Airness
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"In music, as in everything, the disappearing moment of experience is the firmest reality."

—Benjamin Boretz

"You don't choose air guitar. Air guitar chooses you."

—C-Diddy, 2003 World Air Guitar Champion

Cast of Characters

SHREDDY EDDY
GOLDEN THUNDER
FACEBENDER
CANNIBAL QUEEN
THE NINA
D VICIOUS
STATEN ISLAND ANNOUNCER
WESTERN CONFERENCE FINALS ANNOUNCER
MID-ATLANTIC REGION FINALS ANNOUNCER
SPRITE EXEC
CENTRAL CONFERENCE FINALS ANNOUNCER
EASTERN CONFERENCE FINALS ANNOUNCER
HOODED FIGURE
DARK HORSE ANNOUNCER
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP ANNOUNCER

Character Notes

Each character represents one of the pillars of air guitar. This pillar is reflected in performance, song choice, approach to the competition, and personal interactions with others while in character. Mostly, the characters go by their noms d'air. Except for Nina and D Vicious where indicated, they are always wearing the exaggerated costumes of their onstage personas.

All characters are in their 20s or 30s; any part can be played by an actor of any race, except: Golden Thunder, who should be an actor of color, and Facebender, who should be white. Facebender should also be older than the rest of the group by a few years.

Ed "Shreddy Eddy" Leary: artistic merit
Gabe "Golden Thunder" Partridge: originality
Mark "Facebender" Lender: feeling
Astrid "Cannibal Queen" Anderson: technical ability
Nina "The Nina" O'Neal: airness
David "D Vicious" Cooper: charisma/stage presence

Announcer/Sprite Exec/Hooded Figure— These parts are played by the same actor; sometimes his/her voice may be heard, without the actor being onstage. Whenever possible, cast a member of the local air guitar community. You'll be really stoked that you did.

Setting

Most scenes take place in dirty, dingy music venues in urban areas across the US—some small, some large—except when the stage directions indicate we're somewhere else.

Each venue has the same setup: a bar with bar stools serving drinks, a stage, and a backstage/greenroom area with chairs and couches.

A Note on Performance

This play is not meant to mock air guitar or air guitarists. Nothing is being spoofed or sent up in any way. The comedy of the play only works if every character is imbued with sincerity and heart. The personas are big and brash, but they frequently drop to reveal real, earnest, three-dimensional humans with real feelings. Invest in them.

The Scenes

Performances are sixty seconds long, completely choreographed, and astonishingly awesome. They are not jokes. They reveal as much about their performers as the dialogue. Permission to use the following songs is included with your performance license.

Prologue: Last Year's National Championship

- #1: "Cum on Feel the Noize"

Scene 1: Staten Island, New York—Qualifier

- #2: "Sweet Child of Mine"
- #3: "The Supercut of Unity"

Vignette 1: Competition Videos

- #4: "Rebel Yell" (split into Parts 1, 2, and 3)
- #5: "Sweet Emotion"
- #6: "Take It Off"

Scene 2: San Diego, CA—Western Conference Finals

- #7: "Keep on Loving You"

Scene 3: Boston, MA—Mid-Atlantic Conference Finals

- #8: "Arpeggios from Hell"

Vignette 2: D Vicious's Sprite Commercial

- #9: "Crowd Chant"

Scene 4: Chicago, IL—Central Conference Finals

- #10: "I Don't Wanna Grow Up"

Scene 5: New York—Eastern Conference Finals

- #11: "Crowd Chant" clip
- #12: "You Give Love a Bad Name"

Scene 6: New York—After the Loss / Invite to the Dark Horse

- #13: "Sweet Child of Mine" phone clip

Vignette 3: The Dark Horse Competition

- #14: "Shadows of the Night"

Scene 7: Los Angeles—The National Championship

- #15: "Cum on Feel the Noize" slo-mo clip
- #16: "I Love Rock 'N Roll"
- #17: "I Love Rock 'N Roll" instrumental

Official Rules of Competition

(Source: https://www.usairguitar.com/rules)

US Air Guitar obeys the rules set forth by the Air Guitar World Championships:

- Each performance is played to one minute (sixty seconds) of a song.
- The sixty seconds can start anywhere in the song.
- The instrument must be invisible and be a guitar.
- A competitor does not have to live in a city to compete in a qualifier held there.

Rounds

Round 1, Freestyle: Each competitor performs to a song of their choice.

Round 2, Compulsory: Top competitors from Round 1 perform surprise song.

Judging Criteria

All performances are scored on a scale from 4.0 to 6.0—6.0 being the highest possible. A single score is given to each air guitarist based on their overall performance in that round. The scores from BOTH ROUNDS are added to determine the contestants' final scores. The score reflects the quality of the performance based on three key criteria:

- **Technical merit**
  You don't have to know what notes you're playing, but the more your invisible fretwork corresponds to the music that's playing, the better the performance.
- **Stage presence**
  Anyone can do it in the privacy of their bedroom. Few have what it takes to rock a crowd of hundreds or even thousands—all without an instrument.
- **"Airness"**
  The last criteria is the most difficult to define yet often the most decisive of all. Airness is defined as the extent to which a performance transcends the imitation of a real guitar and becomes an art form in and of itself.

Acknowledgments

Airness premiered at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in March 2017. It was directed by Meredith McDonough with the following cast and staff:

THE NINA . . . . . Marinda Anderson
ANNOUNCER. . . . . Matt Burns
CANNIBAL QUEEN. . . . . Angelina Impellizzeri
SHREDDY EDDY. . . . . Nate Miller
FACEBENDER . . . . . Lucas Papaelias
GOLDEN THUNDER. . . . . .Marc Pierre
D VICIOUS. . . . . .Brian Quijada

Scenic Designer . . . . . Deb O
Costume Designer. . . . . Alison Siple
Lighting Designer . . . . . Paul Toben
Sound Designer. . . . . .Lindsay Jones
Movement Director. . . . . .Jenny Koons
Stage Manager . . . . . Bekah Wachenfeld
Dramaturg . . . . . .Hannah Rae Montgomery
Casting . . . . . Paul Davis, Calleri Casting
Air Guitar Consultant . . . . . .Matt "AIRistotle" Burns
Properties Master . . . . . Carrie Mossman
Production Assistant . . . . . .Codey Leroy Butler
Directing Assistant. . . . . .Lila Rachel Becker
Assistant Dramaturg . . . . . .Bryan Howard

Airness owes a developmental debt of gratitude to The Juilliard School.

AIRNESS
by Chelsea Marcantel

Prologue: Last Year's National Championship

[#1: "Cum on Feel the Noize"]

(This scene takes place in memory, so it's outside of time and not set in any particular place. The lights and sound should be impressive, but nowhere near as great as the lights and sound in the final scene. No fog, please! Save that for Scene 7.

We hear the opening notes of an iconic metal banger, Quiet Riot's "Cum on Feel the Noize." As the intro plays, each of our competitors [except Nina] is revealed in his/her own light.
They each have a moment of introduction to the crowd: first SHREDDY EDDY, *then* GOLDEN THUNDER, *then* FACEBENDER, *then* CANNIBAL QUEEN. *They strike a pose, like superheroes. IMPORTANT: None of these four characters plays air guitar in this moment.*

Finally, D VICIOUS *is illuminated. He shreds on air guitar. The others watch him in awe, for about 10 seconds.* D VICIOUS *is their friend, and he is incredible. As the music ends with a strong finish, the* ANNOUNCER *raises* D VICIOUS's *hand over his head.*
He's the champion. Elation!)

(BOOM. Blackout.)

Scene 1: Staten Island, New York—Qualifier

(Lights up on a small, dingy venue in Staten Island, New York. It is late afternoon, and there are no patrons here yet, but a few of tonight's competitors have come early to get the lay of the land. They are all young, but they are old-timers. They have done this dozens of times before, in a dozen cities and towns.

SHREDDY EDDY, GOLDEN THUNDER, *and* D VICIOUS *sit at the sticky bar.* SHREDDY *and* GOLDEN *are in full persona mode.* VICIOUS *is not playing along.)*

D VICIOUS. Worst idea you've ever had, man.

SHREDDY EDDY. Somebody does crucified Jesus every year. Don't be that guy.

GOLDEN THUNDER. "Agent of Unity" is getting me nowhere, dude. I didn't even make the finals in Nashville.

VICIOUS. Nobody gets that you're an "agent of unity." It's like a joke—if you have to explain it, it doesn't work.

GOLDEN. How does it not work? I'm playing an earth-shattering supercut of songs with overt and covert political themes, that tracks the history of "otherized" peoples in America, and ends with the embracement of differences. It's sonic coherence on every level. How are people not putting it together?

SHREDDY. It's a killer supercut, man. But it's maybe just a little bit too much. That's a lot of threads to weave into sixty seconds.

VICIOUS. You don't need to change it, you need to streamline it. Originality only gets you points if the judges can figure out what the heck you're doing.

GOLDEN. But I'm not like you. I start with my message, and then—

VICIOUS. *(interrupting)* It's a rock show, not a lecture, dude.

GOLDEN. The whole impetus of air guitar is world peace, Vicious. If we lose sight of that, *what are we even doing here?*

SHREDDY. I saw a guy play naked in Des Moines this year.

GOLDEN. Aw, come on!

VICIOUS. That happens every year, too, Golden. *(short pause)* Did he place?

SHREDDY. Disqualified.

VICIOUS. Right.

GOLDEN. Is that what this sport is coming to? Surely there are still judges out there with some integrity. I am out here trying to heal the world, and the world refuses to be healed! *(short pause)* If I don't place here tonight, I'm out. I don't have a hometown qualifier like you, Shreddy, or a free ride to Nationals like his highness over here. If I can't get my message across tonight, I'm out for the season.

