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The Hieroglyph-Prone Society of Actors-in- Commercials

By Steve Hubert

1. The Audition

The hieroglyph-prone society of actors-in-commercials.

She rolled the phrase around in her head, said it quietly under her breath. It sounded like a thing to her. But what did it mean? Had she heard the phrase somewhere before, or was this one of those random synapse-firing thingies?

Dina waited in a temporary office reserved by the studio for auditions. The reception area had a unique quality of light that made the edges of things look both fuzzy and defined. Lines appeared hard, but seemed to vibrate almost imperceptibly, like a softly-plucked, but very tightly-tuned, guitar string.

Nearby, more women prepared to audition. Like Dina, they sat with straight backs in chairs set against the wall. She mouthed the words again: *The hieroglyph-prone society of actors-in commercials*. One of the women looked up from a phone and smiled empathetically, mistaking Dina's focus for pre-audition anxiety.

To distract herself, Dina went over some things she'd recently learned about preparing for TV commercial auditions. She knew how to *take care of her skin and smile*, and *how to hold a product for the camera*. She'd watched numerous commercials

to get a feel for *types of expressions*. Now, she knew, it was time to get herself out there.

She adjusted her skirt. Took a deep breath. Whispered the strange words again: *The hieroglyph-prone society of actors-in-commercials*. It felt like the phrase was being transmitted directly into her brain, that she was the terminus for some unnamed but important thing. Was it a warning? Should she be worried? It mattered to Dina to scratch the surface of things, pry open mysteries.

To make her confusion more acute, she'd recently seen John Carpenter's *They Live* and was now harbouring a new, free-floating distrust of authority. Coincidentally, that morning she had also been listening to 3rd Bass for the first time, which had convinced her that there might actually be several layers of hidden knowledge in the world, and that this knowledge was routinely used by power brokers with potentially deep historical roots.

The upshot was, that like Rowdy Roddy or MC Serch, she now went around with sunglasses on.

From a roomful of murmurs she heard her name being called. She stood up and made her way past other hopefuls to a door just beyond reception. The room had a pleasant freshness that seemed propped up on nothing in particular, as though a tropospheric jetstream had been corralled, and then warmed, at great expense. The smoothness of the air exchange system, however, was matched, if not eclipsed, by the casting director's wry greeting. He smiled and gave Dina a wink as he handed her a script with Woman #2 highlighted. Then he introduced her to her reading partner, Wendy. Everything seemed easy and natural as Wendy took a position opposite Dina.

Woman #1: I was at home when I heard the clang of the mail slot. Seeing nothing there, I popped my head outside. Nothing there either. Just then the phone rang.

Woman #2: Hey girl, what's up? There's a show coming up in a couple hours. The band's called The Hoodies and the singer's our mutual friend Brandon.

Woman #1: Sounds decent!

At that moment a man who was sitting next to the casting director, and who looked a little bit like Elvis Costello, delivered a rather bodacious voiceover:

Voiceover: *The Hoodies were a chill wave experiment with overtones of no wave highlighted by their use of real instruments...*

Something wasn't right, Dina thought. *Brandon?* From *The Hoodies*? She stood momentarily unable to move, feeling woozy. It was too familiar to be a coincidence, she knew. But, realizing that both Elvis and Wendy were waiting for her next line, she gathered herself and muttered:

Woman #2: Yeah, they're really good.

