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Back Returning

by [Lisa Adolf](#)

Thus doth the ever-
changing course of
things Run a
perpetual circle,
ever turning; And that
same day, that
highest glory brings,
Brings us into the
point of back-
returning — Daniel

The rain beat a characteristic tattoo on the roof of the tiny earthen dwelling, but its sole occupant had long ago ceased to be distracted by such a frequent phenomenon. Instead the wizened figure contemplated the fire in his hearth and fingered his Gimer stick.

The dancing flames formed themselves into a vision of the cloud city Bespin, the events of the drama so recently played there unfolding once again. Yoda closed his eyes, dispelling the vision and sighed expansively.

"Impetuous. Action without thought to consequence. Told him I did." Yoda shook his head ruefully. The Jedi Master cast a sidelong glance to a far corner of his tiny home.

"Nothing to say have you, Obi-Wan?" Yoda paused expectantly, waiting for his former student to manifest himself. His question remained unanswered. "Sulk if you want. Last hope, indeed." The Master chuckled pleasantly, his gaze returning to the flames. Kenobi's silence suited his plans. For all Obi-Wan's mastery of the Force, he too still had much to learn. For now, Yoda would be happy to keep his plans to himself.

There was a balance to be regained, rent fabric to be rewoven. The damage done by Obi-Wan's last hope was considerable, yet not beyond repair.

"In place are all the elements. For this has been the effort, for this we have planned. Long have we waited. Too long to see all destroyed."

Yoda closed his eyes. What must be done would not be without a price, even for a Jedi Master of eight hundred years experience. First he must martial his strength, then the reparations could begin.

"Much effort .. heh, yes ... "

Jabba the Hut stood facing his prize, chuckling softly. At the doorway to his office two of his henchmen exchanged relieved glances and withdrew from the room.

Tatooine's normally scorching heat had been reaching record highs for the last few days, uninterrupted by even the merest hint of dew. Jabba's business had been as bad as the weather and his temper—never sweet—had gotten progressively worse. When the bounty hunter Boba Fett had delivered Han Solo firmly encased in carbonite, the Hut's gang had expected seven hells to break loose. For several long minutes their worst fears seemed realized. Then a beautiful smile had broken over Jabba's wide face and he had ordered Fett to be paid off—with a bonus besides. Ordering the carbonite slab ensconced in his office, Jabba had become a changed man. His employees breathed a collective sigh of relief, reminding themselves that given the changeability of Jabba's moods, they might yet be sent after Boba Fett with orders to reclaim the money and dispatch Boba to a higher reward. Boba's reputation being what it was, that prospect did not appeal to even the most foolhardy of the crew. Still, to look at Jabba now—self-satisfaction oozing from every pore—vengeance seemed the farthest thing from his mind.

Jabba had been in possession of the carbonite tomb for close to three planetary days. Those among Jabba's gang who had expected quick extrication and even swifter vengeance had been bitterly disappointed. Even now, Jabba seemed in no rush to crack open Han Solo's prison and settle accounts with its occupant. Instead, he seemed to be enjoying the poetic justice Solo's predicament represented, savoring having the man who had dared to defy him for so long in his utter control and possession. The carbonite casing could support Solo's life indefinitely and checking the controls had become an hourly ritual—giving some to wonder if Jabba ever intended to release his victim. Several betting pools had been spawned by speculation on the exact hour and minute of the grand unveiling.

"I've got everything arranged just like I wanted. All the conniving, the double-dealing, the trouble, the money...has been for this..." Jabba said aloud, leaning his considerable bulk on the edge of his desk, his eyes never leaving his prize. Contented, he let his mind wander back over the years of his association with Han Solo. The Corellian had always been too smug, too cocky for his own good in an organization like Jabba's. Sure, he'd had talent at

smuggling, but he had always been too innovative, too clever, and far too careless about Jabba's side of the business. Han hadn't given a second thought to challenging Imperials to games of tag, dropping shipments of valuable contraband at the slightest chance of boarding, then returning to Jabba with lame excuses and a shrug of his shoulders. He had openly defied Jabba's authority and the Hut would never forgive him the final indignity of killing Greedo in the Mos Eisley cantina. Jabba spared a glance at the strangely upholstered chair situated near his desk. He had been denied his revenge on Solo, but he had gotten satisfaction of a kind from Greedo—or at least what had been left of him.

"Always getting away, Han. Always one-upping me. Well, now I've got you..." Jabba paused thoughtfully, a malignant gleam entering his eyes. He reached back over his desk, activating the call button that would bring his minions running. When they arrived, he had only two words for them and he spoke them in a tone that sent chills up the spines of even the most hardened of his lackeys.

"Open it!"

"Heart rate holding steady, oxygen intake normal., reversing freeze suspension cycle to .005...automatic control set for 2.8 minutes." Jabba's chief lieutenant looked up from the controls of the carbonite slab. "Release process has begun, Sir. The body temperature must rise to normal levels and then the carbonite casing will open automatically."

"Fine. Good. Now all of you," Jabba gestured to the half-dozen or so of his employees who clustered around the sarcophagus expectantly, "get out."

"But, Sir..." the lieutenant began.