VICIOUS. And this will be, what, the fourth year you don't qualify for Nationals?

SHREDDY. Whoa, dude! That's harsh.

VICIOUS. What, is that not a fact? Am I not allowed to bring up the actual fact that neither one of you have ever qualified for the National Championships?

SHREDDY. I mean, you can bring it up. You don't have to be a jerk about it. *(short pause)* Last year was your first year at Nationals, and you won the whole thing. One of us could pull that off. Plus, this season, my song is untouchable. Which you would know, if you'd been to *any* of the qualifiers.

VICIOUS. You've always got the perfect song, Shreddy. That's never your problem. Your "angry record store dude" persona's got his head so far up his butt, that you're not giving anything to the crowd. It doesn't matter how superior your taste is, if you can't put on a show.

(A tense pause.)

SHREDDY. Dude, that Sprite commercial really inflated your ego.

GOLDEN. It went straight to your head.

VICIOUS. Aw, shut up.

GOLDEN. You aren't even dressed to play the halftime show.

VICIOUS. I've got plenty of time to figure that out.

SHREDDY. What are you playing?

VICIOUS. Got plenty of time to figure that out, too. I'll probably just throw something together in the green room during Round 1.

SHREDDY. *(hurt)* You're not even going to watch us play?

VICIOUS. No offense, my dudes, but I have a lot on my plate right now. I'm only here to play halftime because it's my home turf and I'm doing the organizers a favor. I'm actually thinking of hiring a manager soon. I got lots to get done.

SHREDDY. *(skeptical)* Like what?

*(*FACEBENDER *walks into the venue. He pretends to take a guitar case off his back and set it on the stage. He then walks over to* SHREDDY, VICIOUS, *and* GOLDEN.*)*

*(*GOLDEN *holds out his hand to* FACEBENDER, *but* FACEBENDER *bypasses the hand and pulls him into a bear hug.)*

GOLDEN. Facebender! Good to see you, man!

FACEBENDER. Golden Thunder. My dear friend. I hope your journey to New York was pleasant.

GOLDEN. It was all right.

*(*SHREDDY *doesn't offer* FACEBENDER *his hand, but* FACEBENDER *pulls him into a warm embrace anyway.)*

FACEBENDER. Shreddy Eddy, it fills my heart to the brim to see you hale and hearty.

SHREDDY. Happy to have you in the room, buddy.

FACEBENDER. Happy to be here, friend.

*(*FACEBENDER *turns to* VICIOUS *and does an exaggerated, sweeping bow [but he does not hug* VICIOUS*].)*

FACEBENDER. My liege.

VICIOUS. *(enjoying this a little more than he should)* Come on, 'Bender.

*(*FACEBENDER *looks around for a bartender, and not seeing one, walks behind the bar, finds a glass, and helps himself.)*

GOLDEN. We haven't seen the bartender in like half an hour.

FACEBENDER. I'll keep track of my own tab. I trust myself.

GOLDEN. *(pause)* Did you catch my song in Nashville, Bender? My supercut of ultimate unity?

FACEBENDER. Indeed I did. I saw the video online.

GOLDEN. What did you think?

FACEBENDER. I thought it was astonishing. Gorgeous, and heartbreaking, and a balm for these troubled times.

GOLDEN. Yeah, see? He gets it. Judges only gave me a 5.1.

FACEBENDER. Egregious!

SHREDDY. The judges at some of these small qualifiers, I mean, who are they? What qualifies them to judge competitive air guitar on our level, you know?

VICIOUS. *(trying to refocus the group's attention on himself)* Most of them wouldn't know a real moment of airness if it smacked them across the face.

GOLDEN. Exactly. And this is the truest art form. The only pure art form left.

FACEBENDER. Incorruptible.

GOLDEN. Un-commercializable.

SHREDDY. Totally democratic.

VICIOUS. And we look totally cool doin' it.

(They clink their glasses. VICIOUS *just misses the clink; no one else notices.)*

SHREDDY. But do these new judges understand that? No. They do not. These qualifiers used to be judged by rock gods, real legends.

But now there are so many of them, it's washed-up comedians and satellite radio DJs.

VICIOUS. Not at Nationals.

SHREDDY. No, no, you're right. If we can get to Nationals, we'll be rocking for people who actually appreciate what they're looking at.

FACEBENDER. So let us focus our powers, gentlemen. The hour of triumph is nigh.

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *enters. She looks around, sees* VICIOUS, *gets a little annoyed [he's not where he should be right now] and addresses the guys at the bar.)*

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Hey, Shreddy. Golden. Facebender.

SHREDDY. Hey, CQ.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. *(emphatically)* Cannibal Queen.

FACEBENDER. Care to join us for a pregame libation?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. I'm good. Vicious? I thought we were going to get dinner before the show?

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *exits.* FACEBENDER, SHREDDY, *and* GOLDEN *make "ooooh, you're in trouble" noises.)*

VICIOUS. *(with great dignity)* Later, Bad News Bears.

*(*VICIOUS *exits following* CANNIBAL QUEEN.*)*

FACEBENDER. She is enchanting.

GOLDEN. That's not the word I'd use.

FACEBENDER. As skilled as she is mysterious. The Aphrodite of air guitar.

SHREDDY. That's excessive, but I will admit, Cannibal Queen's got the best technique in the game right now. There's nothing the judges can pull out in the second round that she can't nail.

FACEBENDER. And yet, she remains as cruelly cast aside as the three of us. Hopes dashed at every qualifier throughout the Midwest, watching her chances of Nationals disappear like ashes in the wind.

GOLDEN. CQ is cold onstage. Low on charisma. She nails it technically, but the crowd comes to have a good time. This isn't Carnegie Hall—

SHREDDY. *(interrupting)* Technical points win championships—

GOLDEN. *(interrupting)* But air guitar's appeal is audience-based. Its whole existence is its effect on the audience, tell me that's not true. Dispute it, if you can, Shreddy. You can't!

SHREDDY. Don't dismiss your technical scores, is all I'm saying. You might be able to fudge your left-hand placement here, in small qualifiers, but on the national stage? The international stage? That just doesn't wash. That's not gonna wash in Finland. Air guitar is not a joke to anyone in Finland.

(The air is getting tense.
NINA *enters. She looks around. The men stare at her.)*

FACEBENDER. Good evening. Are you lost, miss?

NINA. Not lost. Just early.

FACEBENDER. For the Air Guitar qualifier? I regret to inform you that the show doesn't start for a few more hours.

SHREDDY. I think they open the doors at nine. There's a place with good pizza up the street, if you need to kill time.

NINA. I know what time the show starts. I'm registered to compete.

GOLDEN. Really?

SHREDDY. Fresh meat!

FACEBENDER. Delightful.

SHREDDY. I'm Ed Leary. "Shreddy Eddy."

GOLDEN. Gabe Partridge. "Golden Thunder."

FACEBENDER. And I'm Mark Lender. "Facebender."

NINA. Ed, Gabe, Mark.

GOLDEN. Shreddy Eddy, Golden Thunder, and Facebender.

NINA. Those are your stage names?

SHREDDY. They're our *personas.* Important distinction.

NINA. But you're not onstage.

GOLDEN. We're in the venue, though.

FACEBENDER. We are in the arena. Among its denizens. It has already begun, you see.

NINA. I guess.

SHREDDY. When we're among competitors, we go by our personas.

(She stares at them. They stare at her, waiting for her to introduce her persona.)

NINA. *(after a beat)* I'm Nina.

SHREDDY. What do you go by onstage?

NINA. Are stage names mandatory?

SHREDDY. *Personas.* And they're not. But, like, you gotta have one to protect yourself.

NINA. From what?

SHREDDY. From everything outside the music.

NINA. *(rolling her eyes)* Oh boy.

SHREDDY. When you get up there tonight, you won't be a girl onstage at a dive in Staten Island, doing a mime routine. You'll be a rock goddess, playing Wembley Stadium. Madison Square Garden. The International Space Station. Melting faces and breaking hearts for sixty seconds. That rock goddess needs a name.

GOLDEN. So if you start to doubt that *you* can do it, you remember that *she* can.

NINA. I'm in a real band. I actually play the real guitar. So I'm not, you know, *super* worried about this. You guys seem like *really* invested, but how talented could anybody here tonight *really* be?

(They silently turn away from her.)

NINA. Oh, come on, don't be like that. Do you guys really take yourselves this seriously?

FACEBENDER. Ourselves, rarely. Air guitar, inevitably.

NINA. Well, excuse *me*. I didn't mean to insult anyone.

SHREDDY. *(not turning around)* We're not insulted. We just don't want to talk to you anymore.

NINA. You're just gonna ignore me for three hours? That's a long time.

GOLDEN. It will be for you.

(There is a seriously awkward pause. But FACEBENDER *is not ready to give up on* NINA *yet.)*

FACEBENDER. Miss, may I ask what drew you to our conclave this evening?

NINA. Conclave?

SHREDDY. Why did you register? Why are you here?

NINA. *(evasive)* It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment impulse. I was walking down the street yesterday and I saw a poster and I just . . . thought I'd see what this is all about.

FACEBENDER. We enthusiastically welcome all comers. But the first thing you must know is this: ours is not a community built upon competition, but camaraderie.

SHREDDY. There are a few jerks in the mix, but for the most part, everyone's chill.

NINA. I can be chill.

FACEBENDER. Do you swear it?

NINA. Swear.

SHREDDY. Okay then. Let's just see. What song are you performing?

NINA. Oh. Um, I thought I'd do "Don't Stop Believin'."

*(*SHREDDY, GOLDEN, *and* FACEBENDER *all groan in unison.)*

SHREDDY. Are you serious right now?

NINA. What? It's an iconic song.

GOLDEN. Doesn't mean we want to hear it. *Again.*

SHREDDY. Not to mention the fact that the song doesn't exactly melt faces.

