

PROMPT #1: Write about a god desperately trying to get their chosen hero to follow the path they set out for them.

Organum

by **Abigail Danner**

My bones sing. The reverberation of the organ music seeps through my skin, moves my body, beats with my heart, synchronizes with my soul. I belong here. Beneath the vaulted ceilings, on this cobbled floor, with my fellow elite devotees, worshiping Her. My soul focus, Naamah, goddess of beauty, seduction, and power. Misrepresented in the original texts, her true goals align with the progress of humanity. Under her holy guidance and with her gifts, I have witnessed my brothers and sisters of the cloth produce groundbreaking work in alchemy and the arts alike. Statues chiseled to perfection in her honor, production of precise potions to both heal and harm, athletic feats previously unimaginable. When chosen by the goddess Naamah, one could do anything.

The organist had been chosen over five decades ago. Her title: *Organum*, her name long forgotten. Not only could the old crone produce some of the finest melodies of our time with the grand instrument, but she did so only through the power of Naamah. For the old woman's hands are curled and arthritic, her eyes as white as her hair, and by all accounts, she is as deaf as the cold stone of the altar. Yet, she commands the air through the resonant pipes. Fueled on spirit alone, when the *Organum* plays, it feels as though the air is pulled from the very lungs of the congregation.

Soon my time will come. Goddess Naamah selected a single recipient of her gifts only twice a decade, and tonight was the ceremony for the holy occasion, the *Ritus Potentia*. Invited to tonight's mass are only the most dedicated servants of Naamah and close family. I brought my twin brother, Canaan, to join me for the moment of my inevitable win. While dense and somewhat brutish, he supported my ambitions as much as he could. Canaan shares meat with me from his hunts, and crafts me fine gifts for my religious holidays. Holidays that he does not celebrate himself, for I fear that he was not blessed with the mental capacity to bear the burden

of knowledge that the Faith requires of its devotees. Five years ago, he had given me the white fur-lined boots that now decorated my feet. And five years before that, when we were only 15, and freshly eligible for the *Ritus Potentia*, he had given me a sacrificial dagger. The handle, made of bone, bears a simple carving of a serpent with a milky quartz eye. The implement has a narrow pointed blade, a discrete sliver of metal that I made sure to polish in preparation for tonight. I lay awake many a night imagining my moment: the blue light of the enchanted chandelier glinting off the little dagger as I perform my assigned sacrifice. Naamah had never asked me to perform a blood rite, but I know she will call on me in due time. I have dedicated years to her servitude, pored over the holy texts by both daylight and candlelight. For she is worth it, goodness and power in its purest form. Now, after I am selected, what power would I receive? Perhaps the ability to bless crops, create glorious musical compositions, or just receive recognition for once—

“How are you tonight, Abella?” Priestess Vessa’s voice cuts through the consuming sounds of worship in the cathedral, as if her words bypass the inconvenience of traveling through cumbersome air, communing directly with my mind. Vessa has been head of our congregation for quite some time, her glowing pale complexion present in even my earliest memories. I can only assume that she is a favorite of Naamah as she has aged little in all the time I’ve known her, and she is entrancingly beautiful in a way that can only be explained by divine intervention. Her raven hair is tied in a braid down her holy robe-adorned back. The sway of her tresses resembles a dark serpent moving through reeds, the illusion aided by silver baubles that twinkle in the low light like shifting scales.

“I’m excited, Priestess. I have brought my lamb as you requested.” I keep my eyes down in the presence of the priestess to demonstrate my respect. She alone maintains a direct line to Naamah, and doing her bidding is my best hope of gaining holy favor.

“Very good, my child. And I trust that you also brought support?” After nodding in Canaan’s direction, she lifts my chin with one of her long, delicate fingers, raising my warm hazel gaze to meet her frozen countenance. Vessa gave me a slight smile that didn’t reach her eyes, before promptly pivoting on her heel. She carries on gliding down the aisle to the pulpit, greeting others on her way. Canaan shoots me a quizzical look from his pew across the aisle. I just shake my head and smile at him. I surely do not understand most of my interactions with Vessa, but there is no point in revealing my ignorance now, even to my twin.

The crone conducts the air through the cathedral, her wrinkled hands waving about, jerkily drawing on Naamah’s magic to enhance her performance and commence the ceremony. If the organ had only been powered by a draft previously during worship, the artificial wind now picks up, especially around the pulpit, where Vessa begins to levitate. I look on in reverence of the awesome power of our goddess. This is it. The rite begins.

“Welcome all disciples of Naamah, to what will be the most important *Ritus Potentia* of the century, as morning will be delayed by a total eclipse.” Her ethereal voice carries through the acoustically immaculate cathedral just as the crone’s jagged movements on the organ bench intensify. I hear a low choral moan rising from the cavernous walls of the sanctuary. I look, startled, to the source of the sound. It appears as though the marble saints in each alcove are... singing? Each one emits a moan with a unique tone as wind passes their still stone lips. No sooner have I made this unsettling discovery, that many of my fellow disciples begin to cough, hack, and hiss. However, they soon settle back into paying rapt attention. It appears as though Canaan and I are spared of the coughing fit, for Naamah-knows what reason.