[Stage right: A thin metal rod slides in from under the door and

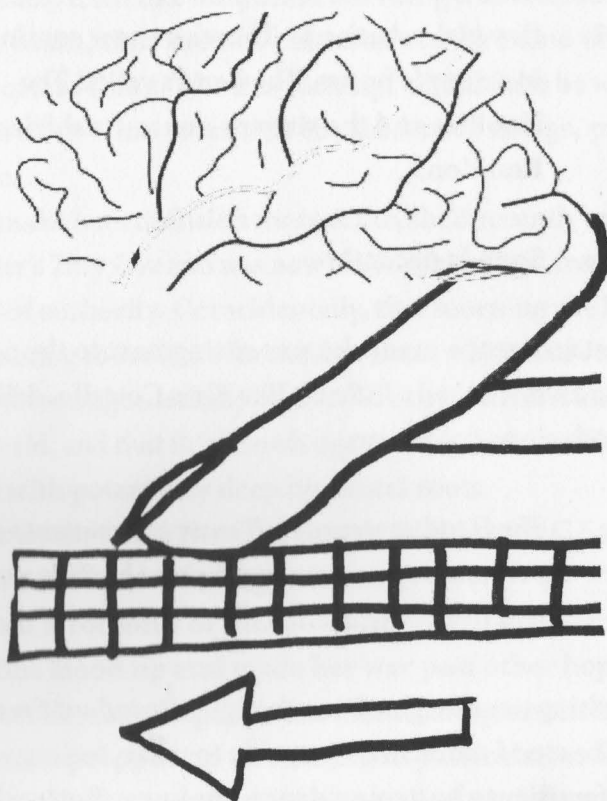


Fig. 1

slowly levitates towards Woman #1 and Woman #2]

[Enter Zero-Astro-7, through door at stage right. He is controlling the rod with a remote. Zero-Astro-7 turns to address the camera in an exaggerated style reminiscent of Ed Grimley]

Dina noticed a symbol on the back of his shirt as he read his lines (Fig. 1)...

Zero-Astro-7: Hello. My name is *Zero-Astro-7*. I'm here to tell ya'll about the most amazing new metal material made of something so thin and so strong! It'll undo your thinking about thinness being weak, and its applications will be numerous and game-changing!

Voiceover: *Cool and amazing new Zero-Astro-7. It's the mental metal with many applications!!!*

Dina stood to one side, awash in the studio's high CRI halogen light. The Elvis Costello voiceover guy and Zero-Astro-7 were grinning at her in the most discomfoting of ways.

"Sooo...should I do it a—"

"You've got the part!" said a voice from out of the shadows. She turned around to find yet another man. This one wore sunglasses and a trench coat, and had a very uncanny air about him. He smiled widely, if menacingly, and Dina could swear

she saw a tooth sparkle. His eagle-nose sat perched above this wide smile. She recalled having seen him before: two weeks ago at a Hoodies gig.

2. Brandon: Boyfriend

Dina's head was spinning as she left the audition. The schlocky and ridiculous script had made little sense to her, but there were certain things she knew for sure: her boyfriend's name was Brandon, and Brandon really was in a band called The Hoodies, and The Hoodies really did have chill wave-no wave roots.

Dina hadn't spoken to Brandon since that same Hoodies gig two weeks earlier, so she wasn't exactly sure of their status. He was charming, yes, but manipulative. He was a successful mountain biker, and his professional profile was buoyed by a not-insignificant web presence. He was handsome in a general kind of way, his face a blank slate onto which adoring adolescent males could project their aspirations. He jumped, winnowed between trees, pushed hard and gained time, followed a line, took risks. Like other successful people, he made everything look easy.

And Brandon was an aspiring writer.

Once, he had written a story that Dina remembered well because it was different from the usual jackassery of his mountain bike videos. The premise of this story had important similarities to that of the *Zero-Astro-7* commercial. It went something like this:

Once upon a time there was an evil scientist who, while thinking of ways to loot and steal, had come up with a super-thin metal material in his lab. It had the thickness of two atoms—one layer for structural integrity and the other for mapping artificial intelligence onto said material—making the metal also super-smart (in hindsight, it was true that the description of this metal had been oddly specific). The evil scientist was later caught mid-robbery while attempting to use one of his super-thin metal rods to hook a man's house keys through a mail slot. The man, who in fact turned out to be a retired detective, eventually convinced the evil scientist to apologize and mend his ways, and together, they went on to develop interesting applications of new technologies that led to better and better ways of solving crimes...

3. How's That For Thin

That night Dina lay in bed, unable to sleep. She was troubled by the many connections between Brandon's story and the commercial, and wondered how, or if, her Brandon was, indeed, involved.

When she finally did fall asleep, her subconscious rose up, and, as so often happens in dreams, her heart substantiated the intuitions that her mind could not.

In her dream, she strung piano wire between two trees along a trail, and waited in the bushes for Brandon to come freewheeling down on his bike. As he approached, she tried to recall that-thing-she-had-always-wanted-to-say-to-him-but-could-never-remember, until suddenly, all at once, it was too

late. The piano wire chopped him cleanly in half.

Only then did she remember what she had wanted to say, blurting out, “HOW’S THAT FOR THIN!”