GOLDEN. Or deliver any kind of crucial message.

NINA. Neal Schon is a guitar prodigy! He played with Santana at fifteen!

SHREDDY. *(impressed)* Good point. Well made. But, the *song.* It just doesn't shred. And it doesn't have anything to do with you, unless you consider yourself just a small-town girl livin' in a lonely world. Journey is for stepmoms and frat boys. You have to play something that blasts *your soul,* Nina.

NINA. Fine, then I'll do "Sweet Child of Mine." You can't argue with the merits of that song.

SHREDDY. Slash himself has argued with the merits of that song. He started writing it as a string skipping guitar exercise.

NINA. And it ended up the band's best-charting song in the US.

GOLDEN. *(looking sidelong at* SHREDDY*)* Which is why everybody and his brother has already competed with it.

NINA. *(dismissive)* Look, I can play the Guns N' Roses song in my sleep. I don't have time to rehearse something new.

GOLDEN. If you pick the wrong song, rehearsal is kind of irrelevant, anyway.

NINA. *(annoyed)* Wow. Helpful. Thanks.

SHREDDY. A boring, overplayed, basic song only works if your cut is subversive.

NINA. *(confused)* My . . . cut?

(The guys groan.)

SHREDDY. If you bomb up there, it's gonna bring down the quality of the show as a whole. I have like fifty different song cuts on my phone. Do you want to use one?

NINA. I'm good, thanks. I'm just gonna get up there and do what I do.

SHREDDY. But . . . this is not what you do.

NINA. Close enough.

(They shake their heads sadly.)

FACEBENDER. *(trying to find some hope for her)* Freestyle is merely the first round of competition. An exemplary score in the second round might be enough to propel you to victory. Since you are a musician, your technical prowess will aid you.

GOLDEN. And since you're local, you get two shots at Nationals. If you lose tonight, you can try again at the Eastern Conference Finals in a few months.

NINA. *(something occurs to her)* Wait, wait, you guys aren't from here?

FACEBENDER. San Diego.

SHREDDY. Chicago.

GOLDEN. Big Sky, Montana.

NINA. Y'all came from *out of state?* To *Staten Island?* For *air guitar?*

(There is a hostile silence.)

(The door opens, and CANNIBAL QUEEN *walks back in.* NINA *gasps and turns away.* CANNIBAL QUEEN *looks at her confused; she doesn't know who* NINA *is.)*

CANNIBAL QUEEN. *(very annoyed)* So Vicious has decided he can't be bothered to play the halftime show tonight.

GOLDEN. Aw, come on!

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Has anybody seen an organizer?

FACEBENDER. Maybe in the green room?

SHREDDY. What a jerkstore.

GOLDEN. Great. The crowd will be in a bad mood before I even get up there.

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *exits to the green room.)*

NINA. *(a little panicky)* He's still competing tonight, right? D Vicious?

SHREDDY. No. He was never gonna compete tonight.

NINA. But his name is on the poster!

SHREDDY. As the halftime entertainment. Vicious is the reigning champ. You're gonna have to make it all the way to nationals if you wanna face off against him.

*(*NINA *is rethinking every decision that brought her to this moment. The lights shift into show mode.)*

ANNOUNCER. Ladies and germs, welcome to your Staten Island Air Guitar qualifier! Since this is the home turf of our reigning National Champion, D Vicious, the Gods of Air have deigned to let us send tonight's winner all the way to Nationals! This is the last shot for those of you without a hometown semi-final, so I hope you're hungry!

(A bright, garish spotlight comes up onstage; NINA *nervously moves into the light.)*

NINA'S FIRST PERFORMANCE

*(*NINA *stands onstage, ready. Nothing happens.* FACEBENDER *cues her from the audience to extend her arm and point her finger.)*

[#2: "Sweet Child of Mine"]

(The intro of "Sweet Child of Mine" starts to play and NINA *freezes.)*

NINA. *(spiraling)* What are you doing here? Okay, hold the guitar. Fake guitar. Not-guitar. You can play it. You can play anything. You look like a fool and your parents would die of shame if they were here right now, but you can play it. Breathe. You know the song. Don't freeze up. Just play the song.

(For an uncomfortable amount of time, NINA *doesn't do anything to the music. Then she recovers, slightly, as we hear the crowd start to boo, bored. Finally, she plays the song as if she had a guitar in her hand, and it's accurate, but she seems miserable and she's not even looking at the crowd. Almost as soon as she finally begins*

to play, the song is cut off. The sixty seconds are over. The small crowd boos, disinterested.)

FACEBENDER. *(from the bar)* Merciful Odin, is it over?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. *(from the bar)* Woof.

NINA. *(mortified)* Kill me. Somebody kill me.

*(*NINA *is stuck onstage, mortified.* GOLDEN *approaches her and nudges her off the stage.)*

GOLDEN. Please move aside. This crowd needs healing more than ever.

GOLDEN THUNDER'S PERFORMANCE

[#3: "The Supercut of Unity"]

(The Supercut of Unity begins to play—it is an epic mashup of "Johnny B. Goode" by Chuck Berry, "Rock Box" by Run DMC, and "Changes" by 2Pac.

The performance should include at least one costume change/reveal.

GOLDEN *gives an amazing air guitar performance. What he lacks in guitar-playing accuracy, he makes up in originality and interpretive glory. And he is the winner. Having to defend his art form to Nina has brought out a deeper level of artistry than he thought he had inside himself. His final costume change reveals a t-shirt that says "Make Air Not War," maybe in sequins.)*

ANNOUNCER. All right, party people, the scores from both rounds are in! Taking first place here tonight in the Staten Island Qualifier, moving on to the National Finals, the man who puts the "art" in "farting around": Golden Thunder!

(Everyone onstage except NINA *rallies around* GOLDEN *and cheers.* NINA *sees something that speaks to her. She's intrigued.*

Lights dim on the Staten Island venue.)

Vignette 1: Competition Videos

(A small light comes up on NINA *and* SHREDDY *with a laptop on the side of the stage. It is a few weeks later. They are watching old competition videos on the internet.* NINA *has a pen and a notepad.* SHREDDY *is holding out to her a single printed piece of paper.)*

SHREDDY. I'm just gonna need your John Hancock on this.

NINA. Oh come on. I told you I would buy all of your drinks—

SHREDDY. *(interrupting)* From now till Nationals.

NINA. From now till Nationals. And my word is good. We do not need a contract.

SHREDDY. Well, considering that you showed up in Staten Island outta nowhere, acted like a complete jerk to everybody, and then got up onstage and thoroughly annihilated yourself, you'll understand why I can't perform these services for you on the honor system. I'mma need you to sign this.

NINA. *(taking it from him and signing)* Fine. Whatever.

(He takes the contract from her, takes a picture of the paper, with his phone, then folds it up, and puts it in his pocket.)

SHREDDY. I'll email you a copy.

NINA. I'm good, thanks. *(short pause)* Do you do this for new people a lot?

SHREDDY. Sure. Anyone who asks.

NINA. That must take a lot of time.

SHREDDY. It does. But there's nothing else I'd rather be talking about, so.

NINA. And here I thought I was special.

SHREDDY. Well, I've never coached a girl before.

NINA. That's not reassuring.

SHREDDY. You signed a contract, lady. Let's begin.

NINA. Teach me. I have a notebook.

SHREDDY. We'll start with the foundation. You did the reading I sent you, yes?

NINA. Yes.

SHREDDY. Pop quiz! First round is—?

NINA. A sixty-second cut of a song I choose.

SHREDDY. Second round is—?

NINA. Sixty seconds of a song chosen by the judges.

SHREDDY. Points are given—?

NINA. On a scale of 4.0 to 6.0

SHREDDY. Exactly like—?

NINA. Figure skating.

SHREDDY. Now tell me: what are the six pillars of air guitar?

NINA. *(reading from her notebook)* Artistic merit, originality, feeling, technical ability, charisma, and airness.

SHREDDY. Great. Excellent. Memorize them. Internalize them. Metabolize them.

NINA. I don't know what any of that means.

SHREDDY. And *that* is why YouTube was invented. *(he types something into the computer)* Okay, okay, so this is the Portland qualifier, two years ago. This is a great place to start. It was a pretty small house, but everybody really tore it up that night.

> *(Three small squares of light come up in the middle of the stage.* FACEBENDER, CANNIBAL QUEEN, *and* GOLDEN *step into the boxes of light. They are in the videos. We watch them, and we see what* NINA *and* SHREDDY *are seeing.*
> NINA *and* SHREDDY *have the power to start and stop the videos, and the bodies of* FACEBENDER, CANNIBAL QUEEN, *and* GOLDEN *must respond accordingly.)*

SHREDDY. Okay, so here's our pal Golden Thunder. His highest marks are always in originality, as you saw in Staten Island, where he slayed.

NINA. Yeah. His whole unification theme was great.

SHREDDY. You picked up on that? I'm impressed.

NINA. He was wailing to an amazing supercut of songs with overt and covert political themes. What fool wouldn't put that together?

SHREDDY. Point Nina! Golden approached airness that night. There is no denying it. *(short pause)* We'll cover airness. Eventually.

NINA. One thing at a time.

SHREDDY. Obviously. So. As you'll see:

[#4: "Rebel Yell (Part 1)"]

(He presses "play" and GOLDEN *comes to life. Billy Idol's "Rebel Yell" plays.* GOLDEN *rocks out for a few seconds.* SHREDDY *presses "pause," and* GOLDEN *freezes.)*

SHREDDY. Golden's gift is that he can take a song that the judges have heard a hundred times, in this case "Rebel Yell", and make it totally his own, a brand new thing.

NINA. Looks pretty standard to me.

SHREDDY. Wait for it.

