiciled a flesrouy ekam ot woh." As she read, a strange sensation of transition overcame her, as if she were slipping through a wormhole. Gasping, she stumbled to her feet—around her, the walls of her bedroom blur and ran like undried paint. She tried to grab a lamp for support, but by the time her hands reached it, it was gone.

...As were her hands. With a gasp, she looked and found them melting away, pouring down her arms and disappearing into her torso in so many drops of flesh. She squeaked, trying to shake it back into shape. What kind of strange trip was this?

There was something off about her skin, too, though it took her a second to notice it. Had she always been so yellow? Was she suffering from jaundice or was it—?

Too late, she realized her clothes had vanished as well—everything save her hat, which felt strangely hard when she grabbed it. Squealing, she struggled to cover herself, but she could barely cross her arms before they vanished into her shoulders. A second later, her legs disappeared into her hips, and a moment later in turn, she felt a terrible crushing pressure all around squishing her, squishing her, smaller, smaller, down, down, down...

Finally, just as she could bear it no more—

The world snapped back into order as if it were made of rubber, the shapeless whirl of colors becoming nothing more frightening than a simple bedroom. To her horror, she found she

couldn't move. No matter how hard she strained, the most she achieved was wobbling a little.

Her heart thudding in her chest, Herta looked around, trying to figure out where she was. It was familiar to her, though it took her a second to place from where. Was this the Astral Express? Why would the curio have teleported her here of all places? And why did it seem to have grown to such gigantic proportions? Had she shrunk on her way here...?

As she was struggling for an answer, the door of the bedroom/cabin opened, and into the room stepped the familiar figure of Caelus, Trailblazer. A mixed flash of embarrassment and relief washed through Herta's mind. If anyone could help her, it was Caelus. On the other hand, she hardly wanted him to see her in such a compromised state...

"Caelus!" she cried, as loudly as her little body would allow. "Caelus!"

Ignoring her calls, he looked down at her with a frown. "A pudding? Why would someone leave me a pudding?"

For the first time in her life, Herta was genuinely baffled. A pudding? What was he talking about? The only thing on the plateau was—

Realization came all at once, in a single terrifying instant. The cookbook. The picture of the dessert. The changed color of her skin and the strange feeling of her squishiness. She'd... She'd turned into a pudding! But how could it possibly have...?

"Well, I suppose I might as well try it," said Caelus, picking up the elaborate spoon lying beside her.

She squealed as he aimed it at her. "W-wait! Caelus, wait! Don't you dare try to eat me! Can't you see it's me...?! Caelus! Caelus!"

If he could hear her words, he ignored them, and inevitably, his spoon made contact with her, its edge slicing cleanly through her gelatinous new body. The sensation made her scream—not in pain, but in utter pleasure. "Nnnn~! Ah! Oh, why~?! Why does it feel so... Nnn~!"

The sensation only grew worse as Caelus plopped the little spoonful of her he'd stolen into his mouth, where she could *feel* it melting on his tongue as if it were still a part of her. "Nnnn~! Oh, Caelus! Caelus, please!" It felt as if he were licking all her most sensitive spots at once.

Unable to hear her cries for mercy—or recognize her as a human being at all—Caelus finally swallowed with a sigh of delight. "Mmm~, not bad. I'll have to figure out who left it so I can thank them."

Herta moaned. *Why don't you thank me?! It's me you're eating!*

Oblivious, Caelus dug his spoon into her again, making her scream in utter ecstasy as he pulled away another chunk of her. Removing the crown of her hat, he crunched the wafer cone it had become to pieces, before plucking the little cookies its flowers had turned into from the base and plopping them into his mouth one after the other. *Crunch!*

After finishing off its brim-turned-sauce, he returned his attention to her again, devouring spoonful after spoonful of her head and her hair and leaving her whimpering a little more with each swallow. The more he ate, the greater the pleasure became, till at last she was reduced to a shivering pile of crumbs and caramel, barely able to muster a thought.

“C-Caelus...” she mumbled idiotically. “Caelus. Eat me. Eat me. Eat me eat me eat meeeeeee.”

Gulp!

The spoon struck the empty plate with a clatter.