

Dax Sky designs alternate reality simulations indistinguishable from the real world. His wife is missing, taken by someone who looks like him. The quest to find her will reveal incredible truths about the nature of reality and life itself.

THE DESIGNER

By Ralph J W Fischer

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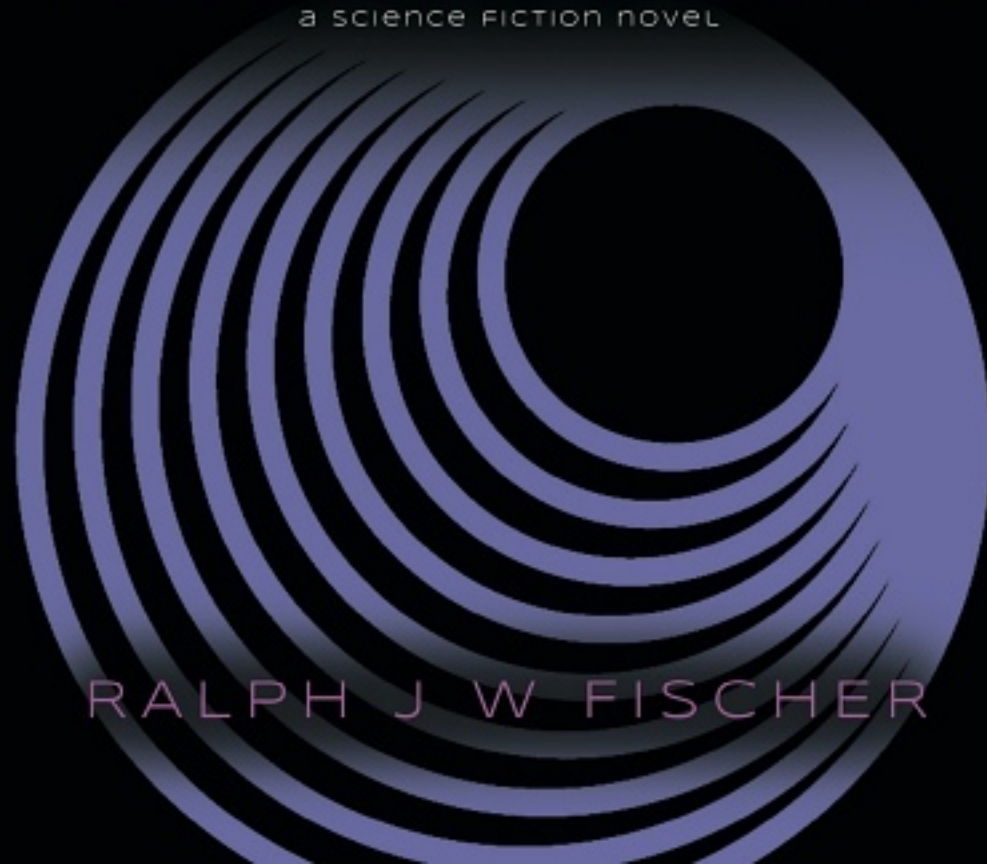
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THE DESIGNER

a SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL



RALPH J W FISCHER

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Chapter 25

The Gaelic colonies along the east coast of Fearann Ur started as self-governing dominions. Britain administered them, much like the original thirteen American colonies. The semiautonomous states would eventually join to declare independence from Britain, again very much like what happened during the eighteenth century in pre-America. Independence was declared when they signed the *Mannahatta Carta* in Dòmhnail, in the year 1411 AD (2164 AUC). The new country was called *Britain Ur*, or “New Britain,” and Dòmhnail was made its capital.

The country occupied an approximate one-hundred-mile strip along the Atlantic coast, from Vinland in the north to what in Dax’s world was once Florida in the south. Inland, beyond the hundred-mile strip to the Pacific, lived many nations and tribes of various indigenous peoples. They included those who had been compensated and displaced from the east coast of Fearann Ur centuries before.

Trade and technology transfer between the people of Britain Ur and the indigenous peoples thrived in the years following its creation. Railroads were built across the continent, along with new indigenous cities on the west and gulf coasts.