Of course, the job, the audition, and everything else, had been prearranged by Brandon. He’d adapted his screenplay, or whatever it was, to be the concept for the commercial because, in fact, he had invested a lot of money in a real thing called *Zero-Astro-7*, which is where he’d gotten the idea for the script in the first place.

He’d invested in the new smart metal because he was sure it could be used for high-end bike parts. This, he reasoned, would give him an eventual exit strategy from the competitive world of mountain biking, and establish him more on the industry side of things. He’d been conditioned, as a professional athlete, to always think of the end game.

“Imagine an adaptive metal sprocket that can change size on its own...” he waxed lyrically during one meeting of the *Zero-Astro-7* board of directors, a board on which he now held a prominent seat. The executive team was as impressed as ever, happily obliging their charismatic wonderboy. They were interested in any and all applications of this game-changing technology, and liked the idea of having Brandon as their public face.

But Dina’s part in the commercial was truly the swan song of Brandon’s involvement. He was not going to let her go without a fight. And yes, there was a great deal at stake.

3. The Hoodies

Brandon had always been into music. He liked how it said something about who he was. But, he realized, it was his friends who were the real innovator-types. So when they were looking for a front man, he saw an opportunity and seized it. He couldn't come up with the ideas for music himself. Honestly, he couldn't even hear music in his head like some people could. But he knew how to get a crowd going. Reading and re-reading the Mötley Crüe biography confirmed for him that a person could be anything he wanted to be as long as he acted the part. "Fake it 'til you make it," he liked to say. He considered himself gifted with insights such as these.

But the night of The Hoodies gig had been the last time he'd seen or heard from Dina. He'd been dead set on impressing her, and deeply bothered by her disappearance.

That night, while the band rocked an opening groove, he found some pills in the dressing room that put him over the moon. Coming up to the stage, he planted a boot-clad foot on a monitor, grabbed a mic, and recited the following words in a suitable monotone:

He said

He wasn't born anywhere.

He said

He was from another planet,

But he still had parents on Earth.

Since he came from elsewhere,

*He reckoned he must have been put
On Earth to love women.
But only women of a certain kind:
They had to accept him.*

"They had to be open to him," he sang.

*Just then,
A lone ball
Rolled down the alley.*

*It rolled and rolled and rolled.
A welcome rejoinder it was.*

*And just when he thought
That the ball might stop
Because of a bump or something,
It kept right on going...*

*And this old alley
Is flat in the middle!*

*Must have got a bit of speed at the beginning,
Where there was a bit more of a downhill...*

At the end of the song (they played one really long song) the whole crowd cheered. Everyone except Dina, that is, who stood in the back corner of the bar with her arms folded.

The poem had been hers.

Moving quickly toward the exit, furious, Dina bumped into a very tall person with a trench coat draped across his shoulders. In mid-dodge she looked up and noticed a strange phrase tattooed down his arm:

The
Hieroglyph-
Prone
Society of
Actors-in-
Commercials.

“Excuse me,” Dina said, backing up. The man’s long, eagle-nose was balanced precariously on a set of tight lips.

“Better watch where you’re going,” he stated, matter-of-factly. Annoyed, Dina had countered: “Hey what’s with the tattoo, huh? More of an acronym than a hieroglyph. Hmph!”

Then she’d forgotten all about it.

4. The Society

After landing the commercial gig, Dina continued to ignore Brandon’s texts. She considered changing her number, but then remembered she was also waiting for more details about the commercial. And while she may have been initially in denial about his true involvement, Brandon’s constant messages now confirmed how she really got the part. She glanced down at the last text from Brandon: “need to talk about commercial,” it

read. Alas, she would be forced to reckon with him directly.

Slowing her pace, she noticed something carved in an old sycamore: a curious symbol with the abstract image of what appeared to be a brain riding the neck of a guitar. She recognized it immediately, from the T-shirt worn by Zero-Astro-7 at the audition (Fig. 1).

“What is this?” she said out loud.

On impulse she ran to the next tree. Again, a strange pictogram, this time with the image of a curious face (Fig. 2).

The next tree bore yet another hieroglyph, this one resembling a basketball (Fig. 3). On this final symbol she could make out some letters. She was about to try and decipher them when she felt the sudden coolness of a shadow across her neck. She spun around.

