

## Habitat

**The Trees are the most significant** element of the biome. However, the Trees are not “plants”, they are the very world itself. They dwell only in the sunlit portions near the top, but that still gives them several kilometers of vertical space, from the “bottom” of the main canopy to the tops of the highest outliers. Their main branches are hundreds of meters in diameter, and everything else grows upon them. Entire trees of more normal stature can take root in their bark. The Trees themselves, since they *are* the world, are sacred, and not to be harmed. This means the only parts of the Trees that are used in any way are dead branches and leaves, and fruits – those parts that the Trees “offer” to aid the rumel.

**There are three categories of life** in the canopy: rumel, animals (including most insects), and plants (including fruits and most non-flying insects). The animals can be summed up in a few simple categories.

**Dozens, or hundreds, of species of squirrels** and other arboreal rodents, ranging in size from mouse to fox; most are omnivorous, some can glide, very few have any intelligence to speak of.

**Lemur-like prosimians**, characterized by semi-opposable thumbs, usually on all four hands. The largest are the size of a hamster, and none have any resemblance to the rumel; none are terribly intelligent.

**Birds.** Most are herbivores or insectivores, and resemble songbirds or sparrows, but there are a few species of hawk-like predators. Of special note among the birds are the many parrots, all of which are excellent mimics, and some of which can learn to speak rumel. Only one bird is large enough to be a real threat to rumel: the *raradjo*. This large, brightly-colored parrot can seriously wound an adult rumel, and carry off a child. Thankfully, while quite territorial, it is herbivorous. The only bird the rumel truly fear, however, is the raven-like *wðwð*, which, since it is all black and can speak, is known to be a tool of the demons.

**Lizards.** Many species, almost as common as the squirrels. None are larger than a hamster, and most are tasty.

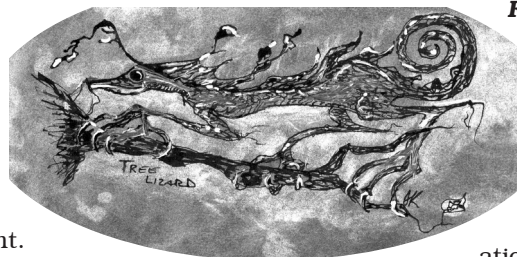
**Snakes.** Despite the seemingly optimal conditions, snakes are actually quite rare. However, those that are found here are almost invariably poisonous. For this reason, they are the only creatures small enough for eating that the rumel do not eat. Luckily, most are shy and avoid contact, so bites are uncommon. The only one that regularly is a problem is the *rungo*, a huge constrictor snake that could swallow a rumel whole even if its jaw couldn't unhinge. It spends most of its time very well-camouflaged as a large branch, until something big enough to be worth its while grabs it or steps on it. It waits until the creature is right at its middle, and then attacks. It can even kill a *djòru*, most of the time – though the *rungo* is likely to die, too, from lingering wounds.

**Insects.** Untold numbers. Ants, beetles, and wasps are the most common, but there are still more flies or butterflies than flowers. Larvae, grubs, and caterpillars are considered plants, rather than insects.

**Frogs.** Only insects and flowers are more common. Frogs come in all sizes and colors, with the largest approaching the size of a rumel's head.

**Wadjale.** This is, except for perhaps the *rungo*, the largest animal in the canopy. A *wadjale* is a huge sloth. They are very ill-tempered, and have wicked claws as big as a rumel's hand. Luckily, they are slow-moving and herbivorous. Unluckily, they move so slowly, and are often so completely covered in mosses and lichens and even small flowering plants, that it is easy to “sneak up” on one, without being aware of it.

