

IZANAMI AND IZANAGI: A CREATION STORY

If the feinnidh was captured during this chase or his weapons shook in his hand, he would be rejected. He was also not accepted if his braided hair had been disturbed by a tree branch or if a dead branch cracked under his foot.

These are just a few of the tough tests a feinnidh had to face. As you might guess, not many who tried out actually became members of the Fionna.

Tara, the castle where Gráinne and her father lived, is a well-known place in Ireland. In fact, it was from there that the ancient Irish kings and queens ruled.

Margaret Mitchell, the author of *Gone With the Wind*, may have been inspired by this name. The southern mansion of the central family in her novel is called Tara. And the family who lived there—the O'Haras—are of Irish descent.

The Irish priests were called druids. These druids were powerful members of society. It was their job to smooth things over when the gods became angry. The druids were also respected teachers and magicians.

The word *druid* means “knowledge of the oak.” The Irish people held the oak in high esteem. They were even known to worship oak trees in the belief that the trees were gods.

Where did Diarmuid end up after dying? According to the ancient Irish, the dead immediately passed to a land called the Otherworld.

The Otherworld was by no means gloomy. It was a bright, cheerful place where people could do as they pleased and not have to suffer the consequences.

And unlike the society of Fionna warriors, the Otherworld wasn't hard to get into. The Irish believed that all people—both good and evil—would end up in the merry Otherworld.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you read the story.

- (set) adrift—let loose without direction
- ceremony—service; ritual
- collapsed—suddenly fell to the ground
- deities—gods
- fated—doomed
- indecisively—uncertainly; without decision
- intruder—invader
- maggots—newly hatched insects such as flies
- molded—formed
- pathetic—poor; worthless
- perish—die; pass away
- pillar—column, usually used as a support
- plead—beg; appeal to
- presence—existence; nearness
- promised—was likely
- revive—bring back to life
- scurrying—moving quickly
- searing—burning; scorching
- surveyed—looked over
- tantrums—fits of bad temper

Main Characters

Izanagi—husband of Izanami
 Izanami—wife of Izanagi; goddess who helps create islands of Japan and people

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A myth from Japan

The gods Izanami and Izanagi aren't content with their heavenly home. With a fine spirit of adventure, they begin to create many wonderful things on earth. But one day the two gods bring a terrible gift to the world—one that will tear them and every other family apart.

In the beginning heaven and earth were one. As time passed, the lighter, clearer part rose above and became heaven. The heavier, thicker part slowly sank and formed the earth. Gods and goddesses soon appeared. The two youngest were Izanagi¹—a god—and Izanami²—a goddess. They lived in the heavens like all the other deities, but they did not care for it much.

As the young often do, they found home rather dull and wanted to explore other worlds. They were particularly curious about a place far below the heavens known as earth. They stood together on the bridge of heaven—a beautiful rainbow—and looked downward.

"It looks like it's all water," Izanagi said. Izanami peered into the mists beneath the heavens.

"That's all I can see," she answered. "Maybe there's land underneath the water somewhere."

"Let's use a heavenly spear to find out," Izanagi suggested. The young god and goddess went and fetched a jeweled

¹ (éz an a' gë)
² (éz an a' më)



spear. They carried it onto the rainbow and poked it deep into the water. When they pulled it out, salty water dripped from the end of the spear.

Then something surprising happened. As the drops fell back into the water, they thickened and formed an island in the ocean.

"There!" said Izanami. "Now we have a place to stand! We can go down and look things over."

Izanagi and Izanami walked all the way down the rainbow and stepped onto the new island. They looked around the land they had just created.

"This is a very fine place," said Izanagi. "Much more interesting than home. I'd rather not go back."

"Then why should we?" said Izanami. "Let's build a home here."

So the god and goddess built a large palace on their new island in the middle of the watery world. They used the lovely jeweled spear as the central **pillar**. When the palace was completed, Izanagi and Izanami stood in the doorway and surveyed their new home.

"This will be a lovely place to live," said Izanami. "I've got an idea," said Izanagi. "Let's get married. Let's live here as husband and wife."

"But how do we go about getting married?" asked Izanami.