There was the man from the audition, the one dressed in a trench coat and sunglasses, the one who had given her the part. In the daylight he looked like a character from *The Matrix*. They stared at each other, though this would have been difficult to confirm, since they both had on sunglasses.

“Can I help you?” said Dina, coolly.

“Hullo,” said the man, “I believe we’ve met before. You bumped into me at The Hoodies show.”

“Yes, and at the audition, don’t forget. So now we meet again.”

He removed his trench coat and swung it over his shoulder like a real gangster. Dina noticed the strange tattoo again: *The Hieroglyph-Prone Society of Actors-in-Commercials*.

“What does it mean?” she asked, pointing at his arm.

“How about you let me do the talking,” said the eagle-nosed

man, and for the first time, Dina noticed his voice seemed coarse but squeaky, a weird polyphony, perhaps caused by some kind of chronic vocal distress.

“Do you want to have a little fun with your ex-boyfriend?” he asked.

5. Everything Explained

As it turned out, The Hieroglyph-Prone Society of Actors-in-Commercials was an ancient order—much older than TV commercials, at least. The eagle-nosed man explained to Dina that the group adapted its name every few years to appear contemporary and therefore benign. Hieroglyphs, he told her, were an early written system, yes, but they were anything but primitive or inferior. Rather, early pictographic writing had an advanced and secret connection to the divine. And *they*, The Hieroglyph-Prone Society of Actors-in-Commercials, had been involved from the beginning.

Even though all of this dovetailed nicely with her desire to get to the root of things, Dina had been wary throughout their conversation. She asked him what any of this had to do with her.

“Well it’s about time that you asked,” Neo (his actual name) replied. “Let me tell you a little story that sounds a bit like your situation:”

“Once upon a time there was a secret society that, in order to blend in, changed its name to *The Hieroglyph-Prone Society of Actors-in-Commercials*. It therefore behooved them, for the sake of appearances, to find a spokesperson that was actually

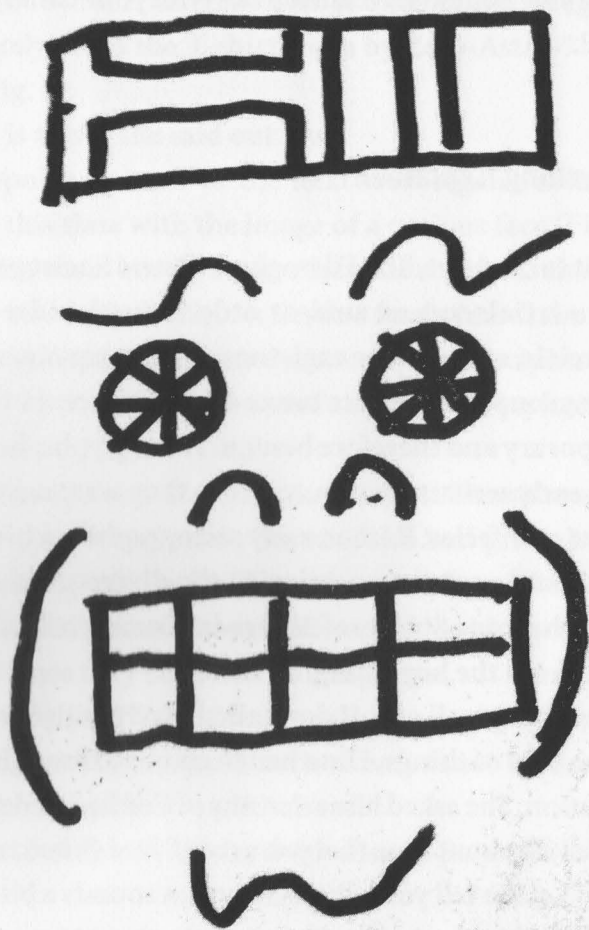


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

an actor in commercials.

Around the same time, a young lady decided to audition for a television commercial. But this wasn't just any commercial that she was auditioning for: it was a commercial for a super-thin, super-smart metal with numerous, game-changing applications.

Now, even though she had no experience, she got the part. She correctly deduced that this was because of help from her ex-boyfriend, who didn't want to let her go, and who maybe had some shares in the super-thin metal industry.

But the plot thickens. Because, you see, *The Hieroglyph-Prone Society of Actors-in-Commercials*—(they used the acronym THaPSAC for short)—had been interested in acquiring a controlling share in the new, super-thin metal. Until somehow, this chance had been swooped away by a young idiot on a bike who got the drop.