[#4: "Rebel Yell (Part 2)"]

*(*SHREDDY *presses "play" again, and* GOLDEN *returns to rocking. After a few seconds,* GOLDEN *removes his t-shirt, revealing a handmade vest with* NORTH *in big letters over a picture of Abraham Lincoln on one side and* SOUTH *and a picture of Ulysses S. Grant on the other. Nina hits "pause.")*

NINA. Oh no.

SHREDDY. It's not over.

[#4: "Rebel Yell (Part 3)"]

*(*SHREDDY *hits "play."* GOLDEN *rocks. After a moment, he fires a cannon and then plays guitar while writing. Fires another cannon. Shakes hands with himself. Finally, he pulls off the vest to reveal an American flag t-shirt with the word UNITY written on it.* SHREDDY *hits "pause.")*

NINA. Was he writing the Emancipation Proclamation in the middle there?

SHREDDY. Very perceptive! And he fired cannons. And surrendered at Appomattox.

NINA. Amazing.

SHREDDY. Absolutely. Originality—you've got the idea.

NINA. Good stuff.

SHREDDY. Moving on! Facebender. What did I tell you in my email?

NINA. *(read from her notebook)* His highest marks are always for feeling.

SHREDDY. Exactly. In a lineup full of ego and testosterone, Facebender is a bright spot of actual heart. He sends out his energy in a glorious wash over the crowd.

[#5: "Sweet Emotion"]

*(*SHREDDY *hits "play," and* FACEBENDER *comes to life. We hear the classic rock anthem from the 70s, "Sweet Emotion" by Aerosmith.* FACEBENDER *plays, he feels, he doesn't move his hands much, but his face is a mask of emotion. He begins to cry, softly. It is so beautiful. It is also totally rock-n-roll.* NINA *hits "pause."* FACEBENDER *freezes.)*

NINA. Is he crying?

SHREDDY. He is.

NINA. It's . . . it's so beautiful.

SHREDDY. That dude uses air guitar to swim against a tide of real sadness. The judges see that. And they hardcore respect it.

NINA. You can't fake that kind of heart.

SHREDDY. Exactly. You have to earn it. I gotta say, you're taking to this like a fish to water. *(short pause)* Now, Cannibal Queen—

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *activates in her block of light, sensing her turn is next.)*

NINA. *(interrupting)* Nope. I don't want to watch her video.

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *looks annoyed and disappointed.)*

SHREDDY. You can't just get up there and play whatever. It's not a dance routine. CQ is a classically trained guitarist, 100% about the music. Accuracy, specificity, and timing.

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *gets ready to play.)*

NINA. The one thing I know is how to play guitar. Can we move on to the second round? My compulsory performance was almost as bad as my freestyle.

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *deactivates, really annoyed now.)*

SHREDDY. Worse.

NINA. Hey!

SHREDDY. You seem to be kind of a natural, young padawan, so I'm not gonna sugarcoat anything for you.

NINA. Okay. Fair.

SHREDDY. *(short pause)* Now, your scores from Round One will be averaged with your scores from Round Two. For Round Two, as you experienced, it's harder to prepare.
Every finalist performs 60 seconds of a song picked by the judges. No one knows what the song will be ahead of time, so you have to be prepared for them to get really creative.

NINA. Creative how?

SHREDDY. Sometimes they pick a song that's super cliché, or super obscure. Sometimes they pick a song specifically to weed out the snobs. For instance, Louisville, four years ago.

[#6: "Take It Off"]

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN, FACEBENDER, *and* GOLDEN *change places.* SHREDDY *hits "play." We hear "Take It Off" by The Donnas.* CANNIBAL QUEEN, FACEBENDER, *and* GOLDEN *all begin to play. After a moment,* NINA *hits "pause.")*

NINA. Who would dare to be snobby about The Donnas?

SHREDDY. Hair Metal Bros who don't understand that The Donnas are the spiritual successors to—

SHREDDY. *(in unison)* The Ramones.

NINA. *(in unison)* The Ramones.

SHREDDY. Yeah. Exactly.

*(A moment of connection. Something *clicks* for both of them.* NINA *hits "play.")*

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN, FACEBENDER, *and* GOLDEN *all begin to play again.* FACEBENDER *is having a rough time. After a few seconds,* SHREDDY *hits "pause.")*

SHREDDY. You see how lost Facebender looks?

NINA. He's all over the place. That is in no way the shape or size of an actual guitar.

SHREDDY. Exactly. That was his first year. He had the heart and the drive, but he didn't have the mechanics. He totally tanked it. Plus, he had to go first. You want to go as late as you can, so you can hear the song a bunch of times. But, the later you go, the more original you have to be. Which is why Golden Thunder did better in this round.

NINA. Oh I can't wait.

*(*SHREDDY *presses "play." We hear "Take it Off."* GOLDEN *immediately takes his shirt off to reveal another shirt underneath.* SHREDDY *presses "pause.")*

NINA. Really?

SHREDDY. I said he did better. I didn't say he did great. But Cannibal Queen—

*(*SHREDDY *hits "play." We hear "Take It Off," and* CANNIBAL QUEEN *slays. The sixty seconds finish.* NINA *hits "pause."* CANNIBAL QUEEN *has a huge grin on her face.)*

SHREDDY. Cannibal Queen takes it all.

NINA. *(darkly)* Yes. Yes she does.

*(*SHREDDY *looks her and raises his eyebrows.)*

NINA. *(avoiding a question she senses is coming)* Hey . . . in Staten Island. You're right, I was rude. I was really focused on winning and usually . . . usually the whole "lone wolf" thing works for me.

SHREDDY. We operate under more of a pack mentality.

NINA. I get that. It's cool. Anyway, I'm sorry if I offended you.

(Note: If SHREDDY *is played by an actor of color, omit the word "white" from the following line.)*

SHREDDY. *(shrugging)* Hey. I'm a straight white dude from the Midwest who doesn't believe in religion. It's kind of hard to offend me.

NINA. *(pause)* Han shot second.

SHREDDY. *(with gusto)* DIE IN A FIRE!

(Lights dim on the Vignette.)

Scene 2: San Diego, CA—Western Conference Finals

(Lights up on a larger, still dingy, venue in San Diego. It is two months after Staten Island. It is late afternoon, and there are no patrons here yet. GOLDEN *and* NINA *sit in the green room.)*

GOLDEN. To be perfectly frank, I'm impressed you came out tonight.

NINA. According to my research, I can still qualify for Nationals this year.

GOLDEN. If the Gods of Air are willing, you all can. Facebender's from San Diego, so he's got a good shot at the Western Conference title here tonight. Shreddy's hometown in Chicago, CQ's hometown in Boston, and you can make a comeback in New York.

NINA. *(quoting* GOLDEN*)* If the Gods of Air are willing.

GOLDEN. Thankfully, I gloriously triumphed in Staten Island. Because qualifiers are thin on the ground in Montana.

NINA. So this *(she motions to the venue)* is where the magic happens?

GOLDEN. Yes. This is where I touch the Divine.

NINA. Very cool. *(short pause)* You and Shreddy and everybody seem really close. Y'all hang out a lot?

GOLDEN. Nah. We're so spread out, we only see each other at competitions.

NINA. Bummer.

GOLDEN. But the group text is fire.

NINA. I'm sure.

GOLDEN. You gonna wow us onstage tonight? You can't qualify here, but you could work out some kinks, try some stuff out before NYC.

NINA. Uh, no. I'm doing recon.

GOLDEN. You don't need to take notes—you need to get back onstage. Air guitar is about the audience. The only way to really get better is to perform.

NINA. I know about audiences. What I don't know about is air guitar.

GOLDEN. You went down in flames in Staten Island. I know that had to sting like whoa. But the longer you put off your comeback, the harder it's going to be to get back on that horse.

*(*NINA *is quiet.)*

NINA. I got lower scores than the guy who performed as resurrected Jesus.

GOLDEN. *(defensive)* To be fair, Pearl Jam's "Alive" was a strong artistic choice. If Jesus hadn't been drunk out of his mind, he might have swept the whole thing. *(pause)* So what are you working on for your comeback?

NINA. Got a couple things in the hopper. Tell me what you think.

GOLDEN. Okay.

*(*SHREDDY *enters behind them, unseen.)*

NINA. "Two Princes" by the Spin Doctors.

GOLDEN. Baby stuff.

NINA. The rhythm guitar part in that song is irresistible! Everybody loves that song!

GOLDEN. What else?

NINA. "Smells Like Teen Spirit."

GOLDEN. Okay, yeah, Nirvana is always a solid choice.

NINA. But?

GOLDEN. But what else you got, that's a little more original? That sends a message to the *crowd,* instead of being just fun for *you?*

NINA. Last but not least, I've been working on some choreo for "American Girl." Tom Petty.

(There are two possibilities for the following exchange. The second can be used if the actors playing NINA *and* GOLDEN *are both actors of color, as they were in the original production.)*

(Option 1)

GOLDEN. *(unenthusiastic)* I get it.

NINA. Because I'm . . . I'm an American girl. I guess.

GOLDEN. No, no, it makes sense.

(Option 2)

GOLDEN. Were you raised by white people?

NINA. Hey!

GOLDEN. No, no, I get it.

NINA. But?

SHREDDY. *(piping up)* But, why are you the *only* person who could perform "American Girl"? Or "Smells Like Teen Spirit"? Or "Two Princes"? How is sixty seconds of one of those songs an extension of your soul, and *only your* soul?

NINA. Dude, how is "I Don't Wanna Grow Up" an extension of YOUR soul?

SHREDDY. Nina, that song is *my entire life.*

NINA. Yeah, yeah, yeah. How?

SHREDDY. You got bigger things to worry about than why I play what I play. What about your persona? Been working on that?

NINA. Oh yeah.

SHREDDY. And?

NINA. What do you think of *(putting on a British accent)* "Kate Middle Finger"?