"I watched two older gods get married once, and I think it's like this," explained Izanagi. "We go in separate directions. Then we meet at the other side of this noble central pillar of our palace. It's simple, isn't it?"

Izanami agreed. "Together, we'll give birth to more islands," she said. "Soon we'll have an entire country to explore."

"You go around from the left," said Izanagi, "and I'll go around from the right."

And so Izanami and Izanagi separated. She went around to the left, and he went around to the right. They met on the far side of the noble pillar that supported their palace.

When they met, Izanami smiled and said, "How

delightful. I've met a lovely young man."

Izanagi smiled and replied, "How delightful. I've met a lovely young woman."

And so Izanagi and Izanami were married. They lived happily together in their palace on the island. After a time, Izanami found herself expecting a child. The young god and goddess were overjoyed. They hoped that Izanami would give birth to an island so that their kingdom would grow.

But the baby that Izanami gave birth to was no island—nor was it a god or goddess. Instead it was a dark and slimy leech child.³ Izanagi and Izanami were disappointed and couldn't figure out what had gone wrong. How could a god and goddess have given birth to such a **pathetic** baby?

"Perhaps our child will improve with time," said Izanami. But even after three years, the leech child hadn't changed at all. It couldn't even stand up.

To make matters worse, Izanagi and Izanami didn't know how to care for the baby. So Izanami put the leech child into a boat made out of reeds. Then Izanagi took the boat and set it adrift on the sea.

"The water is a better place for a such a child," he said. Izanagi and Izanami wanted to have another child. More than anything else, they wanted to create some beautiful islands so that their kingdom would grow. But they feared that they might give birth to another leech child.

"Why did we produce such an ugly baby instead of a beautiful island?" Izanami asked.

"I think I know why," Izanagi answered. "But I'm not sure you'll like the answer."

"You might as well tell me," said Izanami. "There's no use creating more children until we know what went wrong with the first one."

"The older gods believe it's unlucky for the woman to speak first during the marriage **ceremony**," said Izanagi. "I believe that's why we produced the leech child."

³ A leech is a soft-bodied worm that sucks another's blood in order to live. A leech child is one who could never survive on his or her own.

"What are you talking about?" asked Izanami.
 "It happened when we got married," Izanagi said. "When we met on the other side of the central pillar of our palace, you spoke to me before I spoke to you."

Izanami drew a deep sigh. "So I did," she said. "Well, if you think that's so important, let's just get married all over again."

So Izanagi and Izanami went and stood in the doorway of their palace. They looked at each other and smiled.
 "Let us go meet each other at the other side of this noble central pillar of our palace," said Izanagi. "Let us be married and live here as husband and wife."

Izanami just nodded her head in agreement.
 "You go around from the left," said Izanagi, "and I'll go around from the right."

And so Izanami and Izanagi separated. She went around to the left, and he went around to the right. They met on the far side of the noble pillar that supported their palace.

When they met, Izanami smiled but said nothing.

This time, Izanagi spoke first. "How delightful," he said, "I've met a lovely young woman."

And only then did Izanami say, "How delightful. I've met a lovely young man."

So the young god and goddess were remarried in the tradition of the older gods. And this time, things went smoothly. As the years went by, Izanami gave birth to eight children—each one healthy and strong. And each of the children turned into a beautiful island. Soon trees and sweet-smelling flowers grew on the new islands. Waterfalls tumbled down the sides of mountains.

Izanagi and Izanami were happy together. They were proud of their new islands. Yet the gods couldn't enjoy the islands because they were covered with a mist that rose from the sea.

"Our children are lovely, but we can barely see them," said Izanami. "This mist is annoying."

"I agree," said Izanagi. "We need a helper to take care of this problem."

So Izanagi took a puff of his own breath and shaped it into a little god—the god of the wind. The wind blew away the mist until all the islands sparkled like jewels in the ocean.

Then Izanagi and Izanami watched and laughed while the wind blew the young islands around. He shaped and arranged them perfectly on the surface of the water.

"Our little god of the wind is not as powerful as we are, but he does his job very well," said Izanami.