In learning that the young lady who got the part also had an axe to grind with this young idiot, it further behooved THaPSAC to reveal itself to her in hopes of striking up a special arrangement."

"And so you see, Dina," Neo explained, "*this is why we've come to you.*"

6. You Got Me Straight Trippin' Girl

A couple of days later, Dina stood in line at a coffee shop near her apartment. Her sunglasses provided much-needed relief from the café's potent lights. Recent events had been

illuminating enough, she thought.

As it now seemed, she would be doing a public good by helping a secret society wrest control of a revolutionary metal from an easily-coerced, and therefore dangerous, professional mountain biker, who was, in her opinion, a major chump. She had already sacrificed many ideals to be in a relationship with the charming-yet-ridiculous Brandon. He was nice and exciting, sure (good looking, too), but he was also a control freak, a narcissist, and now (thanks to The Hoodies), a plagiarist, too. So it was *personal*.

Dina also saw this as an opportunity for her to finally be part of something bigger. It felt good to be on the inside for a change.

She took her coffee to go and walked to the TV studio where the *Zero-Astro-7* commercial was being taped that day.

“Oh hi ho,” said the twenty-something person at reception. “Wendy here will take you to the back.”

From around the corner came Wendy, the same Wendy who she had auditioned with weeks before.

“Hi Dina,” said Wendy cordially, stretching out a hand. Her grip was firm and cold. “Follow me!” she seemed to scream.

Dina realized that for the plan to work, she would have to be perfectly calm in spite of the perspiration and mild shaking that threatened to expose the truth at any moment. Perhaps this is good training to be an actor after all, she posited. Her blood ran cold and then hot and then cold again, as though tiny flecks of temperature-sensitive alloy were mixing with the gates of her heart. Even so, the feeling was unexpectedly exhilarating.

Wendy pushed open another door and suddenly Dina was

face to face with Brandon.

“Hi,” she managed to say, with a voice that seemed to come from some other world where moxie, she hoped, was in good supply. She did her best to remind herself what she was there for.

“Can I speak to you in private for a second,” she whispered.

They stepped out into the hall and Brandon shut the door behind them.

“What’s with the cold shoulder?” he said. “I’ve been trying to get you for, like, two weeks. I haven’t seen you since The Hoodies gig. You got me straight trippin’ girl!”

“Honestly,” Dina said, just as she’d rehearsed, “I’ve been kind of nervous to see you. You were so, I don’t know, *great* on stage that night. So *in control*. You were sexy, but it was kind of, like, scary how sexy you were, so I decided to keep my distance for a while.”

“...And then I auditioned for this commercial and the whole thing sounded just like that story I read of yours and then for a while I kind of resented you for being so, like, so *present* in my life. But maybe I’m realizing now that I kind of like it. Your power, I mean...”

“Shhhh,” said Brandon. “You’re totally over-thinking it. Look. Come back in and let’s do this commercial and then we’ll go out for lunch and talk.”

Dina felt slightly gross about this exchange. And she wasn’t sure whose side she was on now, either. Brandon was a loser, but maybe he didn’t deserve to be played by THaPSAC.

Dina grabbed him and blurted out, “Hey have you ever heard of *The Hieroglyph-Prone Society of Actors-in-Commercials?*”

“Sure,” said Brandon. He casually lifted up his sleeve to reveal a still-puffy tattoo.

7. Women Of The World Take Over

In Make-Up, Dina just stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her face looked faded in a way her stylist must have noticed, since Dina’s pleasant “hello” had been answered with a steely look-over.

As she sat there, Dina tried to parse things out up to this point. Who was playing who? Had Brandon been co-opted by THaPSAC as a backup plan, in case she wasn’t reliable? Surely the Society hadn’t anticipated she would ask him about them, and yet Brandon hadn’t been surprised when she did. What did he know that she didn’t?

Dina’s mind was racing. Should she still go through with the plan?

Luckily, the stylist was doing things now with Dina’s face that made her feel both collected and unattached. She looked at herself in the mirror, looked right into herself, as if the mirror, and hence her image in it, were some latent, inside/outside vestibule of clarity.

Then, like a true actor, she decided to go off script.

“May I borrow that sharpie?” she inquired.