**Djòru.** “Tree wolves.” Resembling a vicious cross between a sloth and a wolverine, four to six times the mass of an adult rumel, they are as at home slinging from the bottoms of branches (where they rarely get noticed) as running along the tops of them (where they can outrun most animals). They have a very stocky torso, with four long legs that end in ragged, tearing claws, capable of tearing a rumel in half with a single stroke. Their shaggy, darkly-mottled fur is, like that of the *wadjale*, often infested with mosses and lichens, making them even harder to spot. They have a thick moderately-long tail that is used only for balance. The only thing more terrifying than their claws is their



text copyright © 2002 The Impossible Dream: art copyright © 2002 Jill Krzywicki

jaws: *djòru* have huge fangs, and a double-hinged jaw that makes it possible to bring them to bear all at once. There are only a couple of reasons they are not an even greater problem. First, they are solitary and territorial, so when two meet, usually only one survives. Second, they aren't very good jumpers, so most creatures can get away if there is a big enough gap nearby. But only with some advance warning – they are capable of amazing bursts of speed for short distances.

**Almost all of the plants are epiphytes**, with long roots dangling in the wind (except, of course, for the Trees themselves). A few invade the Trees themselves, much like a strangler fig. The plants of the canopy are the most colorful element in a very colorful world, exceeding all but the brightest butterflies and beetles, and putting the most decorated of rumel to shame.

## Food

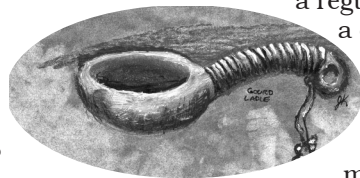
**Fruits** include actual fruiting bodies (berries, fruits, melons); flowers; seed pods, seeds, and nuts; a few cysts and rusts; and various caterpillars, grubs, inch-worms, larvae, and chrysalises (if it doesn't have the right number of limbs and a hard shell, it's not an insect). In short, any part of the plant that is obviously distinct and easily removable. They also eat several plant-derived substances, notably various nectars, pollens, and honey.

**Spices** are all plant-derived (including, again, many crawling invertebrates), and are selected primarily for color, secondarily for odor, and with some consideration to texture. Most are dried, ground, and/or roasted stems, leaves, or roots – all parts of the plants that are not directly edible. A few edible fruits (mostly nuts or seeds, some chrysalises) are also ground and roasted as spices.

**Animals** make up about two-thirds of the diet, and consist of pretty much anything that moves and fits (whole) in a rumel's mouth. Frogs, beetles, and squirrels make up the bulk, with butterflies frequently used as garnish. Birds are also commonly eaten, but are considered a bit more of a delicacy, due to the extra effort to catch them.

**Drinks** are mostly water or leaf- or larva-teas, but do include a cocoa analogue, made from a ground nut.

**Rumel do not cook**, at least as we think of it. Rumel are unwilling to cut animals, and do not generally cook them. Fruits, of course, do not require cooking to be edible, and while they can technically cut up larger fruits to make them bite-sized, they rarely do so, preferring to eat smaller fruits. Spices, of course, are about color, not flavor. So, cooking for the rumel is essentially the art of artfully arranging small dead animals and picked fruits to be pleasing to the eye, and applying further coloring to enhance the overall appearance. There are two exceptions to this: singeing, and soups. Some rumel prefer to remove the fur or feathers from their food, and this is accomplished by heating a large-ish flat stone in a fire and then removing it, and then quickly rolling the animal back and forth on the stone to burn off any hair or feathers. Soups are not eaten on a regular basis, and never contain animals. They are usually a clear broth made with a mixture of spices and fruits, but occasionally include whole fruits. They are always served cold, but sometimes are heated as part of the preparation. Soups are generally only used for rituals: as part of special ceremonies (such as mating) and as medicines.