"Yes, he does," said Izanagi. "And we have lots of tasks for other such helpers to do."

So Izanagi and Izanami created gods and goddesses to watch over the mountains, streams, trees, fruits, and flowers. They created gods and goddesses for the seas, waterfalls, rocks, and everything else that appeared on the earth. None of these deities had the power of Izanami and Izanagi. But they made earthly things even better than before.

Then the couple molded the first people. When they were finished, the god and goddess admired the new human beings.

"They can enjoy the islands just as much as we do," Izanami said.

"Yes," replied Izanagi. "These people will see the wonders we have created and worship us forever." Izanami and Izanagi meant for humans to live forever. For this reason, birth and death were unknown. There wasn't even a word for death.

Then Izanami gave birth to another child—the most beautiful child of all. The baby girl gave off a warm bright light. The proud parents named her Amaterasu.⁴ Izanami and Izanagi quickly realized that Amaterasu would grow into an extraordinary goddess.

"Amaterasu must live in a special place," said Izanami. "She's too important to keep here on a little island."

"You're right," said Izanagi. "Amaterasu deserves to live in the heavens. From there, she can look down upon our beautiful islands."

So Izanagi and Izanami took Amaterasu to the foot of the

⁴ (am at er' a' so)

rainbow. Then they showed her how to walk up the rainbow to the heavens.

Amaterasu waved a cheerful good-bye to her parents and took her place in the heavens. She became the sun, which sends out warmth and light to the entire world.

Izanagi and Izanami stood on their island, looking up at their youngest child with great pride.

"Amaterasu will be the most powerful of our gods and goddesses," said Izanagi.

"Yes, and she'll give birth to a race of emperors to rule the islands,"⁵ said Izanami.

So the couple continued to live happily in their island palace. After a time, Izanami gave birth to a god who was almost as beautiful as Amaterasu. He shone with a soft light. And like Amaterasu, he too promised to be very special. "This child would make a fine companion for Amaterasu," said Izanami.

Izanagi agreed. So Izanagi and Izanami took their new child to the foot of the rainbow and sent him up to the heavens. Soon the moon—for that was the young god's name—was shining down from his place in the heavens. After a time, the moon god and the sun goddess became husband and wife.

Izanami gave birth to many other gods, some more troublesome than others. The storm god, for example, sometimes had temper tantrums.

But it was Izanami's last child—the god of fire—who caused the greatest grief. This god came into the world already searing hot. As a result, Izanami was badly burned while giving birth to him. Indeed, Izanami became so ill with fever that she couldn't move.

Izanagi tended Izanami as best he could. He brought her water and helped her drink. But his wife became weaker and weaker.

Finally Izanami closed her eyes and stopped breathing.

She had died. Izanagi didn't understand what had happened. His wife's death was the first in the world.

After several unsuccessful attempts to revive his wife, Izanagi grew furious. He drew his sword and attacked the baby god of fire, striking him two times. But the fire god wasn't harmed. In fact, the young god just divided into three tiny deities.

"Why should Izanami die when I can't even harm the fire god?" cried Izanagi with despair. "It isn't fair!"

But fair or not, Izanagi realized it was no use striking out against his children. He let the three fire gods go their own way into the world.

Izanami herself was drawn down into the land of darkness—a place called Yomi.⁶ This land was dark and eerie—far different from the brightly lit islands on earth. Izanami didn't like it at all.

"I hope that Izanagi comes for me soon," said Izanami after she crossed Yomi Pass—the gate to the underworld. "It's dark and lonely down here."

Izanami knew she didn't necessarily have to stay in Yomi. Her husband could come down to rescue her and return her to the land of the living.

But there was a catch—Izanami knew she must not taste any of the food of Yomi. If she took just one bite, she would be fated to spend the rest of eternity in darkness.

At first Izanami was not interested in food or drink. She missed Izanagi too much. Soon, though, she began to feel hungry.

"Izanagi, where are you?" Izanami wondered. "Surely you haven't forgotten me?" The goddess wandered through the darkness, feeling more and more hungry. How long could she wait before breaking down and eating?

