

# Ars Longa



by

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As the warrior guided his horse back home, he pondered what the future might hold. The scuffle of a few moments ago, while unfortunate to be sure, was done, in the past and not be to be dwelt on. He had taken no pleasure in killing the peasant—that was not the samurai way—but it was his right, in fact his duty, to ensure that these farmers and fishers showed at all times the proper respect and deference. There must be no doubt in the minds of the people of the Ryukyu island groups—Amami, Sakishima, and Okinawa—that they were now, and would forever be, subject to the rule of Japanese overloads.

As the samurai on his horse clopped away unhurriedly, the young man he had dispatched without even dismounting lay bleeding into the earth. A single sword stroke had cut diagonally halfway through his neck, and he died before he fell. Kin could not help but weep for his younger brother—still, in his heart, he had always known Sato's rashness would lead him to a troubled end. Sato was quick and strong, impetuous and arrogant. Of all their brothers, he was, by far, the most skilled in the techniques taught to them by their father, the empty-hand fighting arts reputed to come from monasteries hidden in the pine forests of China. When a Japanese soldier on horseback decided to take a shortcut through their newly planted fields, it was Sato's blazing pride—no doubt fanned by justified confidence in his hard-earned strength and skill—that goaded him to confront the armed warrior, to try to shoo him off their land. Sato died defending cabbages.

Kin had to tell this to Sato's wife and children. Half the village mourned, while the other half crackled with indignation at the latest atrocity of the shoguns. They were thieves and rapists and murderers. They had invaded their land, demanding loyalty and tribute and imposing their laws however it suited them. They had taken away the islanders' right to carry weapons, diluted their traditions, and sullied their language. It was not always like this, the old ones said. Something must be done, the young ones cried. While all this talk was bandied about, Kin did what he could to help his brother's family go on. Eventually, as they came of age, he began to teach Sato's sons the fighting arts. Knowing he could never hope to equal his brother's mastery, he simply taught as he had been taught to the best of his ability. Bend the knees, work to have strong legs. Keep the arms close to the body, then execute the strike with a smooth, quick motion, finishing with a snap at the end. Wrist straight. Fist tight. Left first, then right. One side, then the other. Counting out each step. Again. Again. And again.

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Generations came and went, one after the other, each as unique and alike as waves on a beach. The emperors of Japan seemed to all but forgot about the bucolic Ryukus as soon as great ships from the East began steaming into Tokyo harbor, bringing rumors of wealth, power, and threat beyond anything they had yet imagined. The people of the Ryukus fished and farmed and traded as always. Families carefully guarded their traditions, passing the

techniques of the fighting arts from fathers to sons, secretive inheritances that linked them to an ancestry in a long-dissolved warrior caste. Innovations were made. Elaborate forms identified with animal names became less prevalent. Stylized movements were simplified, distilled to their practical essentials, and arranged into new sequences to help each generation of students learn so that they could teach the next. Long outlawed by the Japanese conquerors, swords and spears and daggers were scarce among the Ryukyu islanders, so some became adept at ways to use common farming tools as weapons. A grain flail, hinged freely on leather straps, could be swung with devastating speed. Small hand scythes with hooked blades could slash and cut very effectively. The heavy wooden handles that turned millstones were formidable blunt clubs for both attack and defense. The six-foot staff used for carrying water buckets across the shoulders provided extended reach and endless ways to strike and parry. In practiced hands, these unlikely armaments could be as fearsome as the sword of a samurai. However, engines of modern warfare that would make all others seem like relics were already on their way to the Ryukyus.

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A new century arrived, and soon after, echoes of great conflicts from halfway around the world. On the surface, life on the Ryukyu islands changed little at first—but as a decade, then another, wore on, even the most oblivious of islanders could sense the storm of a new era rumbling just beyond the horizon. It arrived in the form of the updated Japanese army, girded in brass-buttoned uniforms and pistol belts, with planes roaring overhead and warships dotting the surrounding sea like floating, metal mountains. Eventually, the mechanized might of the Emperor's army dug into the hills and fields of Okinawa to make its final stand against the apocalyptic onslaught of America. American soldiers were the most ruthless of human monsters. Trained to kill from birth, they would rape and burn and torture even unarmed natives who surrendered. Had not the Japanese officers themselves said this time and again? When the massive American fleet at last arrived on the shore and slammed the island for days with cannonfire and aerial bombardments that seemed to shake the pillars of heaven itself, there were few Okinawans who did not believe the ending of the world had indeed come.