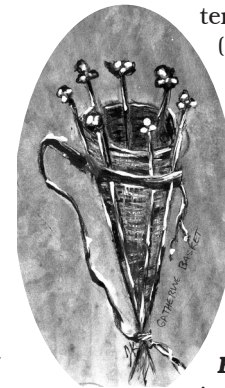
## Common Possessions

**Climbing Stick:** This is the equivalent to a walking stick, and as such is carried by most elderly rumel, and many who travel a great deal, as well as others. However, it's function is slightly different. It is designed not so much to improve purchase while walking, as it is to provide a safety net should one fall. Each is individual, some being carved into shape and others used as found. They are generally short (so as not to get caught when not needed), but not too short (so as to have a good chance of catching something when needed). Typically, this balances out at a bit less than limb-length for most rumel, shorter for some. Some of the very elderly, who no longer leap much at all, use a climbing stick greater than their own span, to maximize it's safety. Most are roughly straight for most of their length, with several branches/hooks at each end. Most of these are at least slightly recurved, so that, should the rumel fall, a flailing limb is likely to hook the stick over a branch.

**Belt:** Most rumel wear a belt. This is usually woven of the fibers of the tough *djodjoma* leaf, and closed by tying it through a wicker loop woven into one end. Some (especially

traders and shamans) will weave one or more bags or pouches or baskets directly into the belt, but most simply tie containers on when needed.

**Bandoleer:** Those who need to carry more than is practical with just a belt usually augment it with a bandoleer, often tied to the belt at one side. Bandoleers more often have integral bags. For truly great loads across long distances, a basket with attached straps is used. The rumel climbs into its harness, with straps across the base of all 4 limbs. Sometimes a 5th strap ties around the chest, if heavy loads or difficult terrain are anticipated, but most rumel find this even more uncomfortable. (For large loads across short distances, baskets with handles are the most common solution.)



**Bags:** Bags come in all sizes and materials, ranging from silk-soft fabrics for primarily-decorative storage of symbolic goods (such as symbols of office), to tough nearly-uncuttable heavy canvases. Some bridge bag and basket, being made of a supple material stretched over or loosely attached to a rigid frame. Closures are usually ties or loop-and-toggles, but some (especially those intended for very small contents) use drawstrings or roll-tops. A few use buckles, but they are generally not considered worth the extra effort (compared to simple ties).

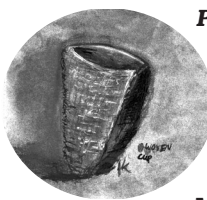
**Baskets:** As stated above, the line between basket and bag for the rumel is a fuzzy one. They make all sorts of containers with the whole spectrum of possible combinations/variations in rigidity. In addition to typical containers, their cooking vessels are shallow bowl-like “baskets” woven of the *wadjare* leaf, which are thus water-tight and able to resist flame for several minutes.

**Other Containers:** Rumel also use ceramic jars/pots/urns of various sorts. However, since all of these are gotten in trade with the Underworld, they are generic in shape, and thus often not as useful as a basket built for the job.

**Instruments:** Given their prohibitions on cutting up animals, there are many fewer types of instruments in their society. They have many varieties of rattles and shakers, and a simple all-wood drum. The rest of their instruments are flute or didgeridoo variations, some having multiple pipes, other having finger holes, some neither, some a mixture. These are usually made of carved wood (often hollowed by insects, first), but most serious musicians swear by the instruments from the Underworld (i.e., bone).

**Tools:** Except for Rememberers, most rumel carry some tools of their position or job with them most of the time (Rememberers *have* no tools of the trade). For weavers, this could include a draw knife, a mallet & pounding stone, a shallow tray basket for pulping fibers (much in the way paper is made), a fiber comb (for separating and straightening fibers; possibly several of them for multiple types of materials), a water bag or -jug for soaking fibers to soften them, dies, and even a portable loom frame (especially for architectural weavers). Those who are agriculturalists will likely have a bone or wood whistle (for long-distance communication), a thresher, several baskets or bags that can be propped open, and a large shallow bag, more like a blanket, that can be spread out to catch falling fruits. If they hunt, they might instead carry bags, ties, a throwing net with lead, and several throwing sticks. While bureaucrats don't have any tools of the trade, per se (other than their personal rememberer(s)), they often wear symbols of office, and thus are the only rumel who regularly wear clothes.