Izanami spied some Yomi food nearby. It certainly didn't look very appetizing. But the hungry goddess was growing desperate.

"I've been down here for a long time," she thought. "I

⁵ The islands in this story are modern-day Japan. The emperors are believed to be direct descendants of Amaterasu.

⁶ (yo' mi)

might as well accept the fact that Izanagi will never come to rescue me." Slowly she walked toward the food. Meanwhile, back on earth, Izanami's husband remained miserably unhappy. All alone, he paced through the beautiful palace and about the island where he and Izanami had once lived in such happiness. The waterfalls, streams, and trees all sang to him. The gods and goddesses of nature tried to cheer their father up. But Izanagi only became lonelier and sadder.

No one knows why Izanagi waited so long to go after his wife. But finally he could no longer live without her. He decided to follow her into the land of darkness and bring her back to the land of the living. So he set out on the road to Yomi.

The path was long and difficult. Izanagi didn't know how many days he walked. Each day, there was less light to see by. It got so dark that he had to feel his way carefully with each foot to be sure he was still on the path. Finally he sensed Izanami's presence in the surrounding darkness.

"Where are you, Izanami?" he called. "I know you're here somewhere!"

But he received no answer. Even so, he knew that she could not be far in front of him.

Izanagi walked deeper and deeper into the land of Yomi, calling Izanami's name again and again. He grew desperate and began to plead with the darkness.

"Izanami, I know you're nearby," he said softly. "I love you. I've come a long and difficult way to find you. Why won't you answer me?"

"Izanagi," a voice whispered. Izanagi knew it was his wife's voice. But she didn't sound happy. The whisper shaped itself into a long, sad sigh.

Despite Izanami's sad tone, Izanagi was greatly cheered to hear her voice.

"Izanami, my beloved wife," he said, "I have come to take you back with me. I cannot be happy without you."

"Izanagi!" the voice replied sharply. "Why did you wait so long?"

Izanagi was shocked at the anger in Izanami's voice. He'd

thought that she would be happy that he had sought her out.

"What's wrong, Izanami?" he said. "Why don't you come to me? Surely you don't want to remain here in the dark."

"I waited for you. I even refused to eat anything here in Yomi," said Izanami. "I hoped to return to the land of the living."

"And now?" Izanagi asked, his heart sinking.

"Now I have no choice," Izanami said bitterly. "I have eaten the food of Yomi, so I can never return to the light. I must stay here forever."

"Don't be foolish. You can still return with me."

"You must neither touch me nor set eyes on me. You must return immediately to the land of the living. Please, Izanagi, listen to me. Go back to your own world at once."

But Izanagi was not satisfied. He could not bear to be so close to Izanami, to hear her voice, and yet to leave without her. He reached into his hair and withdrew a many-toothed comb.⁷ He broke off a tooth, then put the comb back into his hair. Holding the tooth of the comb in his hand, he lit it and held it up like a torch.

Izanagi was so shocked at what he saw that he almost dropped his torch. In the sudden glare he saw how Izanami's body had already started to decay. Her rotting flesh was falling away from her bones. Maggots were crawling all over her, feeding on what was left of her body. Izanagi cried out and turned his eyes away.

Izanami was furious. "You have shamed me!" she shrieked. "This is no act of love. Why didn't you do as I asked? Why did you have to look at me, foolish man?"

Izanagi tried to stammer out an apology, but he was too horrified to speak. Instead he turned to leave.

"You shall be punished for your thoughtlessness!" Izanami screamed. And she called for help from the land of the dead.

In response to Izanami's screams, many terrible shapes

⁷ In Japanese society, it was customary for both men and women to wear fancy combs in their hair.

appeared out of the darkness. These were the terrible women of Yomi, horrible monsters of death. When they saw Izanagi, they crept toward him.

"Destroy the intruder!" hissed one of the terrible women. "Catch him before he escapes!" cried another.

Izanagi backed away from the monsters. He turned to run, but now his torch had burned out. As he staggered along the darkened path, Izanagi heard the horrible creatures hissing and scurrying behind him. They knew their way better than he did and were sure to catch him.

