

Avatar Fan Fiction – Tails, by Jerathai

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Jake was speaking casually with the hunters; they were near the end of their daily meeting. His sharp ears picked up an urgently whispered conversation nearby.

“You ask him!”

“No, you ask him!”

He looked up and saw a little girl coming over to the group. She stopped in front of him and said “Uncle Jake!” In Navi society, any elder male or female of the parents generation was considered an uncle or aunt, a male or female of the grandparents generation was always considered a grandparent. Jake answered, “Yes, little one?”

The blue girl looked at Jake with big green eyes and asked curiously, “How come you keep trying to catch Aunt Neytiri’s tail?”

The hunters grinned, thinking of all the different things that Jake might say, most of them quite embarrassing. Jake surprised them all by responding seriously, saying, “It’s a hunting game.”

The little girl was puzzled and said “A hunting game?”

Jake nodded and asked, “Tell me, what would happen if I wanted to catch Neytiri’s tail and I grabbed Mo’at’s tail instead?”

The child's hands flew to her mouth in shock at the thought of anyone even *contemplating* grabbing the Tsaahik's tail.

Mo’at muttered, “He’d get his head slapped off his neck. That’s what would happen.” Everyone roared with laughter.

Jake smiled and said “Exactly. So the first part of the game is being able to identify your target.” He looked at the girl in all seriousness. “It’s very important for a hunter to know what he is hunting, is it not?” She dropped her hands and nodded very solemnly. Jake continued, “So, if I know that it is Neytiri’s tail that I want to catch, the next thing I need to do is what?”

The little girl asked, “Find Neytiri?”

Jake nodded, "Very good. The next thing a hunter needs to know is how to find his prey." He deliberately looked over at Neytiri to drag the little girl's eyes over to his mate and asked, "Do you think I would find Neytiri at the weavers' place?"

The child instantly shook her head, no.

He asked, "Why not?"

She responded, "Neytiri is a hunter, not a weaver."

Jake said "Ah! So I would find her where the hunters go?" The blue girl nodded. He repeated, "Very good! So now I know what my target is, and where my target is likely to be. So the next part of the game is to what?"

The little girl said again, "Find Neytiri?"

Jake beamed at her and said "You're going to be a very good hunter! So, I find out where Neytiri is. Do I just walk up to Neytiri and grab her tail?"

Neytiri muttered, "He'd get his face slapped." Everyone laughed again. The girl shook her head no, but was smiling.

The Olo'eyctan queried, "So, how do I approached Neytiri if I want to catch her tail?"

The little boy who had been arguing with the girl earlier was nearby listening and couldn't resist yelling, "You have to sneak up on her!"

Jake looked over at the boy and said "Good!" He looked back at the little girl and asked, "When you need to sneak up on someone or something, you have to be patient, right?" The little boy came trotting over, and both the children nodded. He looked at them and said "So being patient is a very important skill for a hunter, and it takes time to develop that kind of patience."

The adults at this point were becoming astonished, because Jake was turning what was to all of them an insignificant child's game into something incredibly real and important.

Jake continued, "Now, if I am trying to catch Neytiri's tail all the time, every day, she will notice me and start looking out for me will she not?"

The two children agreed. He said, "So I need even more patience. If she is on her guard all the time and looking for me all time, then I will never successfully catch her tail. So not only do I have to have patience when I am stalking her, I have to have patience in knowing when it's the right time to stalk her. I have to wait until she is not looking for me if I'm going to be successful."

The adults were floored by this. He said, "So I have been patient, and Neytiri is not expecting me, and I am sneaking up on her. Now what?"

The children just drew blanks and were looking at him. The adults too were drawing blanks. He said, "Well, if I walk up behind Neytiri stomping my feet and knocking over A'tey's pots, making huge amounts of noise, am I going to catch her tail?"

The children instantly shook their heads no.

Jake nodded and said "Good. So I also have to learn how to move very quietly, right?"

The children agreed. Jake instructed, "If I make any noise at all, Neytiri will hear me coming and I will lose the game. So I have to learn how to be very, very quiet when I move, just like I have to be very quiet when I am hunting. Because if my game hears me it will run away. It won't even wait to see what I am, it will simply hear a noise and run away."

Several adults were actually opening their mouths in amazement at this point as Jake continued with his instruction, "So, I have waited until Neytiri is not expecting me. I am sneaking up on her, I am being very quiet, what next?"

The children got very intense, thoughtful looks on their faces as they tried to puzzle out what Jake was getting at. He hinted, "What am I trying to catch?"

