

## It's Baladi Time!

“Oh I'm sorry, the answer was not moss...but pie! Remember Kris when your mom baked one and you couldn't help devour it in front of a good ol' cartoon? (Now imagine a moss pie...now that would change the answer!)”

“The heck? They've eaten moss like a bunch of time already!” Susie replied, not knowing what the answer was and following both Ralsei and Kris when it came to this quiz. The dark prince could certainly have gotten it wrong, but *them*? “Kris, you chose the wrong answer on purpose or what?!”

“I mean...they seemed so eager to eat the moss in the corner when we were in prison during our first big adventure...” Ralsei admitted, a bit embarrassed as the trio were indeed in a TV show, in front of a whole audience. Mr. Tenna had indeed made considerable efforts along with everyone on set and he did want to put in a good performance...he was so sure moss was the answer.

“Worry not folks, the S-Rank is still within reach as you get a bonus round! (To save you the trouble of that awkward little situation, am I right or what?)” Tenna went on add, talking to the audience in a conspirational yet fun manner. Ever the showman, he then clapped his hands twice as the entire room turned black. “Everyone loves dancing! Remember that show Kris? The one where everyone performed in competition? The one you pretended to dislike but obviously though secretly loved? Well...”

The light came back on, the décor changing as this was not a quiz show but a full on dance stage, complete with spotlights, wide space, curtains...and their outfit had been changed accordingly. Their heroic kit was turned into bedlahs much like the last times during their adventures, only they were different now, a bit less revealing. Their colors were respected, pink and green for Ralsei, dark blue and pink for Kris, violet and black for Susie. They were almost a matching set, with puffy pantaloons, lycra midriff-unveiling tops along with jewelry for their wrists and upper arms. Ralsei did have a facial veil and Kris surprisingly had a hairband with a single feather upon it...but otherwise they were very similar.

“Words has come to my non-existent ears that you actually are pretty good belly dancers! People love that! The mystique, the grace, the low but otherwise TV-correct sensuality! (Though we did need to change those outfits because oh boy the censors would kill me if we didn't.)” Tenna explained as the

spotlights began to concentrate on the trio, highlighting them. Ralsei was a touch embarrassed as even though his outfit was more modest this time...it was still unexpected. Susie was frozen in place, too dumbfounded to react as she ever did. Only Kris seemed to be unfazed as they took on a confident pose without fail. "See that meter right there? If you pass a certain threshold, I'll make it so you won't get a penalty for that little moss debacle. Am I generous or what? You just need to woo the audience and put on a good show! (Kris is into that from what I can see, amirite?)

As the music did start, it was Kris who took the lead as they often did. Silent and yet very eloquent in their moves, they started with a hip circle as if they had done this their entire life. The Dark World, their outfit and the general vibes seemed to grant them skills they didn't, nor did anyone, knew they possessed as little "oooh" and "aaaaah" accompanied this initiative. A few hip circles, spins of their midsection turned into them slowly lowering their legs as they kept them ongoing, a surprising showcase of balance from the human.

Ralsei was still a bit embarrassed, yet to witness Kris did grant him the extra push he needed as the dark prince went on to do vertical figure-eights with his hips, mayas as they were usually called. Lifting inward towards one side, he then dropped the opposing hip before going in the other direction to keep a loop ongoing. To not just have a small top and pelvic curtain made him feel a little less self-conscious as he rose his arms serpentinely in asynchronous fashion to ensure everything would be balanced with his own mayas. Beneath his veil, translucent in its fabric, it was not hard to witness an earnest smile blooming from this moment.

Only Susie was a little frozen in place. She had indeed danced twice now and had enough self-awareness to perhaps, maybe, just maybe, a little at least...enjoy baladi? It had been fun and liberating and yet the last couple of times were in front of a very select, low-number crowd. Now it was on TV...or so Mr. Tenna said. Did anyone could witness her like this? Would they be speaking about her in a bedlah in class? Would Berdly, Noelle, Temmy and the others ask questions about Ralsei, their adventures and so forth? Paralyzed by this did she not move an inch even though the spotlights were on her as equally as on the other two.

