# Absolutely Inflexible

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The detector over in one corner of Mahler’s little office gleamed a soft red. With a weary gesture of his hand he drew it to the attention of the sad‑eyed time jumper who sat slouched glumly across the desk from him, looking cramped and uncomfortable in his bulky spacesuit.

“You see,” Mahler said, tapping his desk. “They’ve just found another one. We’re constantly bombarded with you people. When you get to the Moon, you’ll find a whole Dome full of them. I’ve sent over four thousand there myself since I took over the bureau. And that was over eight years ago—in twenty‑seven twenty‑six, to be exact. An average of five hundred a year. Hardly a day goes by without someone dropping in on us.”

“And not one has been set free,” the time jumper said. “Every time traveler who’s come here has been packed off to the Moon immediately. Every single one.”

“Every one,” Mahler agreed. He peered through the thick shielding, trying to see what sort of man was hidden inside the spacesuit.

Mahler often wondered about the men he condemned so easily to the Moon. This one was small in stature, with wispy locks of white hair pasted to his high forehead by perspiration. Evidently he had been a scientist, a respected man of his time, perhaps a happy father although very few of the time jumpers were family men. Perhaps he possessed some bit of scientific knowledge which would be invaluable to the 28th Century. Or perhaps he didn’t. It scarcely mattered. Like all the rest, he would have to be sent to the Moon, to live out his remaining days under the grueling, primitive conditions of the Dome.

“Don’t you think that’s a little cruel?” the other asked. “I came here with no malice, no intent to harm anyone. I’m simply a scientific observer from the past. Driven by curiosity, I took the Jump. I never expected that I’d be walking into life imprisonment.”

“I’m sorry,” Mahler said, getting up.

He decided to end the interview then and there. He had to get rid of this jumper because there was another space traveler coming right up. Some days they came thick and fast, and this looked like one of the really bad days. But the efficient mechanical tracers never missed a jumper.

“But can’t I live on Earth and stay in this spacesuit?” the man asked, panicky now that he saw his interview with Mahler was coming to an end. “That way I’d be sealed off from contact at all times.”

“Please don’t make this any harder than it is for me,” Mahler said. “I’ve explained to you why we must be absolutely inflexible. There cannot—must not—be any exceptions. Two centuries have now passed since the last outbreak of disease on Earth. So naturally we’ve lost most of the resistance acquired over the countless generations when disease was rampant. I’m risking my life coming so close to you, even with the spacesuit sealing you off.”

Mahler signaled to the tall, powerful guards who were waiting in the corridor, looking like huge, heavily armored beetles in the casings that protected them from infection. This was always the worst moment.

“Look,” Mahler said, frowning with impatience. “You’re a walking death trap. You probably carry enough disease germs to kill half the world. Even a cold—a *common* cold—would wipe out millions now. Acquired immunity to disease has simply vanished over the past two centuries. It’s no longer needed, with all diseases conquered. But you time travelers show up loaded with potentialities for all the diseases that once wiped out whole populations. And we can’t risk having you stay here with them.”

“But I’d—”

“I know. You’d swear by all that’s holy to you or to me that you’d never leave the confines of the spacesuit. Sorry. The word of the most honorable man doesn’t carry any weight against the safety of two billion human lives. We can’t take the slightest risk by letting you stay on Earth.

“I know. It’s unfair, it’s cruel—it’s anything else you may choose to call it. You had no idea you would walk into a situation like this. Well, I feel sorry for you. But you knew you were going on a one‑way trip to the future, and would be subject to whatever that future might decide to do with you. You knew that you could not possibly return in time to your own age.” Mahler began to tidy up the paper on his desk with a brusqueness that signaled finality. “I’m terribly sorry, but you’ll just have to try to understand our point of view,” he said. “We’re frightened to death by your very presence here. We can’t allow you to roam Earth, even in a spacesuit. No. There’s nothing for you but the Moon. I have to be absolutely inflexible. Take him away,” he said gesturing to the guards.

They advanced on the little man and began gently to ease him out of Mahler’s office.