"GET OUT!" Jabba bellowed. Abruptly, they all moved to leave, pausing only long enough to file out the narrow doorway. Jabba shot a quick glance to Han Solo's prison, noted the flashing vital signs monitors, then allowed his gaze to dart back to the door. The last of the crowd had filed out the door. Jabba cycled it shut behind them, a self-satisfied smirk crossing his features.

Behind him the carbonite release chime rang off. Jabba reflected that he had never heard a more beautiful sound. Turning, he strode over to the casing and, with a mighty shove, removed the lid of the tomb. Anticipation turned to astonishment.

The carbonite casing was empty.

He came to awareness in a very dim lit, ethereally quiet place, and his first sensations were disorientation and confusion.

He remembered dying in cold and fire. His last memories were of pain, terror, immobility, and a suffocating weight that tore the air from his lungs. He became aware that his hands were poised protectively before him, his fingers clawlike. He vaguely recalled trying to keep the weight from his chest before the oblivion had eradicated further thought. Wonderingly, he looked at them, finally forcing his muscles to respond and lower his arms to his sides. The significance of the movement struck him like a blow.

I'm ALIVE! Han Solo thought wildly, not daring to believe. Alive... He became aware of air filling his lungs and escaping again. The sensation was delicious. Alive he was indeed, but where?

Bespin...

His eyes, he discovered, were adjusting to the faint light of this place he was in. Somehow he knew he was no longer in Bespin. Something about the quality of the air, the styling of the room, the background noise of which he became gradually aware, cemented his conviction he was not in the cloud city—but if he wasn't on Bespin, the only logical alternative was that he was on Tatooine and in Jabba's hands. Frantically, his sense of disorientation increasing, he looked for some clue that would tell him where he was. Peering into the darkness, he found it.

It was a simple, standard issue communications terminal, but Han singled it out and locked his gaze on it unbelievably. Barely discernable in the gloom was a non standard adaptation module—not Imperial issue and most certainly not anything that Jabba would have gotten his hands on. Han himself had seen it fitted after he had delivered a cargo of the terminals to the rebel Alliance.

The Alliance...?! The rebel base...

He turned, his eyes making a sweep of the room, his confusion growing by the millisecond. The furnishings, the fittings, the general styling of the room itself confirmed what he knew to be impossible. It was the rebel base, there could be no doubt about it, but how...

Suddenly, his eyes came to rest on the far side of the room and every thought and question was instantly driven from his mind. Startled to the very core of his soul, he spoke aloud, his voice no more than a harsh, ragged whisper.

"Leia."

Leia Organa felt herself balanced between the blessed oblivion of sleep and waking nightmare of consciousness. She had driven herself all day, working herself into a state of exhaustion that she had hoped would bring her deep and forgetful sleep. The method had served her well since Bespin. Now even that tonic was failing her.

Until this evening a hope had existed within her, a vain hope without the slightest reason for being. The reality was: Han Solo might be dead.

She had never allowed the thought to take full bloom in her mind before, quelching it before it could seed itself in her consciousness. Tonight, however, she had been seized by the conviction that she had been deluding herself since Bespin and that if Han was not already dead, he would be long before Luke, Chewie, and Lando could reach him. The thought was so strong, so true, that it would allow her no peace. It permeated not only her waking mind, but her unconscious as well.

She slept fitfully, dreaming of Han as he had been, alive, vital in her arms. The dreams taunted her, turning into tortured visions of Bespin which startled her awake, only to begin the cycle again. Now she tossed fretfully, not asleep or awake, fearing the terrors of both and wanting neither. Vaguely, as if across some vast and incomprehensible distance she thought she heard someone speak her name. Tortured, she tossed her head, her eyes opened and in the darkness she saw a form take a step toward her.

Eyes wide, she recognized the clothing, the stance, and suddenly—the face. The dreams had not been enough, now she was looking at Han Solo's ghost

She screamed. Hearing herself scream, she knew that she couldn't be dreaming and that caused her to scream again. The figure stopped stock-still, an incredulous and increasingly disgusted look on his face.

"I don't believe this! Everything we've been through...everything I've been through...and this...this is the welcome I get! I don't...! can't..." Han Solo, real and corporeal, sputtered to a halt. Then suddenly, the ghost-who-was-not-a-ghost turned on his heel and with typical Solo abruptness, began striding toward the door. His voice, righteously indignant, caused Leia's heart to first soar like a bird then drop like a rock as it drifted back over his shoulder.

"I'm going to go talk to Rieekan about this!!"

His work done, a satisfied smile broke over Yoda's face, fading away gradually as his body relaxed itself from the tremendous exertion. As he became aware of what had just happened light years away, his ears slowly

drooped and his shoulders began to sag. It had ended so differently when he had first seen it in the flames of Bespin.

Carefully he stooped and picked up his Gimer stick from where it had fallen, regarding it reflectively. He had put everything into this--his heart, his soul, his sense of humor...

"Remember nothing you have been taught? Heh!" Emphatically he thumped the Gimer stick on the dirt floor, raising a small cloud of dust. "Always in motion is the future. Always in motion..."

Yoda's gaze returned to the fire, steadfastly ignoring the spectral laughter from the far corner of the tiny hut.

end

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