The Aztec Empire, already the most advanced indigenous nation in Fearann Ur, benefited greatly from this technology transfer and trade with Britain Ur. The Aztecs went on to occupy and later assimilate west-coast tribal nations as far north as Haida Gwaii. South of its ancient capital, Tenochtitlán, Aztec armies invaded Mayan territories and even tribal areas in the Amazon jungle, further extending the Empire’s reach. The Aztec Empire became the largest

indigenous nation on the Fearann Ur continent, far greater in size than Britain Ur. The Aztecs called this new country Mexica.

Dòmhnaiill also continued to grow in importance. By the year 2000 AD (2753 AUC), its population had grown to more than ten million.

The original Farsaid Temple, demolished in the early 1900s, was replaced with an impressive new structure made of locally quarried Mannahatta schist, glass, and steel. The largest temple in the world, it was constructed at the southern tip of Mannahatta and named the Grand Dòmhnaiill Temple. Four times the size of the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City, its vaulted roof reached more than four hundred feet into the sky, taller than the Statue of Liberty. Its open north side was five hundred feet wide at its base.

In front of the cavernous temple was a ten-mile-long labyrinth. The water-filled labyrinth was constructed as a basket weave with dozens of rivulets moving over and under a maze of paths like intersecting inchworms. At the northern end of the labyrinth stood a massive, titanium-clad sculpture. It was a gift from Britain in 1955 AD (2708 AUC) to mark the thousand-year anniversary of the founding of Dòmhnaiill. The statue stood one hundred and fifty feet tall and depicted Mithra slaying a bull.

On either side of the labyrinth were broad pedestrian malls lined with tropical palms and flowers. Along each avenue soared thousands of mile-high superscrapers. The buildings created a canyon whose floor contained the mall, labyrinth, and avenues. Each building possessed distinctive, nature-inspired designs, adherents to the biomimicry architectural movement which had swept the country.

* * *

At the behest of the Mormon Church, Dr. Rao requested a GhostEyes mission be sent into the Sim to monitor archaeological activities at Palmar Sur. The Church was interested in knowing whether the absence of Christ affected the deposition of Church relics in what would later become the Americas.

Aztec archaeologists could be seen actively excavating the site in the 1960s (2710s AUC) at the same location where, in Dax's world, the stone ossuary box was uncovered in the year 2053 by Costa Rican and Mormon archaeologists. But no stone spheres were ever made by the indigenous *Diquís* people. A stone slab, however, was found buried in the mound at the head of the processional. No man encircled by a serpent was engraved upon it, but beneath it, an ossuary was uncovered.

The GhostEyes witnessed the opening of the stone box by the Aztecs one summer day in 1963 AD (2716 AUC). The box, engraved with the Ouroboros symbol on its lid, was identical to the one dug from the earth by Nina Bell.

This ossuary contained only two objects: a codex of thin gold leaves, bound with three braided copper ropes, and a round stone, looking somewhat like a crimped tart with a hole at its center.

* * *

“They didn't find a Scroll or Orb?” puzzled Dax. “Why would a simulation of our world, with no Ostanes present, result in Lehi not carrying those two objects across the Pacific?”

“That is the question we're all asking, Dax. Any ideas?” asked Dr. Rao.

“Well, the obvious one is that those objects somehow relate to Ostanes. Or to someone who knew him while he was

alive and gave them to Lehi. Not sure how we go about trying to figure that out though.”

“I have been giving it some thought. Your brother, Aaron, works in the historical archives department at the Temple in Salt Lake. Do you think he can secure us access to the original imaging data of the Scroll?”

“You mean the Scroll that was sent to Washington, DC—and is now lost forever?”

“Yes. The imagery captured a few glyphs, which could be seen in a tear of the ‘parchment.’ Some people at the time thought they could be Viking or Celtic runes. We’re going into a Sim with an advanced Viking and Celtic culture. Since I’m joining you, maybe together we can see if anyone in this world can help decipher them.”

Dax sat staring at the ceiling for a few minutes and then said, “I think I may have an idea for a cover story, but I’d like to develop it a bit more. I’ll call Aaron and get back to you, if that’s OK.”

“Sure. Let me know if you require any assistance. I can be very persuasive when I need to be.”

* * *

“The Church is still interested in learning anything it can about the Scroll, since it was found with the famous gold codex, so Aaron got permission to send me these holograms and pics,” said Dax to Dr. Rao, standing with his brother.

“Thank you, Aaron! I have seen a couple of these pics before, but I never realized so many existed. And a hologram too!”

