

THE VALOK

“The Ringing Peaks”

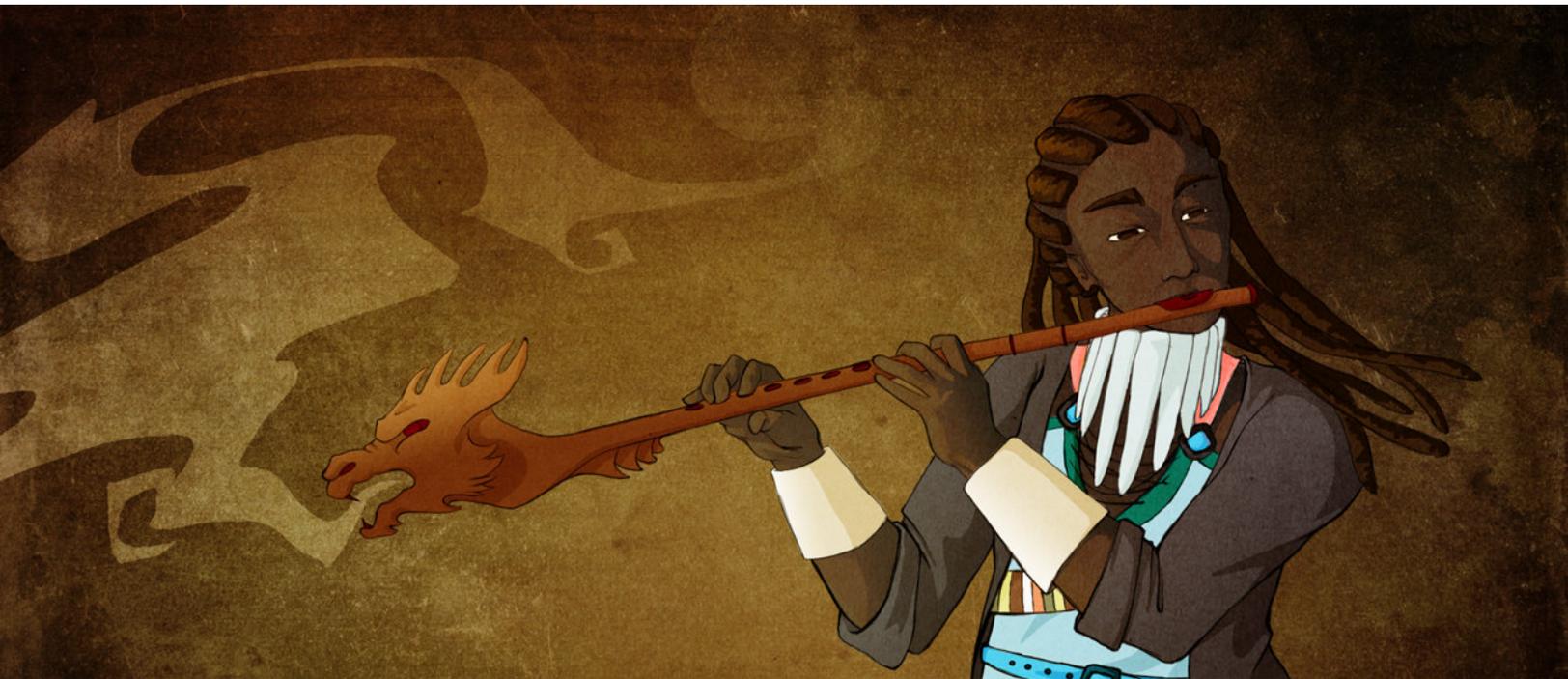
You see those high mountain peaks? The callers are the only thing keeping them from landing on our heads.

Well, that’s not quite right, and you know it. Keeping the callers happy is the only thing that’s keeping those peaks from landing on our heads.

Their song can call down the mountains, call down the chill winds, call down all the evils of the world if they want it to. But their song can call down the rain as well, and all the things we need in life. So we keep them happy, and they keep us safe.

Well, most of us. I know you miss your brother. I miss him, too. But he had a power that he shouldn’t have, and it would have been danger for all of us.

So try not to miss him too much. I’d rather be safe and a little bit sad than free and buried in an avalanche. Wouldn’t you?



To an outsider, the Valok resemble any other loose grouping of primitive tribes, eking out a harsh existence on the sides of the mountains that they call home. They venerate their leaders, the callers, and occasionally exile a young man or woman for the crime of what seems to be little more than a run of especially bad or good luck. They play songs around their fires at night, and tell stories of dangers that the callers’ powers keep at bay.