Mahler sank gratefully into the pneumochair and sprayed his throat with laryngogel. These long speeches always left him exhausted, and now his throat felt raw and scraped. *Someday I’ll get throat cancer from all this talking.* Mahler thought. *And that’ll mean the nuisance of an operation. But if I don’t do this job, someone else will have to.*Mahler heard the protesting screams of the time jumper impassively. In the beginning he had been ready to resign on first witnessing the inevitable frenzied reaction of jumper after jumper as the guards dragged them away. But eight years had hardened him.

They had given him the job because he had been a hard man in the first place. It was a job that called for a hard man. Condrin, his predecessor, had not been the same sort of man at all, and because of his tragic weakness Condrin was now himself on the Moon. He had weakened after heading the bureau a year, and had let a jumper go.

The jumper had promised to secrete himself at the tip of Antarctica and Condrin, thinking that Antarctica would be as safe as the Moon, had foolishly released him. Right after that they had called Mahler in. In eight years Mahler had sent four thousand men—to the Moon. The first had been the runaway jumper—intercepted in Buenos Aires after he had left a trail of disease down the hemisphere from Appalachia to the Argentine Protectorate. The second had been Condrin.

It was getting to be a tiresome job, Mahler thought. But he was proud to hold it and be in a position to save millions of lives. It took a strong man to do what he was doing. He leaned back and awaited the arrival of the next jumper. Instead the door slid smoothly open, and the burly body of Dr. Fournet, the bureau’s chief medical man, broke the photoelectric beam. Mahler glanced up. Fournet carried a time rig dangling from one hand.

“I took this away from our latest customer,” Fournet said. “He told the medic who examined him that it was a two‑way rig and I thought you’d better be the first to look it over.”

Mahler came to full attention quickly. A two‑way rig? Unlikely, he thought. But if it was true it would mean the end of the dreary jumper prison on the Moon. Only how could a two‑way rig exist? He reached out and took the rig from Fournet.

“It seems to be a conventional twenty‑fourth century type,” he said.

“But notice the extra dial,” Fournet said, frowning. Mahler peered and nodded. “Yes. It *seems* to be a two‑way rig, all right. But how can we test it? And it’s not really very probable,” he added. “Why should a two way rig suddenly show up from the twenty‑fourth century, when no other traveler has one? We don’t even have two‑way time travel ourselves, and our scientists insist that we never will.

“Still,” he mused, “it’s a nice thing to dream about. We’ll have to study this a little more closely. But I don’t seriously think it will work. Bring the jumper in, will you?”

As Fournet turned to signal the guards, Mahler asked him, “What’s the man’s medical report, by the way?”

“From here to here,” Fournet said somberly. “You name it, he’s carrying it. Better get him shipped off to the Moon as quickly as you can. I won’t feel safe until he’s off this planet.”

The big medic waved to the guards. Mahler smiled. Fournet’s overcautiousness was proverbial in the Bureau. Even if a jumper were to show up completely free from disease, Fournet would probably insist that he was carrying everything from asthma to leprosy.

The guards brought the jumper into Mahler’s office. He was fairly tall, Mahler saw—and quite young. It was difficult to see his face clearly through the dim plate of the protective spacesuit which all jumpers were compelled to wear. But Mahler could tell that the young time traveler’s face had much of the lean, hard look of Mahler’s own. It was just possible that the jumper’s eyes had widened in surprise as he entered the office, but Mahler could not be sure.

“I never dreamed I’d find *you* here,” the jumper said. The transmitter of the spacesuit brought the young man’s voice over deeply and resonantly. “Your name is Mahler, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” Mahler conceded.

“To go all these years—and find you. Talk about wild improbabilities!”

Mahler ignored him, declining to take up the challenge. He had found it to be good practice never to let a captured jumper get the upper hand in conversation. His standard procedure was firmly to explain to the jumper just why it was imperative for him to be sent to the Moon, and then to summon the guards as quickly as possible.

“You say this is a two‑way time rig?” Mahler asked, holding up the flimsy‑looking piece of equipment.

“That’s right,” the other agreed. “It works both ways. If you pressed the button you’d go straight back to the year two thousand, three hundred and sixty, or thereabouts.”

“Did you build it? ”

“Me? No, hardly,” said the jumper. “I found it. It’s a long story and I don’t have time to tell it now. In fact, if I tried to tell it I’d only make things ten times worse than they are. No. Let’s get this over with as quickly as we can, shall we? I know I don’t stand much of a chance with you, and I’d just as soon make it quick.”