Izanagi pulled the comb from his hair again. He thought, "If I use a piece of this as a torch again, I will be able to find my way more easily. But the monsters will also find me more easily."

Izanagi stood on the path for a moment, clutching the comb indecisively. At a loss as to what to do, he threw his comb to the ground in front of the monsters who followed him. Surprisingly, the comb turned into a garden of green, juicy bamboo shoots.

The horrible women had never seen such plants in the land of Yomi. Curious, they stopped to taste the bamboo shoots. Before long, they were arguing and fighting over every bite.

While the monsters were busy with the bamboo, Izanagi carefully felt his way along the dark path. At last, it seemed as though he was leaving the darkness behind.

Izanagi stopped and rubbed his eyes. Yes, he was now able to see the faintest shades of gray. But soon he heard the monsters of Yomi close behind him again. Surely they would catch him before he could escape this terrible world!

"The bamboo shoots delayed them for a short time," Izanagi thought. "What can I offer that will stop them again?"

Izanagi pulled off his black headdress and threw it to the ground. The headdress changed to a bunch of fresh grapes. As they had with the bamboo shoots, the horrible women stopped to eat and fight over each and every grape.

By the time the monsters caught up with Izanagi again, he had reached the land of the living. Izanagi rolled a huge rock

across Yomi Pass, blocking the monsters' way.

Izanagi collapsed on his side of the boulder. As exhausted as he was, he was relieved to have escaped the horrible land of Yomi. But he was sad that he had hurt Izanami's feelings and had lost her forever.

Then he heard a familiar voice speaking from the other side of the boulder. It was Izanami—and she still sounded furious.

"Izanagi, you have shamed me!" she shouted. "I will revenge myself by killing every one of your people. I have already ordered that they be destroyed. I can strangle a thousand every day, and soon they will all be gone."

"Izanami, have you forgotten that they are your people, too?" Izanagi asked tiredly and sadly. "For your sake as well as mine, I will not let you take this revenge. I will more than replace any people you destroy. I now order a thousand a day to be born—plus half a thousand more. I will not let the people of our islands perish."

Then came a long silence as Izanagi and Izanami both realized that they had created something new. They had brought death and birth to their beloved island people. This was their final and most wonderful creation.

Finally Izanami spoke again. This time her voice was quiet and warm—more like it was in happier days.

"My husband, my love, my lord Izanagi," she said, "you must accept my death. Please don't try to bring me back from Yomi. We must never meet again."

"I will honor your wishes," said Izanagi. "Our marriage is ended."

And so Izanami went back down into the land of Yomi. And Izanagi went and washed in the sea to rid himself of the stains of the land of death. Then he returned to the palace.

Ever after that, Izanagi often thought of Izanami when he looked at the islands, trees, waterfalls, rocks, flowers, people—all the countless things they had created together.

Often he pictured Izanami when he remembered the special gifts they had given humankind—marriage and separation, birth and death. Theirs was a splendid creation.

And in a mysterious way, their separation was the most important part of it all.

INSIGHTS

Like the gods of many other cultures, Izanagi and Izanami were human in appearance. But unlike other gods, Japanese gods were not all-knowing. When they were in heaven, they had no idea what was happening down on earth. They had to rely on messengers to bring them information.

The Japanese gods possessed two souls—one gentle and one violent. The actions of a god depended on which soul was in control at the time. This may explain Izanami's violent attack on her husband. It may also account for the argument that developed between the sun and moon.

As mentioned in the myth of Izanagi and Izanami, the moon god and the sun goddess married. However, one day the moon grew upset with the goddess of food and killed her.

The sun was so enraged by this that she insisted on separating from the moon. In fact, she refused to ever look at her husband again. This story explains why the sun rules the day while the moon guards the night.

Izanami and Izanagi used a jeweled spear as the main support of their palace. Even today the central pillar of a house is often an object of honor—not only in Japan, but in many other countries as well.

The marriage rite of Izanami and Izanagi also reflects a tradition that is found around the world. In many cultures the bride and groom walk around a fire, tree, or other object as part of the wedding ceremony.

Izanami is unable to leave Yomi once she eats food in the underworld.

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