The truth behind the Valok is there for those who look. The callers are what some societies name as poets, others as musicians, and others, bards. A combination of all three and more, the callers use their songs to call down the forces of the elements. They use this magic to protect their tribes, driving away enemies and bringing down rain

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in the growing season. But the callers are hardly altruists. Many of them rule their tribes with an iron fist, threatening to call down an avalanche if they are disobeyed.

Such callers will exile any potential threat to their power. Greatest among these threats are the voiceless, abominations who possess magic that they can wield without the aid of words or song. Such aberrations are killed or driven away, even if they claim to support the caller's rule. For as all the callers know, power begs to be used. Some of the Valok see the callers as precious gifts, their magic enabling the tribes to survive where others would perish. Others see them as simply part of the natural order of things, and at worst, a necessary evil. A few, especially those who have lost friends to exile, see the callers as brutal tyrants. But these few seldom last long.

Training with weapons of any form is forbidden by all but a few callers. Some claim that it is to protect the tribe from accidents, but others are more blunt: they will tolerate no threat to their supremacy. Hunting is accomplished with traps and snares, and larger predators are stunned into submission by the caller's spells. Brawls among members of the same tribe are rare, and conflicts between tribes are carried out entirely by the callers, so there is little reason for a Valok to ever learn to fight. Despite this, they are not helpless.

Valok background benefits: You gain the *Tunewise* daily power.

Appearance

Valok callers dress elaborately, emphasizing their particular style of music. A caller whose chosen instrument is the flute might wear flowing clothes adorned with ribbons, while one who plays the drum is more likely to wear leather sewn with plates of metal and bone that she can tap on whenever she feels the desire to improvise a tune.

Whatever their instrument, the callers dress to impress. Many young callers will travel leagues away from the mountains in order to barter for or steal an appropriately imposing outfit. Billowing cloaks, embroidered vests and shadowy helms are popular, as are roguish masks and gaudy jewelry. While few callers take the time to become especially skilled at swordplay, many will wear a rapier or even a greatsword simply for effect.

All the Valok, both callers and not, wear their hair long and adorned with beads. The high mountain winds through the beads produce sounds reminiscent of a rockfall, a reminder of the callers' power. Many Valok adorn themselves with beads in other places, and some will even wear bells on the cuffs of their garments. Music is the highest power that the Valok know, and so even a hint of music can be enough to ward off danger and ill luck.

Aside from bells and beads, non-caller Valok dress simply. There is little wealth among their people, and so most wear rough garments in earth tones.

Tunewise Valok Background Power

You can hear the strands of the arcane tune, and you know the truth of the melody.

Daily * Arcane

Immediate Reaction Personal

Trigger: You fail a saving throw against a Charm or Fear effect, or you roll an Insight check versus a Bluff attempt and dislike the result.

Effect: Reroll the saving throw or check with a bonus equal to the number of healing surges you have remaining.

Special: You may spend a healing surge to regain the use of this power.

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Hierarchy

Each tribe is ruled by one, and only one, caller. Very rarely a pair of callers will rule a tribe, but this situation seldom lasts long. Young Valok who show signs of musical or magical talent quickly learn to hide it. If they are discovered, they are killed or driven from the tribe. If not, they will practice in secret until they believe their skills great enough to challenge the caller of another tribe. Young callers seldom try to take over their own tribes, though it sometimes happens.

A caller who wishes to rule a tribe of his or her own will find the weakest rival they can to challenge. The loser of such a battle is nearly always killed. The tribe will then celebrate their leader's victory, whether their leader is the old caller or the new. While some tribes are fond of their caller, it is considered best for all that the strongest caller rule and protect the tribe, so there are seldom objections to any transfer of power.

Most callers will have an inner circle who carry out their orders, and act as their eyes and ears among the tribe. Some callers will just have one or two trusted lieutenants and ignore everyone else, while others will divide their entire tribe up into a strictly ranked hierarchy.

Every once in a while, a renegade with magic will try to take over a tribe. Though they sometimes succeed in defeating the caller, they are nearly always rejected by the tribe, and few manage to rule for long. Only callers possess the magic that can protect the tribe from the dangers of the mountains, and so it is seen as incredibly foolhardy to ever wish to be ruled by anyone else.



Spirituality and Ritual

The Valok worship the elements and music. Since the callers have power over both, this reaffirms their place as the rightful leaders of the tribes. Worshipping anything else is dangerous, as it suggests allegiance to something besides the caller.

Ancient shrines dot the mountains, proof that the Valok once venerated spirits and gods, but most of these practices have been lost. A few people here and there might still worship in private, but no tribe calls any deity patron.