“You know, of course, that this is a world without disease—” Mahler began sonorously.

“And that you think I’m carrying enough germs of different sorts to wipe out the whole world. And therefore you have to be absolutely inflexible with me. All right. I won’t try to argue with you. Which way is the Moon?”

*Absolutely inflexible.* The phrase Mahler had used so many times, the phrase that summed him up so neatly! He chuckled to himself. Some of the younger technicians must have tipped off the jumper about the usual procedure, and the jumper had resigned himself to going peacefully, without bothering to plead. It was just as well.

*Absolutely inflexible.* Yes, Mahler thought, the words fitted him well. He was becoming a stereotype in the Bureau. Perhaps he was the only Bureau Chief who had never relented, and let a jumper go. Probably all of the others, bowed under the weight of hordes of curious men flooding in from the past, had finally cracked and taken the risk.

But not Mahler—not Absolutely Inflexible Mahler. He took pride in the deep responsibility that rode on his shoulders, and had no intention of evading a sacred trust. His job was to find the jumpers and get them off Earth as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Every single one. It was a task that required relentless inflexibility.

“This makes my job much easier,” Mahler said. “I’m glad I won’t have to convince you that I am simply doing my duty.”

“Not at all,” the other said. “I understand. I won’t even waste my breath. The task you must carry out is understandable, and I cannot hope to make you change your mind.” He turned to the guards. “I’m ready. Take me away.”

Mahler gestured to them, and they led the jumper away. Amazed, Mahler watched the retreating figure, studying him until he could no longer be seen.

*If they were all like that,* Mahler thought. *I could have gotten to like that one. He was a sensible man—one of the few. He knew he was beaten, and he didn’t try to argue in the face of absolute necessity. It’s too bad he had to go. He’s the kind of man I’d like to find more often these days. But I mustn’t feel sympathy. That would be unwise.*Mahler had succeeded as an administrator only because he had managed to suppress any sympathy for the unfortunates he had been compelled to condemn. Had there been any other place to send them—back to their own time, preferably—he would have been the first to urge abolition of the Moon prison. But, with only one course of action open to him, he performed his job efficiently and automatically.

He picked up the jumper’s time rig and examined it. A two‑way rig would be the solution, of course. As soon as the jumper arrived, a new and better policy would be in force, turning him around and sending him back. They’d get the idea quickly enough. Mahler found himself wishing it could be so; he often wondered what the jumpers stranded on the Moon must think of him.

A two‑way rig would change the world so completely that its implications would be staggering. With men able to move at will backward and forward in time the past, present, and future would blend into one broad and shining highway. It was impossible to conceive of the world as it might be, with free passage in either direction.

But even as Mahler fondled the confiscated time rig he realized that something was wrong. In the six centuries since the attainment of time travel, no one had yet developed a known two‑way rig. And an unknown rig was pretty well ruled out. There were no documented reports of visitors from the future and presumably, if such a rig existed, such visitors would have been as numerous as were the jumpers from the past.

So the young man had been lying, Mahler thought with regret. The two‑way rig was an utter impossibility. The youth had merely been playing a game with his captors. There couldn’t be a two‑way rig, because the past had never been in any way influenced by the future.

Mahler examined the rig. There were two dials on it—the conventional forward dial and another indicating backward travel. Whoever had prepared the incredible hoax had gone to considerable trouble to document it. Why?

Could it be that the jumper had been telling the truth? Mahler wished that he could somehow test the rig immediately. There was always the one slim chance that it might actually work, and that he would no longer have to be a rigid dispenser of justice. Absolutely Inflexible Mahler!

He looked at it. As a time machine, it was fairly crude. It made use of the standard distorter pattern, but the dial was the clumsy wide‑range 24th‑Century one. The vernier system, Mahler reflected, had not been introduced until the 25th Century.

Mahler peered closer to read the instruction label. PLACE LEFT HAND HERE. it said. He studied it carefully. The ghost of a thought wandered into his mind. He pushed it aside in horror, but it recurred. It would be so simple. What if he should—

*No.*

*But—*

## PLACE LEFT HAND HERE.

He reached out tentatively with his left hand.

Be careful now. No sense in being reckless—

###### PLACE LEFT HAND HERE.

###### PRESS DIAL.

He placed his left hand lightly on the indicated place. There was a little crackle of electricity. He let go, quickly and started to replace the time rig when the desk abruptly faded out from under him.