**Decoration:** Most rumel possessions are decorated. Whether simply or with great detail varies with individual taste, but coloration is more societally controlled. Since their own plumage is a significant point of pride, it is generally seen as overstepping one's place to have excessively bright possessions. The brighter and gaudier the color scheme, the higher the indicated status of the bearer.



**Plant fibers** of all sorts are just about the only material commonly used in rumel technology. Therefore, almost everything is constructed around principles of tension, rather than compression. Some wood is used, but generally only in the found shape. Wax and rubber pretty much complete their inventory of raw materials.

**Metal, stone, bone, glass, & ceramic** are all fantastical materials which come from the Underworld. They have no knowledge of their origins, or how to work them beyond simple carving of the softer bone. They have no tools hard enough to work metal or glass, and they know that glass, bone, stone, and ceramic, while hard, are brittle and likely to break if you try and carve them or otherwise compromise their integrity.



---

## Society

---

***The family*** is the basic social unit, providing love and nurtur-ing for the adults and children. However, rumel families are more social constructs than genetic ones. A typical family con-sists of 4-8 adults of similar age, some of them couples, some of them single, and the females’ children. The couples may be married or not, and the rest of the individuals may or may not be related by blood. Monogamy is expected in marriage, but casual sex is otherwise of no concern – rumel are infertile without the aid of special drugs (which only the shamans provide), so sex carries no risk of unintended pregnancy, and they have many fewer taboos about it. (Even sex between lit-termates is acceptable, just not reproduction.)

***In fact, it is the shamans who decide who shall mate*** to reproduce, something that is done twice a year in the central square. These couplings have nothing to do with domestic relationships, and the genetic father has no role in the resulting child’s life. If the mother is married, her husband is considered the child’s father (both socially and legally). All the other adults of the family are aunts and uncles, and their children are cousins.

***The larger society of rumel*** is a Byzantine, sophisticated affair, with multitudinous bureaucrats and officials, some elected, some appointed, some inherited. There are committees, and councils, and council-appointed committees, and commis-sions, and so on, that oversee nearly every aspect of rumel life to one degree or another, and politicians and administrators aplenty of all stripes to fill these positions. About a quarter of the population is some sort of administrator or bureaucrat, not including the many Rememberers employed by the government. It is a given that manipulation, pressuring, bribery, blackmail, and just about any deceitful or indirect form of influence goes on behind the scenes, and that this, as much as or more than what is right or effective, determines what actually gets done, and how.

***The only significant exception to this is the Magistrate.*** Every significant town has one, usually appointed. The Magis-trate is a combination investigator, judge, jury, and sometimes penal system. To carry out their tasks, the Magistrate has a bevy of elected aids and employees that can act in her name. They can also deputize whomever they need to carry out their tasks, and most tend to give their appointed aids make-work and deputize trustworthy friends to do the actual work.

---

## Architecture

---

***Rumel houses*** are generally nest-like, with the only openings being the doors. A typical house will consist of 6-20 roughly-spherical rooms, thus resembling a cluster of soap bubbles. There are typically 2-5 doors, which are usually just a curtained opening, but no windows. Since they are woven of a mixture of harvested and still-living branches, leaves, and vines, more than enough light gets inside. A home typically houses a single family group, and is generally used only for sleeping, cooking, and eating. Furniture is unused, except for the occasional table. Social visits generally take place elsewhere, and sex is usually conducted outside, away from others, where some privacy can be had.

***Larger public buildings*** generally don’t have walls or floors at all, and are just suspended tent-like roofs. They often have curtain-like walls that can be rolled down in the event of inclement weather during an important activity, but even then

***There is no writing.*** The rumel are not only completely illiter-ate, having no concept of symbolic representation, but barely even make use of fixed representation – their art is almost always abstract. Instead, everything is oral, with fully a quarter of the society being professional Rememberers. There are not only Rememberers for such things as history and mythology and law, but family Rememberers who replace the thousands of written lists and notes we keep, and Rememberers whose sole job is to index other Rememberers, in order to tell others who to consult on any given topic.