SHREDDY. Who is she?

NINA. *(British accent)* My persona! *(she drops the accent)* It's like a play on the royal family.

SHREDDY. No one in the royal family plays rock guitar.

NINA. Okay, what about "Ruth Slayer Ginsburg." Get it? It's a pun!

SHREDDY. Is it?

GOLDEN. It's not the roller derby. You don't get points for puns.

NINA. Oh shut up. I think it's harder for girls. Who are my role models?

SHREDDY. Cannibal Queen.

NINA. I hope she breaks her neck.

SHREDDY / GOLDEN. *(in unison, interrupting)* Whoa!

SHREDDY. What is that violence about? Did CQ do something to you?

NINA. SILENCE!

(They wait. She clams up.)

GOLDEN. Well, fine, because now that Shreddy's here, I have some gossip for the group. Guess what I heard. Guess.

SHREDDY. Um . . .

GOLDEN. You won't guess. *(dramatic pause)* Facebender's kid is coming tonight!

SHREDDY. Facebender has a KID?

GOLDEN. Yeah, a daughter, he had her when he was like sixteen. And he always invites her to the San Diego finals, and she never comes. Until *tonight,* you guys.

NINA. Whoa.

GOLDEN. Yeah. Whoa. So we gotta do everything we can to pump up the crowd. His charisma marks have to be off the charts.

*(*SHREDDY *points to* NINA *to prompt her to recite a lesson he has taught her about charisma.)*

NINA. *(proud of herself)* Oooh! It doesn't matter if the crowd loves you or hates you, as long as they're making a lot of noise. Like TV wrestling!

SHREDDY. *(proud of* NINA*)* Exactly, Grasshopper.

GOLDEN. Charisma marks are always high for villains. Cannibal Queen, for one—

SHREDDY. *(interrupting, to* NINA*)* Your fave gal. We're gonna come back to that, by the way.

GOLDEN. *(continuing)* And D Vicious, who won the National Championship last year. He does this thing where he makes the crowd love him, then hate him, then love him again. In sixty seconds. Surely you've seen his routine?

NINA. Oh. I've seen it. Up close.

GOLDEN. But Facebender's not a villain. He's like . . . your sad uncle . . .

SHREDDY. . . . from another century, or a story . . . or . . .

NINA. He's Don Quixote. A man out of time. He dreams the impossible dream.

SHREDDY. *(nodding in agreement)* Uh-huh.

NINA. Is he gonna play "Simple Man" for the freestyle round again?

GOLDEN. He's been playing it all season.

NINA. That's why he hasn't qualified yet.

*(*SHREDDY *and* GOLDEN *look at her sideways, affronted on their friend's behalf.)*

NINA. He's Don Quixote, playing, like, a Huckleberry Finn song.

GOLDEN. She's right. I'm impressed.

SHREDDY. Nina's got a great eye for what's going on under the hood of a routine.

NINA. *(smiling at* SHREDDY*)* I have a good coach.

*(*FACEBENDER *enters. Very nervous.)*

GOLDEN. Facebender Lender! Don't be nervous! This is your night, my dude!

FACEBENDER. You are a true and loyal friend, Golden Thunder. I wish I shared your optimism.

SHREDDY. We heard about your daughter, man.

GOLDEN. I told them. Hope it wasn't a secret.

FACEBENDER. A secret? Indeed no. My . . . my Sophia. She's never seen me play before. I haven't always been . . . the ideal patriarch. Of our little kingdom.

GOLDEN. And you're gonna melt her face off!

(They all look at him sideways.)

GOLDEN. Nope. Weird to say about a man's daughter. Now I say it, I hear it.

SHREDDY. She's gonna love it. How old is she? Doesn't matter. She's gonna love it.

FACEBENDER. *(dropping the façade for a moment)* I can't screw this up in front of my kid. The only way this is anything at all is if I'm good at it. If it's not utterly amazing, I'm . . . I'm just . . . I've already let her down a thousand times.

GOLDEN. Hey? Hey, Facebender? What are you always telling me?

FACEBENDER. To spray-paint your costumes in well-ventilated areas.

GOLDEN. No. Yes. No. What are you always telling me when I start to doubt my awesome sauce? Huh, buddy? What's the greatest thing about air guitar?

NINA. Oh, I wanna know this.

GOLDEN. What does air guitar teach? *(pause)* "Everything we need to rock, is already inside us."

*(*SHREDDY *and* FACEBENDER *nod sagely.* NINA *is moved, unexpectedly.)*

FACEBENDER. *(recovering his persona somewhat)* The greatest truth of this, our chosen art form. Sage of you to remind me, Golden Thunder. But . . . I have a dread in my bones.

NINA. A dread?

FACEBENDER. A real dread. That the ode I have selected for my freestyle contribution, will do me no favors. It has won me no accolades thus far. Why should I expect it to triumph this night?

NINA. You think the song will fail you?

FACEBENDER. Or I, the song. And my Sophia.

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *enters. She has the worst timing. She looks at their anxious faces.)*

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Ugh. Who died in here?

FACEBENDER. Cannibal Queen, even your lovely disposition cannot retrieve me from the funk into which I have fallen. But thank you for trying.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Yeah sure. My pleasure. *(looking around)* Has anyone seen Vicious?

*(*NINA *inhales sharply.)*

SHREDDY. He coming tonight?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Maybe. He said he might.

GOLDEN. *(teasing)* Aw, you need your BF to hold your hand? Since you haven't qualified yet?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Next week. Boston. Home turf. Mark my words, I'm going home with first. And Vicious is not my BF. I'm married. Come on. He's just, we're just, whatever.

NINA. You're married?!

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Who are you, again? I'm usually the only female in the room.

NINA. I'm . . . um . . .

SHREDDY. She's still working on a persona.

NINA. The . . .

SHREDDY. She's not competing again until NYC, so she has some time.

NINA. Nina!

CANNIBAL QUEEN. The Nina? Are you backed by the Pinta and the Santa Maria?

NINA. The Nina.

GOLDEN. Righteous. I love that.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. It has . . . a ring. I guess. Cool. Anyways, if any of you see D Vicious, tell him I'm looking for him.

SHREDDY. Your "not-boyfriend."

GOLDEN. With whom you "just whatever."

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Exactly.

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *exits.* NINA *looks at* SHREDDY, *almost frantically.)*

NINA. He's not really going to be here tonight, is he? David Cooper?

GOLDEN. She knows his *full* name.

SHREDDY. Let me guess, you saw his Sprite commercial.

NINA. No. I mean, yes, I saw it, I just . . . do you really think he'll be here?

*(*FACEBENDER *slowly and sadly begins to remove his wig.)*

SHREDDY. Probably not. He hasn't come to a single qualifier this year, and he bailed on that Staten Island halftime show. That dude used to be a friend, but now he's just . . .

NINA. The competition?

SHREDDY. *(bitterly)* Yeah.

GOLDEN. *(looking over at* FACEBENDER*)* Aw, Facebender, man, put your wig back on!

FACEBENDER. *(teetering on the edge)* What is the point, my friends? Shall I disgrace myself and dishonor Lynyrd Skynyrd on the same night, in front of my only progeny?

SHREDDY. *(sighing)* What?

GOLDEN. He's still conflicted about "Simple Man."

NINA. *(taking charge)* Okay, Facebender, look me in the eyes. Take a deep breath in, now hold it, now a deep breath out. Good. Now another deep breath in, hold it, aaaand out. You're doing great.

SHREDDY. What are you, like a first responder?

NINA. Nope. I'm a web developer. And I'm about to troubleshoot the heck outta this situation.

FACEBENDER. I put myself entirely in your hands, The Nina.

NINA. We have four hours till the show. Plenty of time for you to choreograph a performance for a new song, IF it's the right song. And IF we all contribute.

SHREDDY. I'm in.

GOLDEN. Whatever I can do to help, Bender Buddy.

*(*NINA *begins to pace, thinking on her feet. They all watch her.)*

NINA. Okay. First let's consider our audience. What do West Coast people like?

FACEBENDER. Sunshine!

SHREDDY. Driving with the top down and the music blasting!

GOLDEN. Almonds! *(off their looks)* What? They do! They all eat organic food and drink green juice and almonds are like, part of that.

NINA. Okay, so what we're circling around here, is a culture of people, including you, Bender, who like the sun, and wind in their hair, and who want to live forever.

FACEBENDER. Yes. Yes!

NINA. And then, there's a special person in the room. There's a specific, special person in the audience that you want to reach, even more than the judges, isn't there? How do you reach her? What is the song that feels like sunshine, that speaks directly from you to her?

SHREDDY. We find that song, and it'll play right to your strengths.

GOLDEN. Oh, this is some voodoo.

NINA. No. It's targeted advertising. It's not about whether or not the judges "get" it. It's about the magic in the crowd.

GOLDEN. She's right, 'Bender. If you can grab Sophia by the soul, the judges will have no choice but to go along for the ride.

NINA. You're her father. What's the sound?

FACEBENDER. *(he finds the song inside himself)* Oh! OH, my comrades. There is a song. I know it. And it slays.

FACEBENDER'S PERFORMANCE

(Lights shift quickly and GOLDEN, EDDY, CANNIBAL QUEEN, FACEBENDER, *and* NINA *appear, lined up across the stage, under the bright lights of the show. We hear a sound cue of a medium-sized, but enthusiastic, cheering crowd.)*

[#7: "Keep On Loving You"]

*(*FACEBENDER *steps out in front of the other characters as sixty seconds of REO Speedwagon's "Keep on Loving You" begin to play.*

FACEBENDER *is the perfect combination of bombastic and vulnerable. He is laying it all on the line. He's found the perfect song to convey how much he loves his daughter [Did he used to sing this to her as a baby?] and how hard he rocks at the same time. He's a luminous success, basking in how hard he's feeling it, and the judges can't deny the power of that.)*

ANNOUNCER. People, I am thrilled to announce, in first place here tonight at the Western Conference Finals, moving on to the National Championship, the man who ain't ashamed to rock with his heart on his sleeve: FACEBENDER!