The air was foul and grimy. Mahler wondered what had happened to the Conditioner. Then he looked around. Huge, grotesque, ugly buildings blocked out most of the sky. There were dark oppressive clouds of smoke overhead, and the harsh screech of an industrial society assailed his ears.

He was in the middle of an immense city, and streams of people were rushing past him at a furious pace. They were all small, stunted creatures, their faces harried and neurotic. They all had the same despairing, frightened look. It was an expression Mahler had seen many times on the faces of jumpers escaping from an unendurable nightmare world to a more congenial future.

He stared down at the time rig clutched in his hand, and knew what had happened. The two‑way rig!

It meant the end of the Moon prisons. It meant a complete revolution in civilization. But he had no desire to remain in so oppressive and horrible an age a minute longer than was necessary. He reached down to activate the time rig.

Abruptly someone jolted him from behind and the current of the crowd swept him along. He was struggling desperately to regain control over himself when a hand reached out and gripped the back of his neck.

“Got a card, Hump?” a harsh voice demanded.

He whirled to face an ugly, squinting‑eyed man in a dull‑brown uniform.

“Did you hear what I said? Where’s your card, Hump? Talk up or you get Spotted.”

Mahler twisted out of the man’s grasp and started to jostle his way quickly through the crowd, desiring nothing more than an opportunity to set the time rig and get out of this disease‑ridden, squalid era forever. As he shoved people out of his way they shouted angrily and tried to trip him, raining blows on his back and shoulders.

“There’s a Hump!” someone called. “Spot him!”

The cry became a roar. “Spot him! Spot him! Spot him!”

He turned left and went pounding down a side street, and now it was a full‑fledged mob that dashed after him, shouting in savage fury.

“Send for the Crimers!” a deep voice boomed. “They’ll Spot him!”

A running man caught up to him and in sheer desperation Mahler swung about and let fly with his fists. He heard a dull grunt of pain, but he did not pause in his headlong flight. The unaccustomed exercise was tiring him rapidly.

An open door beckoned, and he hurried swiftly toward it.

An instant later he was inside a small furniture shop and a salesman was advancing toward him. “Can I help you, sir? The latest models, right here.”

“Just leave me alone,” Mahler panted, squinting at the time rig.

The salesman stared uncomprehendingly as Mahler fumbled with the little dial.

There was no vernier. He’d have to chance it and hope to hit the right year. The salesman suddenly screamed and came to life—for reasons Mahler would never understand.

Mahler ignored him and punched the stud viciously.

It was wonderful to step back into the serenity of 28th‑Century Appalachia. It was small wonder so many time jumpers came to so peaceful an age, Mahler reflected, as he waited for his overworked heart to calm down. Almost anything would be preferable to *back there.*He looked up and down the—quiet street, seeking a Convenience where he could repair the scratches and bruises he had acquired during his brief stay in the past. They would scarcely be able to recognize him at the bureau in his present battered condition, with one eye nearly closed, and a great livid welt on his cheek.

He sighted one at last and started down the street, only to be brought up short by the sound of a familiar soft mechanical whining. He looked around to see one of the low‑running mechanical tracers of the bureau purring up the street toward him. It was closely followed by two bureau guards, clad in their protective casings.

Of course! He had arrived from the past, and the detectors had recorded his arrival, just as they would have pinpointed any time traveler. They never missed.

He turned, and walked toward the guards. He failed to recognize them, but this did not surprise him. The bureau was a vast and wide‑ranging organization, and he knew only a handful of the many guards who customarily accompanied the tracers. It was a pleasant relief to see the tracer. The use of tracers had been instituted during his administration, and he was absolutely sure now that he hadn’t returned too early along the time stream.

“Good to see you,” he called to the approaching guards. “I had a little accident in the office.”

They ignored him, and began methodically to unpack a spacesuit from the storage trunk of the mechanical tracer.

“Never mind talking,” one said. “Get into this.”

He paled. “But I’m no jumper,” he protested. “Hold on a moment, fellows. This is all a terrible mistake. I’m Mahler—head of the bureau. Your boss.”