***Money*** is another province of the Rememberers. The basic unit of currency is the Minga, named after a type of melon. However, when actual melons were last used has been forgotten. Today, money is a purely virtual affair, with a network of Rememberers who keep track of who has how much money, and who owes whom, and so on. Even bribery is usually done with virtual currency, rather than hard goods, leading to off-the-record transactions in most Currency Rememberers’ records.

***Food production occupies about a third of the society, and the remaining sixth make up the labor pool,*** mostly weavers of a hundred different sorts. Nearly everything they use is woven in one way or another, from houses that are basically nests of woven living branches, to papers and cloths woven of heavily-processed plant fibers. Most everything is flexible, rather than rigid, and even most rigid structures are tension-based, rather than relying on compression. So, the public baths are basically a huge basin stretched taught between Tree limbs, and the rest of the town square (as well as other large build-ings) rely mostly on huge suspension cables. The ritual biers, upon which matings and funerals occur, are more like ham-mocks than platforms. And so on. Only small tables, and some personal tools, use rigid technologies.

***Rumel often have small birds or arboreal mammals*** (mostly squirrels) as pets. And, like humans, they often ascribe to them more intelligence and awareness than they truly possess. Unlike humans, they do so not out of anthropomorphization (rumelomorphization?), but because of their animist beliefs. They also use some creatures for labor. Since there are almost no large herbivorous animals in the canopy, they do not have beasts of burden, or for riding, or for heavy-duty labor. How-ever, some do train squirrels as messengers and gofers. Of course, a “messenger” squirrel has no written message to carry, so they are most often trained to fetch various people.

only the windward side is usually enclosed. Internal walls are essentially unheard-of. Furniture, other than tables, is also quite rare.

***Villages*** generally cluster towards the top of the canopy. Most are arranged around a central “square”, where the public baths and ritual biers, used for matings and funerals, are located. The magistrate’s office, as well as other important public offices, are usually here, also. A typical village will have a population of a thousand or so, with large cities having as many as 5000 inhabitants.

***The pub*** is probably the most important social venue, other than perhaps the public baths. It is here that most people go after work to socialize with friends and further political schemes. It is likely that as much or more politicking is accom-plished over a gourd of cocoa in the evening than in the official offices all day.

---

## Physiology

---

***Rumel are, basically, lithe spider-monkey-like people*** with a colorful display crest, much like the Earthly Bird of Paradise.

***All four limbs*** are used interchangeably, with fully-opposable thumbs, and are thus of essentially equal build. The limbs are exceptionally long, often 3 times the length of the torso. Each finger is topped with a slender, razor-sharp retractable claw. These break quite easily from sudden stresses, so are only used to aid purchase while climbing.

***The tail*** is even longer than the limbs, and nearly as agile, able to pick up quite small objects accurately.

***The display crest*** starts at the forehead, and runs all the way to the tip of the tail, and beyond. It consists of stiff bristly hairs, not quite of the sturdiness of quills, which the rumel can control with some precision – though strong emotions tend to be hard to hide.

***Rumel have gentle black eyes*** which provide excellent stereo-scopic eyesight, slightly better than humans’ at distance. They are better able to distinguish colors, especially at a distance, and deal much better with sharp contrasts – rumel have no problem making out details in complex shadows while looking into bright sun. However, they are not nearly as good at seeing in generally-low-light conditions, and have trouble seeing well enough to get around at night unless the moon is full (and the sky clear).

***They have a short snout,*** with an active nose, and a very long agile tongue, enabling them to do most of their eating without using their hands. Their teeth display a mixture of shapes suited to their omnivorous diet. Their sense of smell is quite well developed. They can identify one another by scent (though they rarely do, in practice – since they are uncomfortable in the dark, they habitually rely on sight). They can not, generally, track by scent, however – their ability to pick up faint odors is not that well-developed. They can also often accurately identify traces of one substance in a much-larger quantity of another substance (such as a dash of spice in a large vat of soup), though they are still thwarted by strong-smelling substances. However, there is no connection between the nasal passages and mouth. This means that they can eat and breathe at the same time, but since they have no taste buds, it also means that scent plays almost no role in the flavor of food.

