

## THE SWORD THAT BREAKS STONE ~斬岩刀~

By Rawle Nyanzi

Shirato Katsunori sought to regain his lost honor. After he failed his daimyo in a decisive battle, he ran away, choosing to live as a ronin rather than committing honorable suicide. For a year he wandered the land, offering his sword to anyone willing to give him a meal. The work satisfied him and kept him sharp, and every robber learned to fear his blade.

But when he heard of Zanganto, the sword that breaks stone, he quit the life of a sellsword and sought its wielder so that he may regain his place in the court of his former daimyo.

His quest brought him to the fishing village of Kawaguchi. Goro, the famed wielder of Zanganto, had made his home there, and Katsunori intended to steal the famed blade.

Katsunori entered the village with a handful of coins he got from selling off his weapon -- he couldn't arouse suspicion by coming in armed. The ronin stopped a young man who was carrying a large basket of fish.

"Where may I find a place to rest? I can pay," Katsunori said, showing two large oblong disks made of gold.

The young man raised his eyebrows. "Follow me," he said. Katsunori soon arrived at a small hut, where the young man's wife and two baby boys waited for him. As the young family exulted over the catch, Katsunori showed them his gold disks.

"Oh! My apologies," the young man said. "For the night, you may use my blanket. Don't worry about my wife and I."

"Thank you," Katsunori said. He took his place on the blanket and watched through the window above it. As the fisherman's wife left the hut and told everyone about the catch, he saw a disheveled hut across from the one he was in. The fishwife went to that one as well, and Katsunori saw a scarred old man emerge.

He had finally located Goro.

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The village got together and fried all of the catch. Katsunori ate a little bit, but Goro seemed to be quite pleased with himself as he regaled the children with stories of faraway lands and old battles. While Goro held everyone's attention, Katsunori slipped away, supposedly to pass dirt but really to seize the legendary sword.

He crept into the hut; as he assumed, the hut was spare, with only a few robes, a few blankets, and his sword right in the corner. Katsunori took the sword, thrust it into his belt, and walked away. He glanced backward; no one pursued him. After all, he had come to them an unarmed vagabond.

After Katsunori put some distance between himself and the village, he found a large rock on the side of the dirt road. The ronin unsheathed the sword -- a sharp, gleaming blade, crafted with expert care -- then got into a swordsman's stance and aimed at the stone before him.

"It's not a good idea to bash one's sword against rock," an elderly male voice said. Katsunori jumped, then looked to his side to see Goro, carving knife in hand, walking to him calmly.

"If you want this blade, you will have to seize it from me," Katsunori said.

Goro shrugged his shoulders. "It won't take much effort," he said. Katsunori braced himself, then Goro got into a fighting stance with the carving knife. The two men circled each other, each one waiting for the perfect opening. Katsunori, confident in his weapon's superior reach, thrust his sword forward, but Goro stepped to the side. Goro swung his knife, but the attack fell far short. Finally, Katsunori saw his opportunity to strike. He stepped closer and swung his sword sideways, but Goro ducked and struck back with the carving knife.

Half of Katsunori's blade fell away.

The ronin hesitated. How did that happen to the sword that broke

stone? Unless...the weapon wasn't a sword at all.

In that brief moment of equivocation, Goro cut Katsunori's sword away at the hilt, then kicked him in the stomach. The ronin fell on his rear, and Goro wasted no time. The old warrior straddled Katsunori's chest and put the knife to his neck.

"The Zanganto...is a mere carving knife?" Katsunori asked.

"It's a technique," Goro said. "Individual blades, no matter how legendary, always break. Even if such a sword did exist, rust and chipping would have claimed it long ago."

Katsunori thought on it for a moment. "Will you end my life here?" he asked.

"Not at all. If you seek the sword that breaks stone, I will teach you," Goro said.

"But tell me, how did you break a fine blade with such a pitiful weapon?" Katsunori asked.

"Through the power of the technique. It is not an easy one to learn; be prepared for ten years of hard work," Goro said.

"Yes, but how does the technique itself work?"

"Through a power that few have mastered – a dangerous ethereal power privy only to the truly dedicated among us. Are you prepared to take on such a burden?"

"I am. I have nothing else to do and nowhere else to go," Katsunori said. Goro pulled him to his feet.

"Then let us return to the village. We still have some fish left to eat," Goro said. The two warriors walked back to Kawaguchi Village, satisfied with what they had accomplished. Katsunori learned that day that if he wanted to regain his honor, he would have to do it the long and difficult way.