Anaka had taken his family—his brothers and sons, their wives and children and grandchildren, any that remained—and made for the caves. He had heard stories, and even seen signs with his own eyes, of entire villages ending their lives as one, throwing themselves from sea cliffs rather than face the American hordes. As they advanced and the Japanese retreated, his eldest son had been swept away in the tide of combat; his sister blinded and deafened by explosions; his grandson burned, his fingers crumbling, blackened stalks. Yet he could not abandon the shred of hope that they could hide, that they might be overlooked in the chaos. In the deepest hole in the rock he could find, Anaka and his entire clan cowered in semi-dark, barely knowing how the days passed. Even as the sounds of war outside grew quieter, more distance, their fear did not wane.

Finally, alien voices and shadows crowded outside the mouth of the cave. As Anaka listened to the slow advance of booted feet, he steeled himself calmly. He was old, but strong. The cave was narrow. They could only enter one or two at a time, their rifles held in front. If he could deflect the angle of their guns even for an moment, he could strike to the vulnerable points on the face, throat, ribs, knees, groin. Disable a few, perhaps kill one. If he was lucky, that would anger them—drive them to such a rage as they would open fire blindly, or toss a grenade into the cave, obliterating him and his family in a single stroke. If he was lucky.

As the first two American soldiers entered, Anaka crouched low, ready. They were huge, with massive packs and helmets and belts of ammunition draped over their shoulders. He breathed deep and silent, waiting for them to be close enough.

They stopped, waiting. One said something and they stood aside. A different soldier came in slowly. He spoke with a strange accent and said:

"Is any one here injured? Does any one here need medical help?"

Anaka stood in utter confusion. The soldier turned to him, bowed, and said again.

"Sir, my name is Lieutenant Fritzky of the United States Army. Is there any one here who has been hurt and needs medical attention?"

Without thinking, Anaka pointed and said, "My grandson. His hands are burned."

Lieutenant Fritzky called out something in his own language. A few seconds later, two other soldiers with crosses in red on their helmets rushed in. All Anaka could do was stare as they knelt by his grandson and began to bandage his hands.

In the coming months, from the brink of the end of the world, life in Okinawa inched back toward a routine—though, nothing would ever be the same. Some one-hundred thousand, one third of the island's people, were gone. The cratered landscape was slowly healing and the Japanese army bases on their soil had given way to American ones. Anaka had finally started to resume his daily training, performing repetitions of the forms and techniques of his fighting art alone near the water's edge on the beach as the sun rose each morning. He had noticed the American soldiers occasionally watching from a distance.

One morning, Lieutenant Fritzky approached, bowed, and said in his slightly improved accent,

"Excuse me, Mr. Anaka, but some of the men are curious about what you're doing."

Anaka stopped and looked over at three soldiers, lounging around a Jeep in their shirt sleeves. "If they are curious, let them come and see," he replied, then pointed to the group and waved them over. They came, seemingly more amused than interested. He lined them in a row (being soldiers, they did this well enough) and even coerced a reluctant Lieutenant Fritzky to join. He began to show them the basic stances and hand positions. They mimicked him casually. He went along the line and bent their knees and elbows, angling them into the proper forms. The tallest of them—more than a head over Anaka—kept saying things that made the group chuckle. Anaka gave him a light but crisp smack on his forehead. After that, they all watched and practiced the moves with more attention. After a time, when the lesson was at an end, Anaka pointed to the sun lifting above the horizon. He then pointed to the assembled group, then down to the sand where they stood. "To-mor-row," he said, using a word he'd overheard here and there. Anaka pointed and said again. "Tomorrow." The next morning, all four showed up at that same spot on the beach. By the end of the week, there were a dozen.