***They have relatively small somewhat-pointed conical ears*** on the sides of their heads. The ears are not as long or large as a cat’s, but the excellent muscle control the rumel has over them makes directionalizing sounds very easy. A set of feather-like feelers surrounds the ears, further aiding in sound direction, and protecting the ears. Rumel hearing is superb, comparable in Earth creatures to that of a cat. They can hear a very wide range of pitches and have very acute sensitivity. Most rumel can hear boring insects in plants, and they often find caterpillars (“wiggly fruits”) by hearing which leaves they are under.

***Rumel sense of touch*** is similar to that of humans, except that their tongue, hindhands, and underside of the tail are just as sensitive as their forehands. Also, they have a huge comple-ment of feeler whiskers all over their body. Most of these are on the head (upper lip, jawline, chin, and above the eyes, as well as those around the ears), but there are also feelers on their forearms. All of these whiskers are wired directly into the rumel’s reflexes. Those on the limbs initiate grab reflexes, at whatever triggered them. Those on the head cause the rumel to blink, duck, or otherwise protect the threatened area.

***Coloration:*** Rumel are uniformly chestnut-brown – both their skin and their fur shows essentially no variation across an individual, and almost no variation between individuals. Fur covers everywhere except their heads, the underside of the tail, and the palms of all four hands. Their teeth are white, and the rest of the insides of their mouths are a bright blue. But that is far from the end of their color. In addition the display crest, all of the whiskers (on head and limbs) are colored. The crest and whiskers can be found in every color imaginable, and in patterns from staid solids to wild stripes, spots, swirls, and others. Coloration tends to pass through the family – children usually have similar whisker and/or crest coloration to their parents, but it is rarely identical to either. This unique color-ation of whiskers and crest is the primary means of identifica-tion (reinforced with smell at closer range) among rumel – variations of facial features are quite subtle, and rumel rarely wear much in the way of clothing. Furthermore, gender is not visually apparent, though females tend to be slightly larger.

***Rumel are considered adults*** on their 7th birthday, and live to be about 40, usually remaining physically and mentally capable until their last year or so.

---

## Cosmology

---

***Trees and rumel have souls,*** all other creatures do not. Souls would much rather go on to the afterlife than dwell in this one. Similarly, demons suffer a tortured existence in their native realm, and would much rather come into the world. Only by displacing a soul can a demon remain in the world. However, they can temporarily inhabit any being of flesh, living or dead, and then use this to gain entry to a suitable host. Once there, the demon must destroy or expel the resident soul, unless it is already gone. There is no known way to dislodge a demon, once the original soul is gone.

***Luckily, skin is a barrier*** to all ethereal being, both souls and demons. These three facts explain a great many of the rumel’s behaviors. Rumel do not chop or pierce the animals they eat, even after they are dead, lest they serve as a conduit for a demon. They also have very few pointed or edged tools, and no such weapons. Since they refuse to cut a body, even after death, they have essentially no knowledge of anatomy.

***Any rumel that suffers a significant breech of the skin,*** even if they survive the actual wound (rumel medicine is woe-fully primitive when dealing with cuts/punctures), will almost certainly become possessed by a demon (once the soul escapes), and then be outcast. Thankfully, the actual wound need not be witnessed, as those who have been possessed are readily identifiable: any rumel that is possessed by a demon turns completely black, except for her teeth. Any protestations of feeling unchanged are, of course, ignored, since demons are wily sorts who are more than capable of lying – and, besides, the fact that the possessed is unaware is no proof they aren’t possessed.

***Death is permanent,*** though ghosts and other spirits are common. It is very important that a proper funeral be con-ducted, so that a person’s soul can go on to the afterlife, so this is also done when someone is suspected to have died but a body has not been found. Should a person return after that point, they are clearly a ghost, and since only shamans and the insane see ghosts, they are paid no attention.