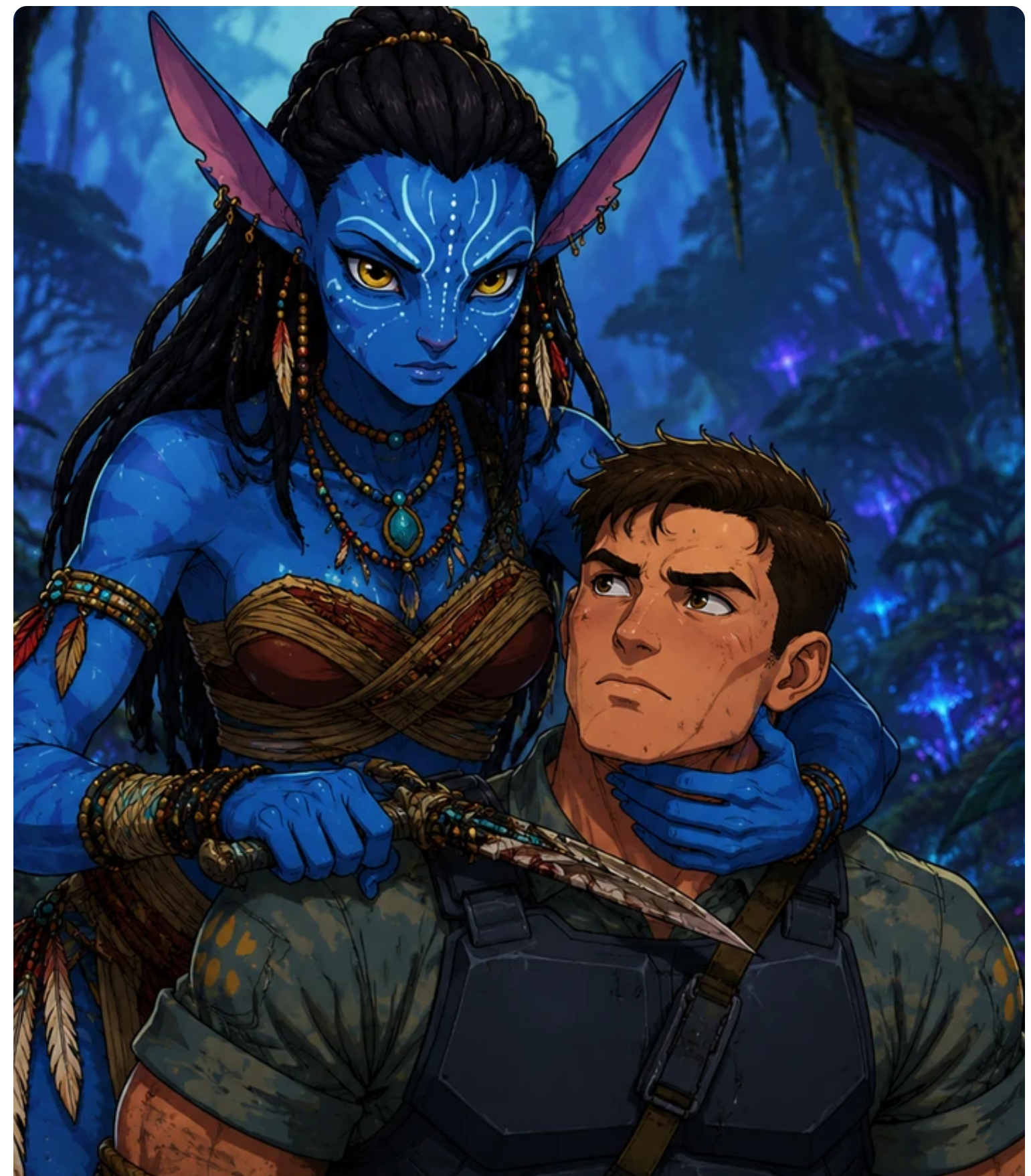


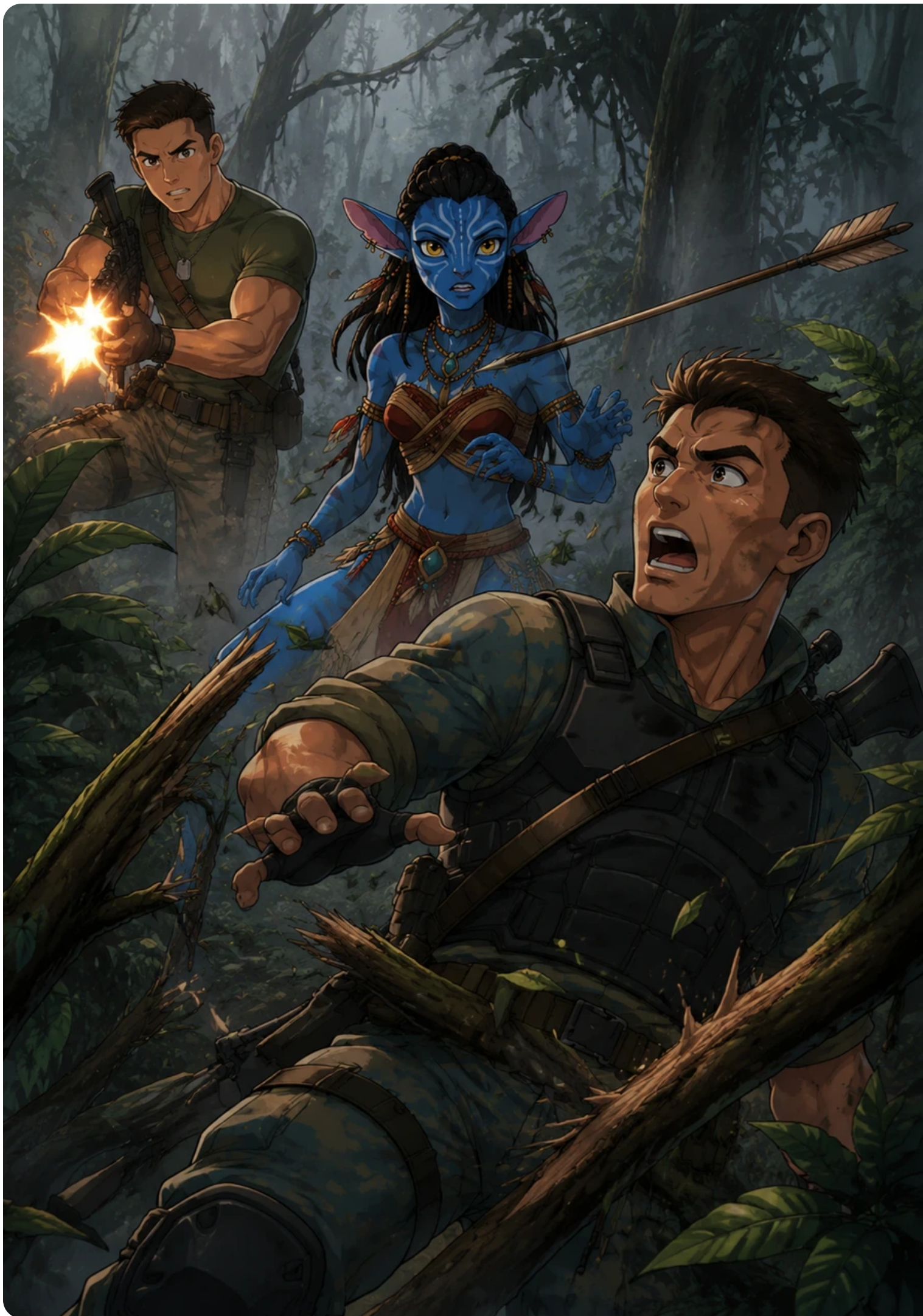


Captured in the Clouded Forest

Quentin Gréselle



Pvt Quentin Denuit pressed his back against the massive, moss-covered trunk of a Pandoran tree, desperately trying to quiet his frantic breathing. He had just broken away from his squad after a disastrous skirmish with the military, and the damp, misty rainforest felt like a beautiful, suffocating trap.



A soldier's shouted warning echoed through the dense canopy before cutting off abruptly as the canopy exploded with the sound of snapping branches. A single arrow whistled through the fog, followed by desperate gunfire and sudden, terrifying silence.



The misty jungle grew eerily quiet, the normal thrum of bioluminescent wildlife completely stifled by the sudden violence. Then came the unsettling sound of rustling leaves and low, rhythmic hissing voices speaking a dialect laced with fragmented English words.



Quentin looked up through the thick fog and locked eyes with a striking Na'vi warrior perched high on a thick branch. It was Varang, the fierce leader of the Mangkwan Clan, her yellow eyes gleaming as her clan members dragged away the remains of the RDA squad.



Varang paused, tilting her head as she sniffed the damp air and scanned the forest floor with predatory focus. Her tail flicked with intense curiosity as her gaze stopped right on the tree where Quentin was desperately trying to stay hidden.



Before Quentin could even process her movement, Varang dropped silently from the branches and lunged from the shadows behind him. Her powerful tail whipped around his throat while her hand slammed over his mouth, pinning his arm before he could reach for his pistol.



Quentin kicked helplessly at the muddy floor, his chest heaving as the Na'vi leader tightened her unbreakable grip around his waist and thighs. She leaned in close to his ear, her voice a low, lethal whisper warning him to stay absolutely still.



Varang hissed a sharp command to her hunters, who emerged from the dense foliage with woven ropes and a heavy cleave gag. They roughly stripped Quentin of his RDA rifle and combat knife, leaving the young soldier completely defenseless.



With practiced efficiency, Varang secured the thick ropes around Quentin's wrists, binding them tightly in front of him. She secured a heavy leash to his bindings, giving it a sharp tug to force him forward into the dark, uncharted depths of the jungle.



Dragged helplessly behind the alien warriors, Quentin looked back one last time at the fading light of the perimeter. With his radio equipment gone and no way to call for backup, he was marched deep into the heart of Mangkwan territory, entirely at the mercy of the wild planet.