

Shreddy, Nina, Golden

(SHREDDY hits "play," and FACEBENDER comes to life. We hear the classic rock anthem from the 70s, "More Than a Feeling" by Boston. 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.)

START



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.

— STOP