Ride of Passage

“…And then what you need to do is capture the largest animal you can find and bring it back to us in order to earn our respect…”

Toki could barely hear what the tribal elder was saying as he was drifting in and out of a daydream. It was just after dawn on what promised to be another hot, balmy day in the rainforest and the young boys of the tribe had been called together for a special lesson from their tribal elders. Today would be the day that they became men.

Hunting was not something that Toki enjoyed. As a matter of fact, he hated it and much preferred cooking. This made him something of a laughing stock amongst the other boys, all of whom were extremely athletic and strong. They saw Toki as a weakling and made fun of him for it.

After what seemed like hours, the lesson finally ended and the boys were presented with a spear and a knife to capture and kill the largest animal they could find in order to earn the respect of the tribal elders.

Not feeling particularly confident, Toki set off into the forest and stood in the middle of a large clearing where the floor was a carpet of green leaves dappled with light from the sun that was trying its hardest to shine through the dense canopy above. The trunks of giant camphor trees erupted from the ground and surrounded the clearing like soldiers guarding their territories from invasion. Toki listened. Nothing but the sound of parrots chirruping could be heard for a while until he heard a rustling from under a pile of leaves. Toki dived. He grabbed. He rolled over. He heard a croaking sound. It was only a frog after all. That wasn’t going to earn him the respect he needed. With a sigh of disappointment, Toki began to make his way deeper into the forest when a mischievous monkey sneaked up behind him and snatched away his frog. “Hey!” He shouted, “That’s my only chance to be a grown-up!”

The monkey danced on a tree branch tauntingly. Jumping, yelling and laughing at Toki when, suddenly, a giant pink tube whipped through the air above his head and…the monkey was gone. Toki looked around in amazement but he couldn’t see anything. Then, he felt a warm breeze on the back of his neck even though there was not a breath of wind in the air. He slowly turned around. There, staring at him, was the most enormous creature he had ever seen.

It had scaly purple skin and eyes that seemed to protrude outwards from its massive skull. Tentatively, Toki put out his finger and touched the creature’s eye. The eye spun in its socket and the animal flashed orange for a moment before lifting Toki onto its back with a long, sturdy tail.

It all happened so quickly that Toki didn’t even have time to think about what was going on. The chameleon (since that was what the creature was) darted off deeper into the forest carrying Toki with him.

As they continued on their journey, the chameleon shot out its tongue to collect animals, which it passed backwards to Toki. The creature was trying to help him find an animal headdress to wear! Elated, he stuffed the animals into the net that he’d brought with him. Toki giggled to himself as he imagined the other boys’ faces when they saw his collection.

Suddenly, the chameleon took a running jump and leapt high above the canopy of the forest. Toki stared around in wonder; he had never been so high up before. He hadn’t realised that the forest was so huge! Before he could recover from the surprise, Toki and the chameleon were falling back through the trees. “Aargh!” he yelled suddenly, as he felt himself slide off the lizard’s back and roll onto the floor. Dazed and confused, Toki got to his feet and looked up. His new friend was stuck in an enormous trap and an alarm bird was shrieking to let his captors know about it! With his dagger in his hand, the boy rushed to rescue the chameleon. He knew that whoever set the trap would be along very shortly. He stopped. This was surely the largest creature in the forest. He imagined what would happen if he took the chameleon’s head back to his tribe; he would be made king for certain! People would tell stories about him for generations! “Don’t be ridiculous, Toki!” he thought to himself and he ran forwards, sliced the net with his dagger and let the chameleon go free.

The next moment, two members of Toki’s tribe hurried into the clearing to see what they had caught in their net. They laughed and whooped triumphantly as they saw Toki’s net full of the creatures the chameleon had caught for him, he’d left it on the floor in his hurry to save his friend. “Never mind,” he thought to himself as the two men dragged the net back to the village, “I wouldn’t have deserved to win respect anyway, it was the chameleon that caught them, not me.”

Dejectedly, Toki began to trudge back to the village. It was very shameful to return without a single animal and he was certain that he would be punished severely. As he was contemplating his fate, he heard the leaves rustling on the floor behind him. He spun around and saw… the chameleon! It had come back for him! Gently, the lizard lifted Toki onto his back, turned around and ran towards the setting sun on the horizon.