“You are welcome, Dr. Rao. Most were never released to the public. The Church would like to learn more about the glyphs and maybe even retrieve the actual Scroll one day, if it still exists.”

“Yes, I have heard some talk about that recently, but I doubt the Chinese would ever sanction such a mission. Or, indeed, even want to try. Aaron, what can you tell us about what they learned about the Scroll back then?”

“Well, first, the ‘parchment’ is not any man-made or natural material known to exist. Analysis conducted at the time indicated that it contained at least one unknown isotope bound up in molecules never seen before.”

“That’s true of the Orb too, isn’t it?” chimed in Dax.

“Yes. The Orb also tested for unknown isotopes in its surface. They are combined with known elements to form strange new molecules. This material is much harder than glass and very different from the leatherlike feel of the Scroll. Also, the Scroll appears to be more fragile than the Orb, since there was a tear in it. The fact that the two objects are both made of exotic materials is one of the reasons why we think they are related. Plus, there is a partial image of a colored globe exposed by the tear, which could be the Orb.”

“Go on, Aaron.” Dr. Rao’s eyes were transfixed on the hologram floating above the table as it rotated and flipped slowly, revealing all its sides and surfaces.

“So, like the pics show, in addition to the globe illustration, we can see about two dozen full and ten partial runelike symbols through the tear,” Aaron said, pointing his finger to an open flap on the rotating hologram image.

“Now, this one we think we can identify. The symbol, a vertical line with a triangle attached to one side—it’s the same as an old Norse rune which translates to ‘door’ or ‘gateway.’ It symbolizes the passage of one form to another, or from one world to another, and it is associated with the Norse god Thor, so we’re confident it’s Viking.”

“Viking—hmm. Well, the Celts did conquer and absorb the Vikings, so they might know something about their language,” Dax said.

“We think the other symbols make up words and sentences. These glyphs are radically different and not of Viking origin at all. The symbols appear to be an unknown dialect of Ogham, which is the primitive Celtic alphabet. Linguists think the language originated in Scythia, near the Black Sea, some time before the birth of Christ.”

“What do we think it says?”

“Our best guess is ‘Throw to start.’ But we could be way off.”

“So, Aaron, I’m assuming that’s why we think there is some kind of Celtic/Viking connection here. The mystery around the unknown materials used in the Orb and Scroll is still puzzling, though. What about the rest of the symbols?” Dr. Rao’s nose was now almost inside the hologram.

“Don’t know. The symbols look like they might be forms of either Ogham or Norse, or an altogether unknown runic language. No one at the time could translate any of them. A lot is still unknown when it comes to ancient runic symbols.”

“Thanks again, Aaron. Dax, let’s get together tomorrow morning to finalize our insertion plan.” Dr. Rao then stood and shook Aaron’s hand. She turned to Dax. “I hope your cover story is a good one.”

* * *

“The GhostEyes missions have identified an institute of higher learning located close to the north end of the labyrinth. The campus was called the Mannahatta Oilthigh and includes a Celtic School of Language Department,” Dax said, sitting across from Dr. Rao. “Our researchers tracked down academic papers written by a professor in that department by the name

of Roibeard Ásgeirsson. He's one of this world's leading experts in the study of ancient runes. We sent a communication to him asking for a meeting, and he replied, saying he was quite intrigued about our mysterious Scroll and wants to meet us."

"Fantastic! So, what's our cover story?"

"We're a couple of archaeologists from Rus. You speak fluent Russian, and I can fake a few phrases if I have to. We're part of a team who made a discovery of a Scroll in western Rus, near the border with Scandinavia. We tell him we're seeking help in deciphering the meaning of some of the runes we can see on the Scroll."

"Sounds good so far. Go on."

"We'll bring along this little universal translator device, which has been programmed to translate the Gaelic/Norse language they speak into Russian and vice versa. Our earpieces will translate that into English—though you won't need it, Dr. Rao." Dax smiled, holding out a white, puck-like device in his hand.

"Should we send the pics to him before we meet?"

"I think so. If you're fine with the plan, I'll send them along with our agreement to the meeting place and time."

"I like it. All right, let's proceed. Once we obtain his confirmation, we'll set the insertion time. But remember, every day in the Sim is one minute and twenty-six seconds for us, so we've got to be ready to jump in at a moment's notice."

* * *

"T minus thirty seconds to insert. Animators, stand by portal entrance."