Vessa continues, frozen eyes focused on me, “As usual, I will require the participation of every disciple in the ceremony tonight, for it is an honor to join highest Naamah in the selection of the next chosen one, particularly on the eve of an eclipse.” This gives me comfort. While this *Ritus Potentia* differs from years past, participation is a time honored tradition. My comfort is short lived, as the statues re-commence their chorus, this time joined by the synchronized coughing and hissing sounds of the congregation. Words, configured in a disjointed melody, slowly begin to emerge from the cacophony. Vowels come from the saints lining the perimeter, and consonant sounds break free from the throats of my fellow followers as they seem to struggle for breath. The wind whips through the room now, convecting from the organ pipes through the saints in one continuous gyre. The chandelier appears to respond in kind, the candles blowing out and re-lighting at a startling pace. Darkness. Flickering light. In the cool flashes of light, I see Vessa’s levitating form vacate the pulpit just as the vowel and consonant threads of the supernatural chorus intertwine to form words:

*Have you ever wanted to eat a song?
Needed it in a way that is wrong?
To know what music is made of?
You know your ears are not enough*

“Come here, Canaan.” Vessa’s voice slices straight into my mind over the encyclical music, as she now looms above the altar. I watch as my brother, rather sheepishly, creeps up the aisle to meet Vessa. Surely she asked him to go up first to receive me for when I am selected?

*You need the song inside
To feel the sound slide up your spine
To let it be your water, food, air
Be the subject of your thousand-yard stare*

“Well done, boy, for our highest goddess Naamah has chosen you to be the recipient of her holy gift on this momentous occasion.” The blood drains from my expectant face. I cannot conceal my disappointment. Sadness. Anger. What has he done to deserve her Favor?!

*To have the notes pour past your throat
Filling up your soul, your lungs, your nose
Let each beat, each all-encompassing sweep
Feast on your life, and dig in deep*

“As you are all aware,” Vessa now addresses the whole room, “For Canaan to receive the gift, he must carry out a sacrifice. And because the power given tonight-” she paused, “-is so *special*, so also must be the sacrifice.” Typically, the recipient would slaughter a goat or lamb that they had raised themselves for just this occasion. My lamb sits safe in a pen outside. Canaan did not bring a lamb. No sooner does this cross my mind that a disciple to my right clutches her throat and collapses. The forced sickly singing proceeds without her:

*Ever wanted Beats that meet the heart in your Chest fully
Move fast red blood through you Orchestrally
To have the mental noise move in time, in synch
Let your body go down and dark, let it Sink*

“Abella, will you please come here?” Vessa’s voice, oft void of inflection, sounds almost smug.

*Craved the peace of surrender to the sound
The only thing within is this song, it surrounds*

Each step I take plunges me in and out of blackness as the air swirls around the chandeliers. I grip my little dagger for comfort under my cloak, thumb brushing over the opaque eye of the serpent on the hilt. When the room flashes dark, I can still see Vessa’s glowing eyes trained on me. When the room lights up in time for my next step, the crone disappears entirely. Perhaps she has become the music? With the next tempestuous sweep of darkness and air, the pace of the tormented choir increases, fervent now:

*You need to fail to feel the full escape
The filled emptiness of space
To forget old mistakes,
To forget past due dates
To eat this song, savor the taste
Its smooth flavor is great
She soothes the hate
Calms the rough seas into a lake
Survives the tough seasons and takes...*

Bathed in blue candlelight once more, I arrive at The Altar. More disciples have fallen now, their breath stolen, but the music persists. I had been so fixated on Vessa’s hypnotic eyes that I failed to notice that she had armed Canaan. He now holds a hunting club in his vascular hand,

not dissimilar from the one he would so aptly wield to procure meat for me. Gifts for me. Show his love for me. Now, his eyes are a soulless blue, his jaw set. He plans to use it.

The endless drone, the noise, the negativity

Dark. I brush my thumb against the eye of the serpent for comfort.

Being alone, the choice, the hostility

Light. Suddenly, I could see. Not the cathedral, but a courtyard, with Vessa. Only, she wasn't dressed in ceremonial robes but a dress, the skirt made of shadow that flowed like fog.

She swirled behind me, leaving a trail of ink in the air. "You ssee, Abella. It was always you. Jusst ass I wass always her." My Goddess! I was now wrapped in a coil of smoke, like a rodent enveloped by a constrictor. Dark.

*And replaced with
A debtless home, a voice, a melody
Feeling known, the joy, novel civility...*

Light. I am back at the altar. Crone gone. Vessa gone. Just one disciple standing, offering weak, accenting consonants amid fits of coughing. Canaan in front of me. Blade in hand, I strike with speed that can only be afforded by an explicit blessing, for he was bigger and stronger than I in every way.

Let it consume you

Dark. Warmth seeps over my clenched fist. Salt and snot fall from my face.

Let it undo you

Light. Red. Red on the altar. Oh goddess. Oh goddess what has she made me do!?

You need to eat the song

Dark. Compelled by tradition, or Namaah herself, I taste iron.

Let it consume you.

Light. The doors of the vestibule fly open, with a bang. The wind comes straight for me.

Let it undo you.

Dark. The power enters me, sacrifice satisfied. Every note makes sense. Every beat of wings, every song, every thread, I am the *Organum*. The air is all mine to control! I use it to sing:

*You needed to eat the song!
Needed it in the way that is wrong*

Light.

I, solitary in the cathedral, walk from the altar. The organ music traces a lazy swing through the air like birds on a cool morning. I am holding something. Just a little blade with a serpentine handle, its eye a limpid sapphire.

With my wind alone for company, I walk out of the sanctuary, out of the nave, out. A little white lamb bleats at me as I pass, but I am followed only by the red footprints of my red, fur-lined, boots.