Ansaru had never been on a plane before, and—after thirty-six hours of being jostled around in an assortment of noisy, cramped aircraft—he all but vowed never to set foot on one again. The journey that had begun from a U.S. Army airstrip in Shuri (twenty years after the war, and there was still no sign the Americans would be leaving any time soon) had finally ended on a miserable, rainy night with a landing at an airport called—with bewildering inconsistency—either Idlewild or John F. Kennedy on the outskirts of New York City, U.S.A. Eventually, he found his way to a bus bound for Manhattan. Ansaru had long dreamed of coming to the United States. He had first heard about it from the doctors and nurses who helped him rehabilitate his burned hands as a child. In the following years, he had picked up basic English—and an encyclopedic knowledge of baseball—from the American soldiers. He knew he wanted to see the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River and the Grand Canyon and Yankee Stadium. When he got a letter from a distant uncle who owned a fabric-importing business in an exotic-sounding place called "The Lower East Side," it seemed like the call of destiny itself. So, he packed a few belongings, some clothes, wrapped his training uniform and belt around his six-foot staff weapon and carried them halfway across the world. He made plans to work at his uncle's business until he saved up enough money to open his own karate school, bringing the ancient art of his ancestors to this New World.

Ansaru had no illusions, though. He knew that danger and difficulty walked hand-in-hand with the great opportunities of America. It was a land of law and justice where the police might beat you at any time if you weren't white. People from all over the world lived and worked side-by-side in America, yet in the alleys of her great cities were thieving, murderous gangs who lured immigrants into drugs and prostitution. Ansaru was young, but strong. He was no weak-willed rube to be easily corrupted. Years of training and discipline had given him the resolve and patience to take on this country of contradictions. Ansaru was confident he was prepared for anything America could put before him. However, as the bus turned onto Broadway from 42nd street, Ansaru found he was utterly unprepared for his first glimpse of Times Square at night.

Eight years later, when he had saved enough to rent a small studio for his first karate school, he had the name of the style spelled out in the front window with kanji characters of red neon. It had to be neon. He insisted upon it.

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In a suburban strip mall in New Jersey, a "Traditional Okinawan Karate" school is nestled among the shopfronts. Inside, a genial, black-belted young man greets parents picking up their pre-teen children from a recently finished Saturday afternoon class. The kids laugh and tussle and call out "Bye, sensei!" as they depart one by one. At last, there is only a middle-aged man standing in the doorway.

"Are you here to pick up someone?" the instructor asks.

"No, sensei," the older man replies with a nervous bow. Though the instructor is perhaps fifteen years his junior, he shows him great deference. "I'm here for class."

"Oh my god!" blurts the instructor. "A grown-up, here to save me from 'kid-rot-ee' hell!" Both men laugh. The instructor grimaces guiltily. "I shouldn't say that. They're good kids... and, hey, they pay the bills!"

After the student changes, he steps from the locker room onto the training deck wearing a clean, white *gi* and a pristine white *obie*. The instructor calls to him,

"Be sure to bow to the *shiden* when stepping onto the deck."

"Arigato, sensei!" the student replies, as he bows to the instructor.

"Not to me," the instructor corrects, "To the *shiden*. Those guys." He points to a series of black-and-white photographs of old Asian men, lining the front wall between hangings of the Okinawan and American flags. "The *shiden* are the previous masters, those that came before us, we say." He points to each in turn. "He taught him, who taught him, who taught him, who taught him, who taught me. They represent our lineage."

"Ah," says the student as he turns and bows. "The important people."

"True," commented the instructor. "But not *the* most important person here. You know who that is?"

"You, sensei."

"No. You." The instructor points to the student, then conspicuously to the student's white belt. "You're the most important one here. If no one ever decided to study karate, if no one ever worked up the courage to walk in that front door, this art would simply die out as the old masters pass away."

"Ars longa, vita brevis," answers the student.

"What's that?"

"It's Latin, sensei. It means 'Art endures, life is fleeting.'"

"Ain't it the truth! Ready to get started?"

"Yes, sensei."

The instructor and student warm up for a few minutes, then line up side-by-side in front of a large mirror.

"*Zenkutzu dachi gedan barai, hidari ashi, hidari te.* Forward-leaning stance, downward sweeping block, left foot, left hand. Strike the pose."

The two men assume the position. The instructor nudges the student's hands and feet into a more precise image of the form.

"Turn the hips and execute the technique on each count. Left then right. Begin the count, please."

"Arigato, sensei. *Ichi. Ni. San. Shi....*"

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