8. Dropbox Hijinx

Back in the TV studio, Dina took a quick head count. The director was there, as was Wendy, who would apparently be playing opposite her again. The Elvis Costello voiceover guy was there. The Zero-Astro-7 guy was there.

She made a quiet dash to Brandon's side. He was standing off-set clicking his phone.

"When did you get that tattoo?" she asked.

"A couple weeks ago. I thought you would have seen it when I was onstage with The Hoodies." He looked up from his phone, eyes narrowing.

"Oh yeah. Right. Can I borrow your phone for a sec? Mine is out of batteries."

"Sure."

Brandon was a little dumb.

As he walked over to the director, Dina quickly accessed his dropbox. She found a folder called THaPSAC, password-protected. She punched in *Zero-Astro-7*. Nothing. Then, she punched in Dina.

It worked.

She bulk sent the enclosed files to dina@gmail.com.

"Here you go," she said, handing back the phone without missing a beat.

9. Who Am I

Unfortunately, Dina didn't have time to look through

Brandon's files before the shoot, so in the meantime, she decided to go along with the asinine script.

Voiceover: Cool and Amazing new *Zero-Astro-7*. It's the mental metal with many applications!!!

After the shoot, before anyone could stop her, Dina quickly headed home to check her inbox.

Thankfully, Brandon was no computer whiz, and the files inside weren't encrypted. She scanned the entries, hoping to get a fix on something good. Then she noticed an odd one: a file called "Hoodies lyrics." A-word doc.

She opened it, and there, at the top, was her poem: the one Brandon had stolen. But below the poem was something entirely different. It looked like instructions of some kind:

Intelligent Graphene Carbon Compound (IGCC)

Zero-Astro-7 is a smart graphene compound that weds existing atomic sheet technology with liquid robotic intelligence. It can be programmed for specific tasks, but its A.I. module allows the material to adapt and change according to real-time needs.

Below this, Dina saw what appeared to be the complete chemical recipe for *Zero-Astro-7*.

"Holy shit," she exclaimed.

Then she heard a knock. Exasperated, she crossed the room and flung open the door.

There stood Brandon.

"You are a robot," he announced.

10. Reality Closes In

"Well actually, you're more of a hybrid," he explained. "The rest of us are robots, though."

Brandon was pacing around Dina's living room now, looking agitated. It worried her that he might not be so dumb after all.

As the facade of her image of him eroded away, Brandon continued.

"We, THaPSAC, implanted you with *Zero-Astro-7* months ago while you were asleep. We wanted to know how the compound would work in a live human subject. Surprisingly, *Zero-Astro-7* turned out to be 100 percent compatible with organic tissue."

At that moment, Neo burst into the apartment, throwing his sunglasses to the floor. His eyes were on fire.

"What are you *doing here*, Brandon?" he demanded. "This was not part of our *arrangement*! You're destroying everything! And why? Because you *love* her? You cannot *love*. You're a fucking robot."

"Take—it—out—of—me!" Dina screamed.

Both Brandon and Neo turned their heads towards her in slow motion and responded in perfect unison.

"We can't."

“What?!” screamed Dina, stunned. “This is so...*totally*... uncool!”

Now, as Brandon and Neo addressed her in turns, she felt a warm silence wash over her. Their lips were still moving, but she couldn't hear. Dina began to think deeply. New thoughts and patterns emerged, trickling in slowly at first, then triggering endorphins and other uncharted reactions, all in a rush. She stood up, resolute, not emotionless exactly, but happy and content. Everything she knew was amplified. She could hear and see and smell and taste and touch with a precision that bordered on clairvoyance.

She had been activated.

The two robots suddenly stopped what they were doing and began to back away.

Dina remembered the good times she and Brandon had spent together, mountain biking, watching Netflix, eating out, making love. She sent these memories to Brandon telepathically, as a final homage.

Dina took a step towards Brandon and Neo, her hands reaching towards them. The tips of her fingers sprouted piano wire-like cables that lassoed around the torsos of the two robots and went taut, slicing them in half right through the middle.

“HOW'S THAT FOR THIN,” she remarked coolly amidst the sound of crackling circuitry.

Heading for the exit, Dina casually pushed up a sleeve to reveal a jiffy-markered tattoo:

**The
Hieroglyph-
Prone
Society of
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Commercials.**

“Talk about poetical,” she mused, walking out into the still-warm afternoon.