NINA. *(to* SHREDDY*)* What do you get if you win the World Championships, anyway?

SHREDDY. Limited-edition custom Flying Finn electric guitar.

NINA. A REAL GUITAR?? A real guitar is the grand prize??

SHREDDY. *(shrugging)* What?

(Lights dim on the venue in San Diego.)

Scene 3: Boston, MA—Mid-Atlantic Conference Finals

(Lights up on a medium-sized, still dingy, venue in Boston. It is the next week. It is late afternoon, and there are no patrons here yet.

NINA *sits in the green room, drinking a beer and working on her computer. This goes on in silence for a moment, until* CANNIBAL QUEEN *enters.)*

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Oh, good, you're here. The Nina, right? I wanna talk to you.

NINA. *(a little panicky)* What? Why? Can't you see I'm working?

(Genuinely curious, CANNIBAL QUEEN *gets momentarily derailed from her original purpose.)*

CANNIBAL QUEEN. What kind of work can you do from the back of this gross place?

NINA. *(hostile)* I build websites. I can do it from anywhere.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Oh. Cool. You don't have to quit your job for the season.

NINA. People quit their jobs to play air guitar?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Yeah, that's half the fun. There's always another bartending job. Or an Uber to drive. No one's leaving their job at the Pentagon or anything.

NINA. And what job did you quit to be here tonight?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. I've got a Masters in classical guitar. So, I mean, I guess I'll teach eventually, when I'm like fifty. Mostly right now, I just do air guitar. And I'm married.

NINA. So it's *his* money that keeps you in leather pants and hair extensions?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Number one, this is my real hair. Number two, yes, it's his money, and he doesn't care what I do with it as long as I'm happy. *(refocusing)* And number three—I want to talk to you, woman-to-woman. I can really help you, you know. If more of us, who are competent, join the circuit, eventually they'll have to let one of us win.

NINA. I don't want your help.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. You one-a those mean girls who can't be friends with other ladies?

NINA. I'm friends with plenty of girls.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Good. So let's get down to business. I don't know what the scarecrow, the tin man, and the lion have been telling you, but it's different for us. You have to be really careful not to give the crowd everything.

NINA. What does that even mean?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Don't let them use you as entertainment.

NINA. Entertainment?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Okay, so like, costume for one thing. You'll see girls who do the whole short skirt, pigtails, slinky boots thing—they never win. The organizers love when they enter, because they give the crowd something to drool over. But they never place. They'll tell you to smile, jump around, give 'em a show, but don't listen to that garbage. I don't give them anything but the music. You have to fight for every second of stage time, and that starts with not dressing like a groupie

*(*NINA *is silent.* CANNIBAL QUEEN *decides to continue being helpful, in her own special way.)*

CANNIBAL QUEEN. And you need a better song. Your freestyle round in Staten Island was nonsense.

NINA. I'm working on something new.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. What?

NINA. Heart.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Heart?! Oh, barf. Come on, it's so cliché.

NINA. *(very defensive)* Hey, Nancy Wilson's guitar playing basically defined the sound of the 70s and 80s. *(short pause)* But I'm also working on some Joan Jett.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. You don't have to do a female guitarist because you're a girl. If you want to play with the boys, think like the boys.

NINA. Or, you know, think for yourself.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Yeah, just don't give them any excuse to write you off, is all I'm saying. If you're gonna do this, actually *do it.* The right way.

NINA. Joan Jett made me want to play guitar! *(short pause)* Anyway, why do you care? Why are you lecturing me?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. This is how mean people make friends—we instruct.

NINA. You and I are not gonna be friends.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. What is your damage?

NINA. You're married! You're married, and you're messing around with Da— D Vicious. Aren't you?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Oooooh. Are you a fangirl? Are you a little D Vicious fangirl?

NINA. *(short pause)* No. I'm his fiancée.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. WHAT?!

NINA. Or. I was.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Oh, no. NO. Hey! I didn't know he had a fiancée! He never told me.

*(*NINA *is not expecting to hear this, and it throws her for a moment.)*

NINA. W-would you have cared if he had told you?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Yes. YES. I don't poach.

NINA. You cheat on your husband.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Not that it's any of your business, but ethical non-monogamy is an *established* part of our marriage. It doesn't mean I go around scamming on other girls' dudes.

NINA. Well. You scammed on mine. And you still are, aren't you? You're still dating him.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Hey, I'm sorry a terrible thing happened to you, but this bad blood is between you and Vicious. Leave me out of it.

(The door to the green room opens, and VICIOUS *enters.)*

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Oh boy.

*(*VICIOUS *moves to* CANNIBAL QUEEN *first, not looking at* NINA. *He tries to kiss her on the cheek.)*

VICIOUS. Hey, gorgeous.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. *(pulling away, nodding her head at* NINA*)* Nope.

VICIOUS. *(seeing* NINA*)* Hold up. Nina?!

NINA. It's The Nina now.

VICIOUS. What? What are you doing here?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. And that's my cue to find another place to be.

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *exits.)*

VICIOUS. *(calling after her)* Astrid? ASTRID?! *(Wheeling around to* NINA*)* What is this, some kind of ambush?

NINA. Oh, calm down. It's not an ambush. I didn't even know you'd be in Boston.

VICIOUS. I'm the reigning National Champion. I could be anywhere.

NINA. I haven't seen you at any of the other qualifiers.

VICIOUS. How many of these competitions have you been to?

NINA. All of them. All over. Facebender's victory in San Diego last week? I was there. I helped him pick his new song. We're *friends* now.

VICIOUS. Stop. Stop talking. You made fun of me for a *solid year* for playing air guitar. And now you're suddenly *on* the circuit?

NINA. My persona is "The Nina."

VICIOUS. THAT'S THE STUPIDEST NAME I'VE EVER HEARD. *(a realization)* Are you—are you trying to get me back?

NINA. No.

VICIOUS. This is about my Sprite commercial, isn't it?

NINA. NO! That stupid commercial was only online, anyway! And nobody likes Sprite!

VICIOUS. EVERYBODY loves Sprite!

NINA. You didn't win the freaking Nobel Prize!

VICIOUS. And yet, you're following me. You never wanted me to do this, you made fun of me to your friends, your parents, anyone who would listen, you NEVER came to a SINGLE show, but now that I'm the champion, oh, suddenly, here you are. Now you care, and you're at every qualifier. I'm suspicious, I gotta tell you. But I shouldn't be. You can't just be supportive, you always know better.

NINA. Oh, I have problems with being supportive? Says the guy who bailed out of nowhere.

VICIOUS. Oh, yeah. We had a perfect relationship and no problems and I just bolted. Sure, you go ahead and tell yourself that.

NINA. I came home one day, and all your stuff was gone. No call, no note, just "You Give Love a Bad Name" blaring on repeat.

VICIOUS. There was no point in having another fight when you had stopped listening.

NINA. When you started to get good at air guitar, you checked out of our relationship.

VICIOUS. Maybe I did, Nina. Because I suddenly remembered what it was like to be around people who *wanted to be around me.*

NINA. I loved you! I loved our band and our apartment and our life. I loved you.

VICIOUS. It was impossible to feel that. *(short pause)* I don't want our old life, and I don't want you. You're just awful.

NINA. *(discovering this)* Oh, this is your *favorite.* This moment when I feel stupid and say too much and you have all the power. You *love* this.

VICIOUS. Oh, that is so typically your move. You act like you don't need help from anybody, but blame everyone else when you fail.

(A hit. A palpable hit.)

NINA. *(pause)* I'm not doing this to get you back.

(Unseen by NINA, GOLDEN, FACEBENDER, *and* SHREDDY *enter the green room. As soon as they see what's happening they stop short, and quietly eavesdrop.)*

VICIOUS. Then why are you here, Nina??

NINA. Because. When someone breaks your heart, you find out what they love most in the whole world. Then you take it from them.

VICIOUS. *(short pause)* You are very dark inside.

NINA. Yeah. You're right. And whose fault is that?

VICIOUS. Your terrible parents?

NINA. You broke up our REAL band, you broke up our REAL relationship, for what? To mess around with somebody else's wife and spend every night with people who think you're cool because you're the best at IMAGINARY GUITAR? To play PRETEND with a gaggle of second-rate UNDATEABLE LOSERS who couldn't be contributing members of society if they tried? THIS is your kingdom? THIS is where you're god? You ruined my REAL LIFE, and you get to be happy in PRETEND LAND? Absolutely not. It may be second-rate, it may be imaginary, but I'm here to take it from you.

*(*VICIOUS *nods his head in the direction of the new arrivals. No one says anything.* NINA *is mortified;* SHREDDY, GOLDEN, *and* FACEBENDER *are crestfallen.)*

VICIOUS. Yeah. Good luck with that. *(short pause)* See you in New York.

*(*VICIOUS *exits.* NINA *turns to her friends, desperate to apologize.)*

NINA. Guys! GUYS! I didn't mean that stuff, I didn't! He gets into my head. Please!

(They brush past her and take positions at the front of the stage.)

SHREDDY. *(without looking at her)* Whatever, Nina.

CANNIBAL QUEEN'S PERFORMANCE

(Lights shift quickly. GOLDEN, SHREDDY, FACEBENDER, *and* NINA *appear, lined up across the stage, under the bright lights of the show. They are joined downstage by* CANNIBAL QUEEN *and* VICIOUS. *We hear a sound cue of a medium-sized, but enthusiastic, cheering crowd. There is also a fair amount of booing in the mix, but that's okay;* CANNIBAL QUEEN's *persona is a villain.)*

ANNOUNCER. Well, well, well! Ladies and gentlemen, chalk one up for the Women's Movement! Taking home the gold tonight here in Boston, and repping the Mid-Atlantic region at Nationals next month, your hometown heroine, the lady we all hate to love: CANNIBAL QUEEN!

