

C. R. DOWNING

LIGHT  
BENDER

*Traveler's* **HOT L** - Volume 5

## Section 1

# The Eyes Have It

The late-model sedan crunched to a stop in the gravel-covered parking lot. The passenger door opened. Two eyeballs floated out of the car and rose to a point seventy-inches above the sidewalk.

The eyeballs disappeared briefly while the car door swung shut. After turning toward the door labeled “Lobby,” they moved in a rhythmic pattern until they reached the lobby’s double-doors.

Although the doors were not motion-activated, the left member of the pair swung open, the eyeballs moved through the doorway and stopped when a raspy voice called from an open doorway behind the front desk.

“It is your turn to check-in a traveler.” Eternity’s directive grated its way into Chronos’s ear. Not a husband and wife, their species has a single-gender, the co-managers of Traveler’s HOT L treated each other as what many clients thought sounded like “an old married couple.” The fact that Eternity was often described by travelers as a “tall, thin, shrewish woman” while Chronos’s description was generally a “much shorter shrew” did little to weaken the impression.

“I looked in the lobby. There’s no guest here.”

Eternity frowned, pushed the door from the control room to the lobby open, and moved behind the front desk. A scan of the lobby supported Chronos’s statement. She turned back to the open doorway.

“Is this the time travel hotel?” The question emanated from empty space in front of the counter.

Eternity's right eye squinted closed. She tilted her head and glared at what appeared to be floating eyeballs on the other side of the front desk.

When she didn't reply, the eyeballs added, "The E is missing from your signage."

Chronos sent a short burst of laughter into the lobby then responded to the apparently bodyless eyeballs.

"Alien creature, if that's what you are, this is not a hotel."

"And, the signs are not missing any letters." The woman's face was a blank masque. Her statement was matter-of-fact.

"But they are. The E in 'hotel' must have blown over on one, and it's faded almost to invisibility in the other."

Chronis gave another snort. "You don't understand, alien. This place is a HOT L, a Harmonious Overlap of Time Location."

"We know about the signs. We placed the sign on the lawn. As for the highway sign, it was there before we built this building. We removed the 'E' as best we could. This is a HOT L, not a hotel." Eternity's emphasis on the pronunciation of each term and her tone indicated further discussion was unwise.

"I'm not an alien," the eyeballs confessed.

"Trust me, I knew that." Chronos's smugness rivaled his partner's tone on the insult scale.

Eternity now stood within inches of the eyeballs. She poked one index finger in that direction and demanded, "Why are you here?"

"Ouch!" Eyeballs complained. "You jabbed me in the neck. You need a manicure."

"My fingernail worked perfectly. Answer my question or Chronos and I will give you what is sometimes known as a bum's rush out of my lobby."

"Why aren't you visible to us?"

“I screwed up royally. That’s why I need to time travel back and fix that.”

“I’m not particularly fond of the term ‘time travel.’ But you can be transported to another time via one of our harmonic overlap of time pockets in this building.”

Even without any facial movements supporting the eyeball's actions, it was clear the owner was confused.

“How did you get here? I cannot imagine you driving a car in your current apparently bodiless state.”

“I have a friend waiting in her car in your parking lot.”

“Does she agree that traveling back in time is the best solution for your problem?”

“I guess so. She’s been involved from the beginning. She suggested this place and offered to drive me here.”

“Go get your friend,” Eternity demanded. “When you are both present, the three of us will go into a private location and discuss your situation.”

Eyeballs disappeared. Seconds later the exterior lobby door opened and closed.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Chronos whined when the proprietors were alone.

“Considering how many centuries you have lived, you still have an unflattering number of childish responses to situations you find disrespectful or degrading.”

“Then again, maybe I just do it because I know it irritates you.” He winked while moving out of her arm’s reach. “Time to put on your best behavior, Eternity. The customers are both in the lobby now.”

If looks could kill, Chronos would have needed CPR. With great effort, Eternity composed herself and watched the eyeballs and an African-American woman approach the front desk.

“My name is Clarissa Newland. You’ve already met my friend, Belton Flournoy, although he doesn’t remember introducing himself.”

“His memory is accurate.” Eternity’s inflection left no doubt about her position on proper introductory etiquette. “I am Eternity. How did you learn about our service?”

Clarissa explained she received a mailer addressed to her, although she never requested information. She talked Belton into taking a short trip to get away from all that was going on in their lives and found herself compelled to stop at the HOT L.