"Oh oh, sounds like someone has stage fright?" Tenna went on to say, standing on the side as he watched the baladi meter being filled about a third of the way, with two-thirds being the necessary level to get the reward that he did promise. He obviously meant to make Susie snap out of it, yet the purple

dinosaur certainly found no courage or rebellion in this little comment, too absorbed in her own thoughts.

It was Ralsei which did try to help first, twirling with a few steps to get closer to Susie as he went on to shimmy his hips, moving them like piston as he stood by her side. He was smaller in stature, certainly not as imposing as she was, but he did try to bring comfort and energy with his presence, one of his usual powers during their adventures. “Don't worry Susie. It's okay if we don't get the bonus. Just shimmy with me and let's just focus on having fun, okay?” he offered, not quite on point about the nature of her stress, but earnest and kind nonetheless.

Kris, as mute as ever, got up, rolled their shoulders and then spun once before landing to the opposite side to Ralsei. Both were bordering their taller, larger, cruder friend as they went on to shimmy too. Not quite in rhythm with Ralsei, the whole thing being a touch chaotic and yet as Susie did notice that they were there she began to calm down. All spotlights were on them, but since when did she worry about what others thought? Yes she used to be lonely, crying by herself and all that...but no more. She had those two doofuses, Lancer, maybe Noelle and more...she could afford this now. Besides, if anyone mocked her she'd just kick their ass.

Worries melting gradually, she followed their lead for the moment as she shimmied her hips too. Knees moving back and forth rapidly, hips dropping and rising, it was not all that elegant as she was still a novice but she did manage it as both Kris and Ralsei then went on to mimic her instead. She could do this and thus as she bumped her hips roughly while pressing her palms together did they both do the same...even though they did get hit by those rather strong waist motions which prompted them to perhaps take just one step away for precaution. Still rough, still crude, still very much Susie and yet not devoid of the beauty of baladi.

“Would you look at that, folks? That is very touching teamwork! (And excellent TV, might I add!)” Tenna commented, a bunch of low-volume “aaaaww” being inserted yet not loud enough to disrupt the Middle Eastern music. Being more focused on the moment and less on her thoughts made Susie actually hear the strings, drums and flute played as she arched her lower back, moving her arms in undulations. Her hands were a bit too rigid, more dinosaur-like than serpentine, but still a noble effort as both Ralsei and Kris followed suit. Then she spun forward and clasped her palms above her head, swaying her hips with surprising softness as both her companions did the same. “Incredible! From three

solo stars to a team! They're nearly in perfect synch!”

It felt pretty good now. Yes she was badass but she could be delicate, calculated, graceful...if there was one thing that Susie learned about herself in these adventures is that she cared and that she was more than just a brute. Multi-faceted...like most people really. Her emotional growth had not gone unnoticed by her as she went on to swish towards the audience with one step forward, a twist of her torso and midsection as she did half vertical figure-eights. Her arms resting behind her head, she then twirled back towards the center of the stage as the other two did their best to just go with the flow. Then some more shimmies as they got closer, the music seemingly reaching a climax before the spotlights dimmed and then shut down as the song ended.

“That was quite a show, folks! Now don't touch that dial as we see the meter and...wow! It's completely full!” Tenna said with excitement, clapping and cheering filling the studio as light came back on to the regular quiz set, with the trio back in their regular Dark World clothes. “Not only do you remove the stain of getting that question wrong...but you actually deserve a bonus prize!”

“Oh? A prize?” Ralsei replied, intrigued as he couldn't help himself but be particularly invested. It was his first time interacting with TV material and it was fun as he was on the edge of his non-existent seat. “What is it?”

“**A Ralsei plushie!**”

“Oh come o-”