They both yelled, "Neytiri's tail!"

"Very good. Now does a tail stay still all the time, or does it move?"

Both the children shouted, "It moves!"

Jake brought his own tail up in front of the two children for a demonstration. He just started lazily flicking it from left to right as most Na'vi habitually did. He freed one hand and waited till his tail was in front of him and snatched, but he flipped his tail to the left. He asked the children, "What just happened?"

The little boy said, "You missed!"

Jake said "So I have to learn how to do what?" He grabbed the air around his tail several more times for emphasis.

The children were puzzled and he said, "I have to..." and moved his hand slowly towards his twitching tail, waited until his tail was within reach, and grabbed. "I have to aim properly if I am to grasp where the tail is going to be."

Light dawned in the children's eyes. He let his tail go and demonstrated again, and explained, "If I aim for where the tail was," and he grabbed open air again as he switched his tail, "instead of where the tail is going to be, then I miss."

The children were watching his tail avidly. It twitched to the left, he waited, it twitched to the right. It was just normal movement, he wasn't doing anything specific. But the next time he grabbed for where the tail was going instead of where it had been, and connected. The children understood.

He said, "So, aiming with your weapon is very important too. You have to know, whether it is your hand, a knife, or a bow, where your target is going to be when you strike it."

The adults were flabbergasted.

He continued, "So, what is next?"

The children had no idea.

Jake looked at them with a smile, and he said. "Neytiri is my mate, I do not wish to hurt her. The whole point of the game is to catch her tail, not to pull it. If I pull it, I will hurt her." The children understood. He explained, "One of the most important skills of a hunter," and he reached out his hand to where the girl's tail was in front of her and grasped it gently to illustrate, "is to use only the amount of power that is required, and no more."

He grasped the little girl's tail in his hand. Firmly, but not hard. And without actually pulling on the tail. Then he let go and dropped his hand. He said to them, "If I have done everything else right, if I have identified my prey, and tracked it successfully, and then been very quiet and snuck up on it successfully, and aimed successfully, but I use too much power, or too little, then I have lost the game. Because I have not done it right."

Jake asked them, "Do you understand?" They were just astonished, but they got it. He said, "If I manage to do all that, to find Neytiri, to sneak up on her, and to catch her tail, not pull it, then for that round of the game, I win. Because she did not see me, she did not hear me, and she let me get so close that I was able to touch her tail without her knowing it."

The children were delighted, and he told them, "If at any time Neytiri hears me, sees me, or pulls her tail out of my reach, then she has won that round of the game."

The children's faces lit up with excitement and happiness. They were thrilled with this game. Jake hugged the little girl and then leaned in to the children and in a

stage whisper said, "And then I let her tail go and run away fast so that she can't catch me!" Everyone burst out laughing.

He patted the little girl and let her up and bid her go run and play. Everybody knew what game the two kids were going to go play. Jake turned back to the adults and they were all just absolutely amazed. He had taken the simple childish past time of playing with tails and had turned it into something that sounded like the ultimate hunter exercise, and they all realized that he was absolutely right.

Mo'at exclaimed, "I think that little girl has just gotten the most important hunting lesson of her life!"

Sirtey, the senior hunter of the tribe, was equally slack-jawed and managed to say, "I'm thinking I should be instructing all of the hunters to catch tails!"

Everybody laughed. One of the hunters shook her head and said, "Only Jake could take a child's game and turn it into the most important exercise in the world."

Of course from that point on the whole thing just snowballed. Once the word of what the game of catching tails was all about, New Hometree was just afire with it. The children did it because it was a game they played anyway, but they played with new awareness now.

The hunters started playing it among themselves too, because it wasn't any fun trying to catch the tail of anyone who wasn't in on the joke. The whole thing went to a new level when one of the hunters boasted that nobody could catch his tail, saying that he was too alert.

Botan said that he would go fetch fresh fruit from the jungle for anybody who could catch his tail. Of course, that turned every single hunter in New Hometree loose on the poor slob. Everybody loved the fruit, and it was just tedious to go marching out into the jungle to find it, because it didn't grow in great concentrations in many places. After making that challenge, he found himself having to slog through the jungle on several occasions to fill his carry net with fruit and bring it back, to everyone's delight.

After this had been going on for a couple of weeks, Mo'at pulled Jake aside with a smile to complement him, saying that she hadn't seen such simple joy and happiness in the people since they had moved into New Hometree. Jake replied contentedly that the people badly needed some happiness, and he was pleased to have been able to contribute to it.