“We have an aggressive advertising company.”

“So, can we travel back in time and fix an issue?” Belton asked.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Eternity assured him. “My partner, Chronos, gets great joy from describing our services.”

“Think of the HOT L as a collection of pools of time. Each room contains a single pool.” Without missing a beat, Chronos began explaining how the Harmonic Overlapping Time Location worked.

Eternity sat down. She knew what was coming—and how long it took her colleague to finish his spiel.

“Every 1 hour and 16 minutes, exactly, ripples in time appear in each room. The time of the ripples is not synchronized between rooms, so we have times changing almost continually. That’s much better for scheduling trips than having all rooms change time at once. While the time is changing, the walls ripple.”

Clarissa raised her hand.

“No questions until the end of the explanation,” Eternity barked. She gestured sequentially for Clarissa to lower her hand and Chronos to continue.

“When the ripples dissipate, it is a different time in that room. Every 228 time changes, the same time period at precisely the

same location reappears in the same time pool, a specific room in this establishment.”

“Is he saying we have only 76 minutes at the time we choose before we have to return?” Belton asked while his eyeballs peered eerily in Eternity’s direction.

“No,” Eternity answered. “You have to choose from times allotted in 12-day periods.” She glanced at the wall clock in the room then at Chronos. “Wrap this up.”

“Roger that. If you want to return to your time, this time, you’ve got to be in that room when the right ripples are stirring. After 228 seventy-six-minute cycles, it’s 12 days later in our timeline. If you miss that seventy-six-minute window of opportunity to return, you must wait another 12 days, that’s 228 more cycles, for the same time to reappear.” Chronos finished with a flourishing gesture the best magician in Las Vegas would have been proud of.

“Both of you follow me to a more private location,” Eternity snapped. “Chronos must check in a scheduled group of travelers.”

Chronos opened the door behind the counter. Eternity led the way for the potential travelers. Clarissa nodded politely as they passed.

Chronos shut the door behind them and assumed a position behind the front desk. Entering the lobby was a family of five with time travel plans to opening day at Disneyland in 1955. Chronos waved his greeting. The father nodded, the mother smiled, and the kids waved enthusiastically in return.

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“Can you make Belton visible?” Eternity asked Clarissa.

“No one can,” Belton, AKA Eyeballs, answered for himself. “I’ve got to go back before I applied Light Bender directly to my skin and stop myself from rubbing the stuff all over my body.”

## LIGHT BENDER

“We developed a method of surveillance where the security guard is hidden from view of those around him,” Clarissa explained. “The method uses what some call spooky action to in a sense bend light waves around the guard’s body through the guard’s clothes. Since there is no light reflected off the security guard’s surface, no one can see that guard.”

Eternity held up her hand. The movement and her facial expression left no doubt that the explanation was over.

“We need to move to a specialized location. Once we get settled, you both will remember what happened to get you to this moment in time. Of course, I have the authority to end your remembering once I have enough information to chart a pathway back along the fabric of time to the event.”

She waved off Clarissa’s attempt to interrupt.

“You get to talk only after I experience your memories.”

Fifteen minutes later, the pair sat in reclining chairs wearing headpieces designed to isolate the strongest memory present in the brain beneath it. The device sent the selected memory to a supercomputer that reconstructed the digitized data. The final step projected the memory into Eternity’s cerebral cortex. Simultaneous recording of the memory in a sophisticated code native to Eternity’s home planet was a routine security precaution.

“Let us begin. Recall your first memory of this situation.”

Four human eyes shut as Belton and Clarissa recalled the start of the tempestuous path they traveled to the situation they faced at home.

Transmission began.

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Two minutes after she started Belton and Carissa’s memory downloads, Eternity turned off the collection devices. Nearly any human memory up to a year in length uploaded in less than seventy seconds. She extended the memory collection time

because human memory storage patterns were less predictable than those of her species. She would not risk the loss of memory by either subject with a second recovery session.

Once the program finished memory collection, it generated what humans refer to as Delta waves. These deep sleep waves kept the pair relaxed until Eternity was ready for her next step.

She ordered scans along the length of both memory versions of the events leading to the humans' unexpected appearance in the HOT L that day. She was glad Chronos wasn't helping her. She knew he would not ignore her use of the word 'appearance' when one of the humans was invisible.