"T minus ten seconds. Calibrate to RTR. Open portal door."

"Five, four, three, two, one—Animators insert."

Dax and Dr. Rao disappeared into the mist.

As the fog dissolved, the pair found themselves surrounded by dozens of people moving in and out of the gaping entrance of the Mithraeum behind them. Dax and Rao faced the labyrinth, the gravity-defying rivulets of water glistening in the sun stretching far into the distance. The sun reflected off the oddly shaped superscrapers, their upper floors obscured by clouds. Thousands of craft, flying at various altitudes, streamed in a north–south direction high above each of the two grand promenades. Some darted in and out of the buildings like bees in a hive, joining and breaking from stacked rivers of vehicles. The promenades featured a series of parallel tracks, one on each side of the labyrinth. They were filled with covered pods with seating inside, moving slowly, levitating inches above the ground. People sat in the pods, engrossed in conversation as they leisurely paraded up and down the mall.

Most people ignored them, but one couple couldn't stop staring at them, looking like they'd seen a pair of ghosts. Which is what their sudden materialization from thin air must have made them look like.

“Can we take a look inside the Mithraeum?” asked Dax, dressed in a conservative tweed jacket and pants.

“Sure. We've got a few hours till our meeting. Afterward, I suggest we take one of those pods up to the Oilthigh,” messaged Dr. Rao, wearing a long black dress and scarlet headscarf.

The two walked into the temple. Moving friezes and carved tablets depicting various scenes in the life of Mithra covered the walls. Dozens of stone statues of people lined the perimeter.

In front of the altar, at the southern end of the temple, stood thirteen men. Each was playing a *carnyx*, a kind of brass trumpet with a bell shaped like an openmouthed snake. The long-bearded men wore white *léines*, smock-like garments that

hung just above the knees. Emerald-green brats mantled their shoulders. The music, reminiscent of sprightly Irish folk tunes, echoed off the walls and curved ceiling.

Dax cocked his head back to look at the ceiling.

“This one’s got the disks too! But these are all lit up. They look like a real night sky. The black one is there too. Its serrated teeth are pulsating, streaming light into its center. How cool is that?” asked Dax, craning his neck so far back he almost tumbled to the stone floor.

“We really should ask someone while we’re here, but I’m not sure how. I think we should start our trek up north. We need to focus on the task at hand. I don’t want to get lost, and it’s not like we can ask anyone for directions either.” Dr. Rao motioned toward the sunlit entrance. “Besides, my ears are hurting. But thank God they’re not playing bagpipes.”

“I don’t know. I thought it sounded nice. And I kinda like bagpipe music.”

The two exited the temple and strolled into the warm sunlight. Their nostrils flared as they inhaled the damp sea air scented with the sweet perfume of flowers. They walked over to the eastern promenade, lined on either side with beds of lilies and hibiscus. The pair sat down in one of the moving pods and exchanged smiles with a young couple sitting across from them.

The trip to the north end of the mall took a leisurely two hours. It gave them both a chance to take in this spectacular city and the people who lived here. Rao and Dax, of course, had never been to New York City, which had been destroyed by the Chinese more than a hundred years ago. But this city appeared much more beautiful and modern than pictures they had seen of old New York. Though it was centuries before the time they lived in, the technology they witnessed seemed far ahead of what existed even in their world.

When the pod reached the northern end of the mall, they stepped out, finding themselves at the foot of the colossal statue of Mithra slaying a bull. It towered over them like a man-made mountain plated with shiny titanium. The sun transformed the sculpture into a blazing mirror, reflecting shards of sunlight in all directions like lasers shooting from a silvery rock. The brilliant light bathed nearby trees, people, and buildings in a spectacular light show.

“The campus is only a few blocks from here. Our appointment is in thirty minutes. His office is in the Cànan Institute building,” said Rao.

They walked in a northerly direction at a brisk clip and soon stood before a medieval-looking arch which marked the entrance to the university campus.

“I see it,” Dax whispered, pointing to an oddly shaped building a few hundred yards away.

They entered the pink, metal-clad building which resembled branching sea coral, its tentacles reaching into the sky like some weird octopus. The pair took a skypod to one of its multiple ninetieth floors. As they exited the skypod, they were greeted by Professor Ásgeirsson, standing at the door to his office. He smiled and waved his cane.