(The crowd cheers.)

ANNOUNCER. What's that? What's that?? Hey Cannibal Queen, your subjects want an encore!

[#8: "Arpeggios From Hell"]

*(*CANNIBAL QUEEN *steps out in front of the other characters and absolutely shreds a classically-inspired rock track with no lyrics, "Arpeggios From Hell" by Yngwie Malmsteen.*

CANNIBAL QUEEN *is technically flawless, with the concentration of a surgeon. She isn't flashy. She gives the audience nothing but the music; but the music, and her facility with it, is astonishing. It is by far the most technically difficult song of the competition, and she doesn't miss a single note. She also doesn't smile. When she's done, she takes a brisk, curt bow, like a concert pianist, then stands up straight and makes a crude gesture to the audience. They go wild with boos.)*

*(*VICIOUS *walks up to* CANNIBAL QUEEN *and plants a huge kiss on her lips.* GOLDEN, SHREDDY, *and* FACEBENDER *gather around* CANNIBAL QUEEN *to congratulate her. Everyone except* NINA *exits together, celebrating.* NINA *is alone onstage, looking miserable.*

Lights dim on the Boston venue.)

If you need to take an intermission, it goes here.

Vignette 2: D Vicious's Sprite Commercial

(A small light comes up on NINA, *hunched over a laptop or her phone on the side of the stage. It is a few days later. She is watching the outtakes of D Vicious's Sprite commercial on the internet.*

Over the course of this Vignette, we will see how D Vicious went from an enthusiastic lover of the sport of air guitar, to the jaded buzzkill he is today. The outtakes of this commercial are a microcosm of his past year. In the first take, he is ten times happier than we've seen him. In the final take, he's the man we now know.

VICIOUS *enters; he is in his full persona and costume.)*

[#9: "Crowd Chant"]

(We hear an amped up crowd-pleaser played, Joe Satriani's "Crowd Chant," as VICIOUS *runs around the stage performing. He's exuberant. He works the crowd like a master, using the song's built-in call-and-response. After 30-45 seconds, the song cuts off abruptly.*

We hear the SPRITE EXEC's *voice [but we don't see him/her], which seems to come from everywhere.)*

SPRITE EXEC. So what am I watching here?

VICIOUS. This is something new I'm working on. "Crowd Chant." Joe Satriani? I have a few other cuts on my phone, too, if you want to see something different.

SPRITE EXEC. "Cum on Feel the Noize." That's what we want to see.

VICIOUS. But, I won Nationals with that song.

SPRITE EXEC. Exactly. And that's why we hired you.

VICIOUS. But everyone's already seen me do that song.

SPRITE EXEC. Look, if it works, work it. Don't mess with success, kid.

VICIOUS. But—

SPRITE EXEC. And stay in your box.

VICIOUS. My box?

(A small square of light comes up in the middle of the stage.)

SPRITE EXEC. Your mark. Stay on your mark, genius. Look down.

*(*VICIOUS *looks down at the little box of light on the floor.)*

VICIOUS. Oh. Um, okay.

SPRITE EXEC. Let's take it from the line. We'll just dub "Cum on Feel the Noize" over whatever he just did.

VICIOUS. Hey, I can—!

SPRITE EXEC. *(interrupting)* David Cooper Sprite commercial, take two.

*(*VICIOUS *centers himself and regains most of his enthusiasm. He takes a big sip from an imaginary can of Sprite.)*

VICIOUS. *(holding an imaginary can)* Take it from me, D Vicious: Sprite will *slay* your thirst!

*(*VICIOUS *does a mean air guitar lick, and looks deliriously happy to be here.)*

SPRITE EXEC. Okay, lose the air drinking.

VICIOUS. But it's funny!

SPRITE EXEC. Is it?

VICIOUS. Because I'm an air guitar champion.

SPRITE EXEC. Stick to the script, please.

*(*VICIOUS *looks annoyed. He resets.)*

SPRITE EXEC. David Cooper Sprite commercial, take ten.

VICIOUS. Take it from me, D Vicious: Sprite will *slay* your thirst!

*(*VICIOUS *does a sick power slide across the stage. Stands up. Looks defiant and pleased.)*

SPRITE EXEC. Don't do that.

VICIOUS. Come on, man! The power slide is my signature move.

SPRITE EXEC. You slid right out of frame.

VICIOUS. Well, follow me!

SPRITE EXEC. Stick to your blocking. This is not hard, here, "champ."

VICIOUS. *(crestfallen)* Whatever.

*(*VICIOUS *is chastised. He resets.)*

SPRITE EXEC. David Cooper Sprite commercial, take fourteen.

VICIOUS. Take it from me, D Vicious: Sprite will *slay* your thirst!

*(*VICIOUS *does a sweet double crane kick.)*

SPRITE EXEC. *(weary)* No power slides. No karate. No finger guns. No twirling. No death drops. No air guitar. Just say the line and look at the camera. Got it?

VICIOUS. COME ON!

SPRITE EXEC. Reset!

*(*VICIOUS *is livid. He resets.)*

SPRITE EXEC. *(wearier still)* David Cooper Sprite commercial, take twenty-five.

VICIOUS. *(grumpily)* Take it from me, D Vicious: *(he steps halfway out of his box of light)* Sprite will—

SPRITE EXEC. *(interrupting)* You're off your mark.

VICIOUS. *(stepping back into the light)* I need a break!

*(*VICIOUS *storms off.* NINA *closes the laptop. She's actually feeling bad for Vicious, and she doesn't want to.)*

NINA. *(sympathetic, in spite of herself)* Oh. Oh no.

*(*NINA *exits.*
Lights dim on the Vignette.)

Scene 4: Chicago, IL—Central Conference Finals

(Lights up on a large, but still dingy, venue in Chicago. Somewhere like The Metro. It is the next week. It is late afternoon, and there are no patrons here yet.)

*(*NINA *sits alone at the bar. She got here very, very early. She wanted to catch people coming in the door.*
She waits. Eventually, FACEBENDER *walks in.)*

NINA. Bender! Facebender! Over here!

FACEBENDER. Ah. The Nina. *(pause, he turns to go)* If you'll excuse me.

*(*NINA *stands and blocks his way.)*

NINA. Please! Stay. I want to apologize. Did you get my messages?

FACEBENDER. I did. Thank you so much for your remorseful sentiments. *(pause)* I must to the green room now.

NINA. I apologized! Now forgive me!

FACEBENDER. *(dropping his façade)* You called us "second-rate undateable losers."

NINA. I was out of my mind.

FACEBENDER. When we come to these competitions, it's OUR space, get it? It might smell like old sweat and stale beer in here, but it's supposed to be safe.

NINA. I didn't mean all that stuff you heard me say to David. That wasn't the real me! He . . . he turns me into a rage monster. It's really gnarly. It's like I took a time machine right back to our breakup. But I'm not that person anymore, I promise. I'm a million times sorry, okay?

*(*FACEBENDER *is unconvinced.)*

NINA. Hey, remember San Diego? Remember when I calmed you down, and we all worked as, like, a killer squad, and then you absolutely slayed? And then you added me to the group text? That's the real me. That's The Nina.

*(*FACEBENDER *regards her for a moment, then relents. His demeanor softens. His façade is still dropped.)*

FACEBENDER. Do you want to know how I got into air guitar?

NINA. I would love to know.

(During this speech, FACEBENDER *walks behind the bar and grabs himself a drink, before joining* NINA *in front of the bar again.)*

FACEBENDER. I work for the County of San Diego.

NINA. What do you do? None of you ever talk about your jobs.

FACEBENDER. Because when we're here, everything outside is irrelevant. Except for right now, when I'm telling you this story.

NINA. Got it.

FACEBENDER. Do you know what a Public Guardian is?

NINA. Like . . . Batman?

FACEBENDER. *(laughing)* No. Nothing like Batman. If a person, usually a poor person, dies, and there's no family or friends or will that can be located, somebody still has to clean out their apartment, and bury their body, and tie up their loose ends. That's my job. The apartment-cleaning bit.

NINA. Whoa. How do you get a job like that?

(Note: During the following monologue, it's important that FACEBENDER *does not feel sorry for himself at all. These are the*

facts of his reality, and communicating them to NINA *will make her understand why air guitar is vital.)*

FACEBENDER. Well, it was a match made in heaven. Nobody wants that job, and at the time, nobody wanted me. I was bumming around, couldn't find anything steady. Had run up some sizeable debts. I heard about this job from a buddy, and it sounded easy enough, so I applied. And I got it. You basically just have to be willing to walk into disgusting apartments.

Sometimes we have to wear hazmat suits and bootees. These people can be dead for weeks, or months, before anyone finds them. Before anyone cares. Sometimes there are flies, or roaches, or mice. Lots of times, people's apartments are just full of wall-to-wall junk. This one lady last year, died standing up and stayed that way. There wasn't room in her place to fall over.

We work in pairs, to keep us from stealing. It's weird, seeing what strangers kept in their closets, what they ate, what movies they watched, what kind of toilet paper they used. We go through everything, looking for signs of relationships. Is there an address book? A business card? A computer? Who are the people in these photographs? Are they still alive, would they care that this person is dead? It's the most depressing kind of archeology, but somebody has to do it. And that somebody in San Diego County has been me, for the last few years. I've been through a lot of partners. But I'll tell you one thing.

NINA. *(rapt)* What?