The computer program purged non-essential memories by the brain scans from the data before it uploaded to Eternity's brain. Protocols already embedded in her brain merged multiple memories into a single composite version, allowing her to follow what happened in a pseudo real-time version of events.

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Chronos finished checking in the Disneyland travelers and joined his partner in the viewing room in the room behind the front desk.

"I knew you were intrigued by this situation when I heard the memory-recovery system power-up."

"They are sleeping now," Eternity replied, ignoring the comment. "I am viewing the memory file to give me a—"

"Deeper, clearer understanding of what happened and in what sequence," he finished the comment he'd heard scores of time in the centuries they managed the HOT L.

"I am concerned by the recklessness of the human, Belton. We cannot attempt any movement back down the timeline until we have more details of the situation than I am able to retrieve with the recovery program. Summon Tempus and Epoch. We will need them to gather more information before we proceed."



Chronos nodded. Tempus and Epoch were the time synchronizers responsible for the 19th through 21st centuries. When the timeline in that range is damaged, they repair it, then smooth the wrinkled time fabric, maintaining the integrity of the rate of time's passage.

Although members of the same alien species as Chronos and Eternity, time synchronizers' unique DNA sequences gives them the ability to morph their bodies to match a number of life forms in seconds. To conserve energy, they exist as mist between morphs.

Tempus responded to the summons as a sphere of mist that condensed into a human-like form.

"I know you called for both Epoch and me, but he's working on controlling the speed of an unraveling time thread that's causing the human it represents to age nearly one month every two days."

"You'll be able to handle our request without any problems," Chronos assured the time synchronizer. "Eternity feels the need for more details of their situation before we commit to any offer of assistance via the HOT L."

"I enjoy investigating human behavior. My family does not express emotions over any event. Most humans are more, um—"

"Demonstrative." Eternity's voice preceded her entrance as she completed the time synchronizer's thought to her liking. "I am pleased that someone finds pleasure through interaction with humans. I will assign more of my emotional human interaction opportunities to you, if you so desire."

Tempus smiled and flashed a thumbs up before her human form dissolved and her misty particles dissipated through a window.

## Section 2

# Fleshing Out the Memories

Belton Flournoy rubbed his eyes for what he knew was the fifty-seventh time in the last half-hour. He counted the number of eye rubs during development sessions. One of his not-for-publication theories was the number of eye rubs tracked the progress of his current experiment.

Fifty-seven eye rubs during the current ninety-minutes of his session were more than his projection. That indicated a lack of headway in his experimental trials.

He placed his light source on the tabletop, picked up his cell phone, and hit number three.

“This is Clarissa. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

“Hi, Clare. It’s Belton.”

“It’s been a while, Belton. Your number dropped out of my favorites list.”

“I need your help.”

“I’m sorry. I must have misunderstood what you just said. Can you repeat that?”

“Fun-eee.” Belton paused. He liked Clarissa. She liked him, off and on. Although she had minimal formal training in biology or physics, she was a natural problem-solver for issues in anything related to vision and optics. Since light waves were the primary focus of his stalled research, he needed her.

“Is that all?” Clarissa queried, although her tone of voice implied she knew the answer.

“Don’t be that way.”

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“It’s the only way I know of getting you to admit you’ve experimented yourself into a situation you can’t see a way out of.”

He did not respond.

“What iteration of this fiasco are you on?”

“I just shut down session twenty-six.”

“How many eye rubs?”

“Fifty-seven.”

“In two hours?”

“Ninety minutes.”

“You’re as stuck as I’ve ever known you to be.”

He heard paper rustling.

“The first time I can commit to assisting you is next Wednesday evening. You have six days to compose either a testable hypothesis or a well-thought-out question.”

She ended the call.

His face morphed into that of the Cheshire cat in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. He began summarizing his work and composing the required hypothesis.

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Tempus began her observation of Belton the day he called Clarissa. She watched their interactions as a misty cloud through a supply register of Belton’s HVAC system. The vantage point was adequate, but not ideal. When she was certain his focus was on the problem, her misty form migrated into the room and settled where a wall supported the ceiling. Spread out in noodle-like fashion, the odds of discovery were minimal.

Everything seemed on the up and up until he ended the phone call to Clarissa. Her empathic training registered his smile as deceitfulness not happiness when he returned to his notebook. It was an unsettling discovery this early in her surveillance.

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