All three went into his office. Dax pointed to the universal translator he pulled out of his bag. Like a French mime, he touched his mouth, the device, and then his ear. He placed the translator on a conference table.

Ásgeirsson appeared to be a man in his eighties, though with all the biomechatronic replacement parts available in this world, there was no way for them to guess his real age. He was tall and wiry. Below the glossy crown of his head sprouted a few untamed white tufts of hair, both inside and behind his ears. His leathery face was accessorized with a bushy, silvery-

orange beard and mustache. Above each eye was stationed an eyebrow that reminded Dax of a red, woolly caterpillar.

As Dr. Rao began to speak in Russian, the translator device came alive.

“Thank you, Professor Ásgeirsson, for seeing us. We brought our own translator along. I hope you don’t mind,” Dr. Rao said.

“No, not at all,” said the professor, bending over to look at the device, revealing a mild hunchback.

“Yes, thank you, Professor. This is my assistant, Dax Sky.”

“Welcome, Mr. Sky.”

“Please call me Dax, Professor Ásgeirsson. Did you receive our picts?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Sorry for being so forward, but—may I ask what you think about these runes?”

“Nothing to be sorry about. But I have some bad news for you, Dr. Rao. I believe you have been hoodwinked. These are not ancient runes. No, not at all. Most of them are modern. We use almost all today. Evolved from old Norse and Gaelic runes, for sure, but all very modern. In fact, some of the runes appear to be even more modernized than those I am familiar with—but they could be technical jargon of some kind. There are a couple of runes I have ne’er seen before, so I cannot help you with them, though. Perhaps some obscure slang used in Britain today. Bewildering, I have to admit.”

“Were you able to translate any of them, sir?” asked Dax, in broken Russian.

“I can only give you snippets. I understand the Scroll is delicate, and you are not rushing to unravel it. But I can tell you what some of these words and phrases say,” Ásgeirsson

said, coughing a few times and then setting down a piece of paper covered in runes.

“Allow me to begin with the runes inside—these ones,” said the Professor, pointing to the sheet. “From left to right, the words say ‘extraction,’ ‘throw to wake,’ ‘reality,’ ‘gateway,’ ‘destination,’ ‘destination reference date,’ and ‘origin place.’”

“Well, we did sort of get a couple of them,” Dax said after sitting in silence for a few minutes.

“Any idea what they mean, Professor?”

“I cannot help you there, Dr. Rao. A real head-scratcher. Now, what I did find interesting were the seven staveless runes. Someone’s hand wrote those glyphs. I think you indicated that they were on the outside of the Scroll?”

“Yes, that is correct, Professor. Our own analysis suggested the glyphs to be of some kind of ancient runic alphabet,” offered Dax.

“Indeed. Early Futhark, recognizable, though modernized quite a bit. The alphabet is more than two thousand years old, but is still used today by some of our Mithraic priests and astrologers. You can find many of these same symbols in our Church documents. But here’s where it gets really interesting. Confounding even.”

“Confounding?”

“Yes. Those staveless runes spell out ‘Neo Tass.’”

“Sounds like a name.”

“It is a name. If you go into the Mithraeum a few miles south of here, you will find a statue of a famous Mithraic astrologer also named Neo Tass. He died on a secret Church mission about fifty years ago. I wonder if this Scroll of yours might be his. But what could it possibly be doing in western Rus?”

“This is head-spinning stuff, Professor. A lot for us to digest, for sure,” Dax replied.

“Yes, quite the mystery. I do think you might have something valuable here. Is there anything else I can assist you with, Dr. Rao?”

“No, thank you, Professor.”

“Much appreciated, sir,” added Dax.

“Oh, almost forgot, Professor. We brought a small gift for you. It is from Rus.” Rao proceeded to take a small wrapped box from her bag and then handed it to Ásgeirsson.

“Matryoshka nesting dolls! How kind of you. They are beautifully made and hand-painted, I suspect.” The Professor took the doll out of the box and twisted it open to reveal another smaller doll inside. He did the same with this second doll and found an even smaller one nested inside it. He would repeat this three more times until he found a last tiny doll that he could not open.

“Twist it open. Might be a little hard at first. Go ahead. Watch what happens.”

The professor tried again to twist open the doll, a little harder this time. His eyes bulged as he watched it grow to the size of the first doll.

“Try to open it,” said Rao, her teeth and gums on full display.