“Don’t play games with us, chum,” the tall guard said, while the other forced the spacesuit down over Mahler’s shoulders. To his horror, Mahler saw that they did not recognize him at all.

“Suppose you just come peacefully and let the chief explain everything to you, without any trouble,” the short guard said.

“But I am the chief,” Mahler protested. “I was examining a two‑way rig in my office and accidentally sent myself back to the past. Take this thing off me and I’ll show you my identification card. That should convince you.”

“Look, chum, we don’t want to be convinced of anything. Tell it to the chief, if you like. Now, are you coming—or do we bring you?”

There was no point, Mahler decided, in trying to prove his identity to the clean‑faced young medic who examined him at the bureau office. To insist on an immediate identification would only add more complications, No. It would be far better to wait until he reached the office of the chief.

He knew now what had happened. Apparently he had landed somewhere in his own future, shortly after his own death. Someone else had taken over the bureau, and he, Mahler had been forgotten. He suddenly realized with a little shock that at that very moment his ashes were probably posing in an urn at the Appalachia Crematorium.

When he got to the chief of the bureau, he would simply and calmly explain exactly what had happened and ask for permission to go back ten or twenty or thirty years to the time in which he belonged. Once there, he could turn the two‑way rig over to the proper authorities and resume his life from his point of departure. When that happened, the jumpers would no longer be sent to the Moon, and there would be no further need for Inflexible Mahler.

But, he suddenly realized, if he’d already done that why was there still a clearance bureau? An uneasy fear began to, grow in him.

“Hurry up and finish that report,” Mahler told the medic.

“I don’t know what the rush is,” the medic complained. “Unless you like it on the Moon.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Mahler said confidently. “If I told you who I am, you’d think twice about—”

“Is this thing your time rig?” the medic asked unexpectedly. “Not really. I mean—yes, yes it is,” Mahler said. “And be careful with it. It’s the world’s only two‑way rig.”

“Really, now!” said the medic. “Two ways, eh?”

“Yes. And if you’ll take me to your chief—”

“Just a minute. I’d like to show this to the head medic.”

In a few moments the medic returned. “All right, we’ll go to the chief now. I’d advise you not to bother arguing with him. You can’t win. You should have stayed in your own age.”

Two guards appeared and jostled Mahler down the familiar corridor to the brightly lit little office where he bad spent eight years of his life. Eight years on the other side of the fence!

As he approached the room that had once been his office, he carefully planned what he would say to his successor. He would explain the accident first, of course. Then he would establish his identity beyond any possibility of doubt and request permission to use the two‑way rig to return to his own time. The chief would probably be belligerent at first. But he’d quickly enough become curious, and finally amused at the chain of events that had ensnarled Mahler.

And, of course, he would make amends, after they had exchanged anecdotes about the job they both held at the same time across a wide gap of years. Mahler vowed that he would never again touch a time machine, once he got back. He would let others undertake the huge job of transmitting the jumpers back to their own eras.

Ht moved forward and broke the photoelectric beam. The door to the bureau chief’s office slid open. Behind the desk sat a tall, powerfully built man with hard gray eyes.

*Me!*Through the dim plate of the spacesuit into which he had been stuffed, Mahler stared in stunned horror at the man behind the desk. It was impossible for him to doubt that he was gazing at Inflexible Mahler, the man who had sent four thousand men to the Moon, without exception, in the unbending pursuit of his duty.

*And if he’s Mahler—Who am I?*Suddenly Mahler saw the insane circle complete. He recalled the jumper, the firm, deep‑voiced, unafraid time jumper who had arrived claiming to have a two‑way rig and who had marched off to the Moon without arguing. Now Mahler knew who that strange jumper was.

But how did the cycle start? Where had the two‑way rig come from in the first place? He had gone to the past to bring it to the present to take it to the past to—

His head swam. There was no way out. He looked at the man behind the desk and began to walk slowly toward him, feeling a wall of circumstance growing up around him, while in frustration he tried impotently to beat his way out.

It was utterly pointless to argue. Not with Absolutely Inflexible Mahler. It would just be a waste of breath. The wheel had come full circle, and he was as good as on the Moon already. He looked at the man behind the desk with a new, strange light in his eyes.

“I never dreamed I’d find you here,” the jumper said. The transmitter of the spacesuit brought the jumper’s voice over deeply and resonantly.