FACEBENDER. When I die, somebody is gonna know. Right away. Lots of people. I used to go through my life like I was gonna live forever, but now I know. It could be any day. But I won't go out anonymous. No stranger is going to have to pick through my stuff, wondering if there's anybody out in the world who'd care to inherit the $300 in my bank account. Before I started playing air guitar, I hadn't seen my daughter, or her mother, in like six years. I felt like too much time had passed, and I was embarrassed to reach out to them. Now, we hang out at least once a month. It's totally awkward, but it's happening. It's getting there.

(Unseen by NINA *and* FACEBENDER, GOLDEN *and* SHREDDY *enter.)*

FACEBENDER. My list of friends gets longer and longer. I text them every day. I hug them every time I see them. When I die, there are gonna be so many broken-hearted punks playing sad, sad air guitar solos at my funeral. I put it in my will.

NINA. That's amazing.

FACEBENDER. I look death in its nasty face every day. And then at night, I come here, and I get up onstage and *live* like there's no tomorrow. Because there isn't. There really isn't. It's silly and it's fun and it's absurd, but life is a slow march off a cliff into nothingness, so why not be as silly as you want?

GOLDEN. I'm gonna play "Stairway to Heaven" at your funeral. All eight minutes and three seconds. Got my routine all worked out.

SHREDDY. I was thinking Weezer's "Say It Ain't So." Some strong power chords to carry you into the next life.

FACEBENDER. *(resuming his persona)* Gentlemen, Miss The Nina is heartily sorry for her offenses in Boston. I move that we unanimously accept her sincere apology.

NINA. I'm so, so, SO, SO SORRY. I'm the worst. I know.

SHREDDY. Lots of people want to date us, actually.

GOLDEN. And we ARE contributing members of society. This all might be pretend, but it's serious pretend.

NINA. I get it. Can I please get back on the group text? PLEASE?

*(*GOLDEN, FACEBENDER, *and* SHREDDY *exchange looks.)*

SHREDDY. What do you say, guys?

GOLDEN. *(shrugging)* Ah, sure.

FACEBENDER. I believe the standard ritual of reconciliation will serve as a suitable penance.

(The three men turn to look at NINA.*)*

NINA. Which is?

(The three men walk over to NINA *and, one by one, very specifically, they "lean" their air guitars against the bar in front of her.)*

SHREDDY. Tune our guitars.

NINA. Oh, COME ON!

GOLDEN. Tune them! That shows us you're truly sorry!

FACEBENDER. It is the traditional mode.

NINA. *(grumbling)* Fine.

SHREDDY. Do mine first, since I'm competing.

*(*NINA *"picks up" the "guitar" that* SHREDDY *put down, and begins to tune it as she would a real guitar. He watches her to make sure she's really doing it.)*

SHREDDY. Much obliged.

*(*NINA *tunes the air guitars until they are all ready, however long that takes.)*

NINA. *(grumbling good-naturedly)* This is a bit much, y'all.

GOLDEN. Ah-ah-ah! If you think you're too good to be here, the judges can smell it a mile away. Mockery is the enemy of airness.

FACEBENDER. Sir, have you just created that glorious motto in this moment?

GOLDEN. Sure did.

FACEBENDER. Extraordinary!

GOLDEN. I thank you.

NINA. Okay, how many of these things do I have to watch before I understand what airness is?

GOLDEN. One never understands airness. One ACHIEVES airness.

SHREDDY. It can't be coached. It almost can't be explained.

NINA. Oh, that clears it up.

SHREDDY. I'll tell you what airness is NOT. Airness is NOT taking notes on what everyone is doing, but never getting up onstage to try anything yourself.

GOLDEN. VERY true.

FACEBENDER. In our world, Miss The Nina, the life of the spectator and the life of the performer are two halves of the same whole. You cannot fully appreciate one without the other.

NINA. I'll get there, okay? Next month? New York? I'll be so ready.

GOLDEN. New York is a huge venue and the competition will be fierce.

NINA. *(slightly annoyed)* I'll know when I'm ready. Trust me.

SHREDDY. *(doubtful)* Okay. It's just way more fun if you actually play.

(They all nod. NINA *looks uncomfortable. The door opens, and* CANNIBAL QUEEN *sticks her head in. Seeing who's in the room, she scurries as fast as she can and exits to the green room, without saying a word to anyone.)*

FACEBENDER. *(softly, to himself, but* GOLDEN *overhears)* Why does she run from me?

GOLDEN. Dude, that was most definitely not about you.

*(*FACEBENDER *follows* CANNIBAL QUEEN *off into the green room, and* GOLDEN *follows* FACEBENDER. NINA *and* SHREDDY *are alone. It's the tiniest bit awkward.)*

NINA. Shreddy, I really am sorry.

SHREDDY. You said. You tuned.

NINA. Yeah, but I feel like I should . . . I need to say something more. To you. You were nice enough to coach me and I felt like maybe we were becoming . . . like . . . maybe . . .

SHREDDY. Is it that hard for you to say the word "friends"?

NINA. *(jokingly confused)* Fa-rends? Yes, friends. I want us to be friends because I think you're cool.

SHREDDY. I am. I am cool.

(A short pause. He smiles at her.)

NINA. Sooo . . . Chicago is your home turf. Gonna do "I Don't Wanna Grow Up" again tonight?

SHREDDY. Indeed. Johnny Ramone and I are in this together.

*(*NINA *gives him a look.)*

SHREDDY. What??

NINA. I mean, so many Ramones songs objectively rock harder.

SHREDDY. Were that true, WERE that true, and I'm not saying it is, how hard a song rocks or how technically impressive it is, is NOT the only thing to consider when choosing a song. Everything about "I Don't Wanna Grow Up" makes it perfect for air guitar, for me, and for the Central Conference Finals.

NINA. *(exaggerated)* Gooo ooon.

SHREDDY. The Ramones are from Forest Hills, Queens. I am from the South Side of Chicago. We are in Chicago now. This is all urban kismet.

NINA. "I Wanna Be Sedated" is better-known.

SHREDDY. Grraaah! Have you learned nothing? Am I, Shreddy Eddy, a man who wants to be sedated??

NINA. Well, it's just—

SHREDDY. *(interrupting)* You are the music and the music is you! You think I just picked my song off a jukebox? "I Don't Wanna Grow Up" was written by Tom Waits for the Bone Machine album, and he wrote that song for EXACTLY ME.

NINA. Exactly you?

SHREDDY. (*getting really worked up)* EXACTLY. It's about a young man, a few years into adulthood, looking at his parents, looking at his society, and stating firmly, "This is broken, and I opt out." He doesn't want the car, or the mortgage, or the soul-sucking job, or to be bald and filled with doubt. He doesn't have an alternative solution, because he's running on fear, he's frantic, he's not thinking logically. The rhythm of it, the speed of the recording, the repetition—it's a tantrum. He's trying to stay a child, he's running as fast as he can in the opposite direction, even though there's NOTHING THERE. It's messed up and it's inevitable. You can't not grow up. *(pause)* That's what Tom Waits knew. That's what the Ramones recorded. That's what I bring to the stage.

NINA. You have the "thing." It's charisma, it's magnetism—

SHREDDY. *(interrupting)* It's hard work, The Nina. Here *(he smacks his head)* and here *(he smacks his heart). (Almost angry)* You don't waltz into a qualifier with Guns N' Roses because you're mad at your ex-boyfriend. We're here to share something, not to take something. Some of us here want to win this because we believe it's special.

NINA. I think it's special, too! I really do.

SHREDDY. I hope that's true. *(pause)* You want to qualify in New York next month? You want to be an air guitar champion? You need to risk everything, because you're gonna have to take it over my dead body. I'm your friend backstage, I'm your friend in the green room, but for those sixty seconds onstage, I'm your competition. And I bleed this.

SHREDDY EDDY'S PERFORMANCE

(Lights shift quickly. GOLDEN, SHREDDY, FACEBENDER, NINA, *and* CANNIBAL QUEEN *appear, lined up across the stage, under the bright lights of the show. We hear a sound cue of a large, enthusiastic, cheering crowd.)*

[#10 "I Don't Wanna Grow Up"]

*(*SHREDDY EDDY *steps out in front of the other characters and slays the Ramones's recording of "I Don't Wanna Grow Up."*

SHREDDY EDDY's *anger and fear and doubt are perfectly channeled by this song. He is right—it was written for him. It's*

almost impossible, for sixty seconds, to believe that he didn't write and record this. His performance isn't flashy, it isn't overly emotive, but it is in earnest. This is the best match of man and music that the judges have seen in a long time. He lives inside it. He gets closer to airness than anyone we've seen yet.

NINA *stares at him, his performance fanning the flames of a massive crush that's been growing inside her.)*

ANNOUNCER. And in first place . . . was there a doubt in anyone's mind? Your hometown hero, Proud Son of the South Side, angry young man with loins burning to represent the Central Conference at the finals next month—SHREDDY EDDY!!

(Lights dim on the venue in Chicago.)

Scene 5: New York—Eastern Conference Finals

(Lights up on a large, but still dingy, venue in New York City. Somewhere like The Bowery Ballroom. It is the next month. It is late afternoon, and there are no patrons here yet.

CANNIBAL QUEEN *and* VICIOUS *are sitting at the bar. They came here together tonight, but the conversation has turned tense.)*

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Come on, just admit it, Vicious.

VICIOUS. I live in New York.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. You're came tonight for one reason. To psych her out.

VICIOUS. False.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. I'm judging you.

VICIOUS. Calm down.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. You're mean when you're scared.

VICIOUS. Scared? What on earth do I have to be scared of?

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Well, The Nina, clearly.

VICIOUS. Nina is not a threat to me in any way, especially air guitar.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. Then why are you here trying to intimidate her?

VICIOUS. I'm a guest of the organizers. They asked me to pick the Round Two song.

CANNIBAL QUEEN. You could've done that over email.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!



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