He twisted it open, and nested inside was a smaller doll just like the one inside the original doll.

Rao giggled. “You could do this all day, Professor, but soon your office would be filled with dolls.”

“What a wonderful toy. Thank you so much. You Russians are so clever.”

“You are most welcome. But it is we who must thank you.”

“It was nothing. No bother at all. I hope I was at least somewhat helpful.” Ásgeirsson paused, glancing at a fearsome warrior mask hanging on a wall. “Oh, I meant to ask. How do

you think your national football team is going to do in the world finals against our Gaelic Warriors next week?"

Dax and Dr. Rao looked at each other with blank faces. Dax finally spoke. "Hmm—uh. I hope better than the last time they met." The sweat stain under his arms now reached to his waist.

"Well, as you can guess, I hope they don't." Ásgeirsson laughed.

"Oh, Professor Ásgeirsson. Before we leave, may I ask you a naïve question?"

"Of course."

"In the Mithraeum south of here. On its ceiling. Can you tell us what the single black disk represents?"

"I'm surprised, Dr. Rao. You have Mithraeums in Rus. Why, it is the cause of the Earth's destruction, of course—the *ebon star*."

"Oh yes, how could I forget. It has been some time since I have visited a Mithraeum. Thank you again," Rao said. They left Ásgeirsson's office and entered a skypod, which deposited them back to street level.

Ásgeirsson glanced at the conference table and thought, *Oh, they forgot their little translator.*

* * *

"Damn! How could we have left the translator in the Sim?" swore Rao, her Russian accent much more distinct than usual.

"It's been three days since you and Dax left the Sim. More than eight years have passed inside," Jim said.

"What did the GhostEyes find?"

"They went into the institute building a few hours ago. Ásgeirsson's office was empty. No trace of him. We're

sending another mission in with a real FliesEyes swarm to retrieve the device, if we can find it.”

“How is this even possible, Jim? How can we lose an old tech Spore-made object inside a computer program?” asked Rao, her lips knotted.

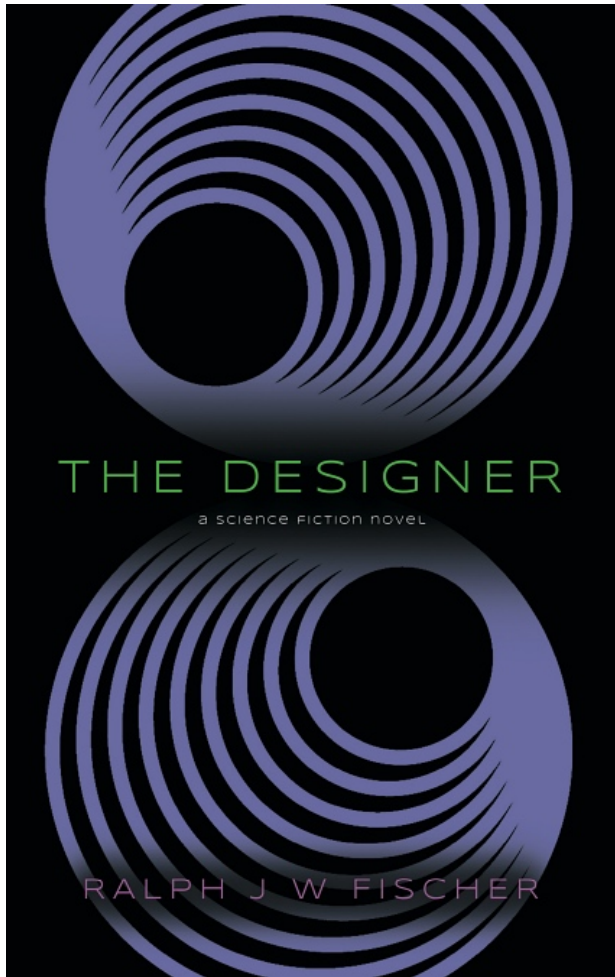
“The translator is made of matter. When it went into the Sim, it was converted into electrical energy. You know, conservation of energy and matter. The thing is in the data banks on Mars in the form of energy,” explained Jim.

“What if we turn off the Sim and erase the data?”

“Gone forever. Energy released as heat.”

“Well, you’d better find it. We’ve no idea what the implication of it being in there might be.”

Dr. Rao struggled to suppress the panic that had almost overwhelmed her these last few days.



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