

Ambulance Chaser

It is ten to nine on a brisk London morning and Maggie Tarp makes her way to the corporate headquarters of the Fractious News Network. Outside the building, she sees cigarette butts lying on the ground next to the planter and she shakes her head, disapprovingly.

“That is so disgusting,” she mutters as she swoops past.

Inside the building, she clips across the marble floor to the elevator and presses the up-button. Glancing momentarily at her reflection in the shiny metal doors, she turns away and contemplates what she’s seen.

Her long brunette hair rests lightly around her neck like a sleeping Persian cat. Her face is touched with sufficient makeup to create a look at least three points more delightful than her birthright. She wears just enough foundation to hide the pale band of freckles that cross her nose. Those damned freckles, they give away her humble origins, why can’t they just disappear?

All these colors and textures are bought to perfection by her immaculate clothes. She wears a silk blouse tucked into a slate grey pencil skirt, with stockings and high-heels to match.

Maggie used to look plain, with freckles across her nose, until she saw the movie *Bladerunner*. Since then she styled herself on the character Rachel from Tyrell Corp. “Do you like our owl?” she sometimes used to say, practicing the role. It is a fitting question, because Maggie is not just a pleasure to behold, she is wise beyond her years. A successful professional at just 26 years old. Who would have thought a Tarp could come so far?

She glances back into the mirrored surface to take a measure of the one noticeable imperfection. There is a scowl crossing her face. It’s always like this when she is away from the Moogh. The Moogh Scowl, they call it.

It’s even worse when she’s in the city, like today. There’s too much traffic belching greenhouse gas and too many people rushing around, smoking cigarettes and dropping the butts on the ground. She does her best to force a smile, but it’s not easy. Sometimes the Moogh Scowl lasts for days.

The door of the elevator slides open and Maggie steps back to allow the people inside to egress. She recognizes one person, an annoying man, and is thankful that her face is largely hidden by a swirl of hair.

She moves into the elevator and presses the button for level 12, the Executive Suite. The silver doors slide closed but just before they meet, the toe of an unpolished shoe jams into the gap. Maggie steps back in surprise as a pair of hands with chewed fingernails grip the inside edges of the door. The annoying man makes a grunting noise as he struggles to prevent the doors closing. “Can he do it?” he says, forcing the silver doors part-way open.

Then to Maggie's dismay, the annoying journalist, Perrin Speer, squeezes through the gap into the elevator. Maggie squirms, feeling like a snow pea trapped in a pressure cooker with a chili pepper.

Perrin repeatedly hits the 'close door' button, observing that the floor 12 button is alight. He starts talking in his pithy, high-pitched voice. "Whoa. Swanky. Executive Suite," he hits the button for the sixth-floor and glances around to see Maggie glaring at him. "Howdy, Cow Girl," he says, provocatively.

Perrin is mid-thirties. He dresses op-shop and never seems to get a proper shave. To most people he is an annoying twat but the newspaper executives love him because he knows how to write populist shit about tragedies. Perrin Speer sells a lot of Fractious News.

"Get a life," Maggie grumbles, feeling the scowl move bone deep.

"It is a cow, isn't it? You know, the *Moogoo*." He pronounces the word with the accent of a mooing cow.

"Grow a womb, Perrin!"

Perrin is persistent, irritating and lacking in social intelligence. It is a combination that makes him successful in his line of work because he's not afraid to ask inappropriate questions.

"It's a simple question, Maggie," he persists, "is the Moogh a cow?"

"No!" Maggie bites back. "The Moogh is not a cow! Nobody knows what the Moogh is. It's just a Moogh."

"Maybe it's a mutant cow and the G stands for GMO."

"Go to Mars, why don't you?"

The elevator arrives at the sixth floor. The door slides open but Perrin doesn't step out. Instead he hits the 'close door' button again.

"I'll take you top," he says, saliently. The doors close and Perrin looks at Maggie through the reflective surface. She is deliberately looking away, cursing her luck.

"I know something you don't know," he says, cryptically.

"You know how to chase ambulances."

The elevator halts at the 12th floor and there is a long delay before the doors slide open. At last, Maggie can escape.

"Good luck with the Dim Director," says Perrin.

Maggie moves quickly into the Executive Suite, relieved to be out of the pressure cooker. She wonders for a second how Perrin knew that she was meeting with the Dim Director. It troubles her for a moment and then the thought passes.

At the reception desk there sits a fittingly glamorous receptionist whose hair

is a tangle of blonde curls. She smells of perfume and nail polish remover. Maggie introduces herself by showing off her gold embossed business card.

“Would you take a seat over there?” The blonde receptionist indicates towards an arrangement of plush leather chairs around a glass coffee table.

Maggie takes a few hesitant steps in that direction, conscious that she has been ordered to sit. Instead, she moves to the window and looks at the city below. She can see people smoking and flicking their cigarette butts into the gutter. The grumpy look feels like it is settling in for the day and she doesn't know why she has been summonsed to meet the Director. She anxiously picks the edge of the card with a fingernail.

She hears a familiar voice and turns to see friendly face, a girlfriend from her university days and now a co-worker at Fractious News. The two women perform a brief hug.

“It's the famous Maggie Tarp?” says Novell, enthusiastically.

“Hi, Novell, how are you?”

“I'm fine but look at you.” Novell lifts the lapel of Maggie's blouse and teases the material between her finger tip and thumb. “Well, that's nice.”

“That's caterpillar silk from a Catalan souk,” Maggie says, bashfully.

“I'm so glad you're safe,” Novell suddenly adopts a worried tone.

“Why would I be unsafe?”

“I heard that you work with that awful creature,” says Novell.

“I work with the Moogh. And it is perfectly safe for women.”

“Really? Didn't it rape an old lady, like King Kong or something?”

“What? Where did you hear that?” Public opinion of the Moogh is just awful in the offices of Fractious News, Maggie thinks, scratching the business card anxiously.

“It was trending in the blogosphere a while back.”

Maggie groans. “Trending isn't true,” she says for the millionth time. “The Moogh is a gentle giant. No one ever gets hurt.”

“What about the guy with his leg missing? Or the one stabbed in the head?”

“But that wasn't the Moogh that was--” Maggie starts to plead, but she is interrupted by the curly haired secretary addressing her, telling her that she can go into the Dim Director's office.

“Let's have a wine tonight,” Novell says. “Do you have a card?”

Maggie passes over the dog-eared card that now has a whole corner ruined.

“Maggie Tarp,” Novell nods approvingly, “Senior Moogh Reporter.”

“Wine at seven,” says Maggie. “And I'll set you straight about the Moogh.”