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Keeping Up Appearances

by [Alison Glover](#)

Han was trying to be charming. Maybe not very charming, but at least moderately charming. This would have been easier if he'd been able to muster more energy, and wasn't wishing it was just him and his drink sitting companionably together at the tech station in the Falcon's lounge. Unfortunately, he also had a guest, who was making herself very much at ease on the couch behind the gaming table. It was getting harder and harder for Han not to ask Galen whether that dye job on her fur was an accident or a joke, and he'd forgotten just how irritating that habit of twirling her whiskers could be. Since Han doubted he'd developed a sudden xenophobia for sentients whose ancestors must have been rat-like, his increasing irritation with Galen must be personal.

Usually, Han regarded time spent gathering information, even if not of immediate relevance, as time well spent. But the signal-to-noise ratio of Galen's conversation was even lower than Han had remembered. He was having trouble imagining any circumstances in which some of the trivia she was spouting could ever be useful. Han would never have let Galen near the good stuff, but he was now feeling resentful at what looked like being a complete waste of even his cheap brandy. But then Galen had always been just a be-jewelled, loud-mouthed bore with an inferiority complex, who drank too much. The downside of this was that she'd always talked far too much about what a successful business-person she was, but it also meant that she would sometimes slip and tell you something you should have paid for.

What Han was specifically trying to find out was whether she knew anything about the failed attempt to steal the consignment of equipment that he, Chewie and Luke had just delivered to the Rebel cell here on Benang. The attempt had appeared to Han to merely be opportunism on the part of some independent local entrepreneurs, but he'd wanted to make sure of that. However, Galen

appeared to know nothing that would either confirm or refute that conclusion, it was time to get her off the Falcon. They had plenty of time before their planned rendezvous with the Bothans on Pemul, but Han would rather spend it finding out if Pemul's scenery lived up to its reputation than hanging round this run-down port. One of the many reasons to get off the Sa'Tiochrahan for a while was to experience some fresh air, after weeks of breathing the recycled stuff. Unfortunately the atmosphere here smelled like it contained even more mysterious and odorous sulfur- and nitrogen-containing compounds than that on the Alliance's second-hand converted cruiser. Maybe these were just different smelly chemicals, to which Han's nose hadn't yet become inured.

Equally unfortunately no good way of persuading Galen to go was immediately springing to mind. He could forcefully evict her, but that would cause too much talk, and he might later regret ensuring that she never, ever spoke to him again. So he really ought to think of a polite way of getting rid of her.

Whether it was Galen's chattering that had numbed his mind, or that shifting all that cargo manually after the repulsor lift had failed had been more tiring than he'd realized, Han wasn't sure. Either way, he was singularly out of bright ideas. As he gazed blankly down the passageway, seeking inspiration, Luke came out of the Falcon's cramped shower cubicle, stopping in the gangway to pull a shirt on. Technically, there were sufficient cubic meters of space in the cubicle for a normal-sized humanoid to get dressed in. Han could do so if he had to, and wasn't in too much of a hurry. But it was a lot easier get dress outside, where there was no chance of accidentally hitting something that would drive the Falcon's eccentric water-recycling system into apoplexy, and thus getting a second, probably much colder, shower.

Although it had looked to Han like Galen had been having trouble focusing anywhere beyond the twitching tip of her nose, she mustn't have been that far gone, because she noticed Luke, too.

"Who's that? I thought you didn't like crewing with other humans, Solo?"

"Oh, he's just..... " Han thought there had been a disapproving note in Galen's voice. Yeah, that was right. Galen was a member of some religious sect that disapproved of.... Han couldn't remember exactly. Almost everything enjoyable, except drinking, which was presumably why Galen did so much of that. A sect which categorically frowned on non-family same-species cohabitation, regardless of gender, except under suitably religiously-endorsed and ceremonially-certified circumstances. So maybe Han could offend her enough for her to leave without the use of force, just in case he ever did drop by this forsaken industrial slag-heap of a planet again, and needed someone who knew lots of other someones.

"He's my -" Han paused and gave what he hoped was an appropriate sort of smile, "- cabin boy. If you know what I mean."

Luke still had his back to Han, but Han had no trouble at all imagining the horrified expression that would be on the kid's face, given how indignant his shoulders were managing to look.

"Ah," said Galen, perversely not saying much just when Han would have liked a hint as to whether or not she was suitably affronted. "Really." She twirled at her whiskers some more, while Han tried to stop imagining pulling them out one at a time.

"That reminds me, Solo. Although I understand that Jabba's prepared to give you a little more time to pay up, there is another human I hear he is looking for. Jabba and some others."

"Oh?" prompted Han.

"Yes. Some rebel called Skywalker. Heard you'd had some dealings with them, thought you might know something about it."

Han picked up his own drink. Luke couldn't have missed over-hearing that, and he hoped the kid would have enough sense to stay out of the way and let Han handle finding out about this.

"Might be good money in it, if you did know something," added Galen, taking her turn at a not-so-subtle prompt.

"Didn't have that much to do with the rebels," Han said. "First couple of jobs were okay, but after that they stopped paying, so I moved on....."

For the umpteenth time, Han wished that he'd gotten out of that ridiculous medal ceremony. Sure, it was good for the Alliance's morale to symbolically celebrate its victories. But they could have just hung a medal on Luke, who was the one who was planning to stay with the Alliance. There were far too many people who knew that Han had something to do with rescuing Leia and destroying the Death Star.

Besides, it still really gave Han the shits that they'd given him a medal and not Chewie, when the Wookiee had been the one with most of the arguments for going back.

And Han must have been hanging round the Alliance for too long, since where else would he have gotten to be so optimistic as to expect Luke to stay out of the way. At least Luke didn't charge in demanding to know who the hell was looking for him. He just came in quietly and knelt down on the floor beside Han, without saying anything.

This uncharacteristic behavior worried Han a little, so he took another drink, and wondered how he could conjure up the fond look he imagined he ought to be giving Luke.

Or, after he'd glanced down and taken in the kid's appearance, one that at least didn't say quite so clearly, 'what the hell do you think you're doing?'

That was the problem, really. Luke did look like a kid. Han had initially been amused (and maybe just a little impressed) that Luke apparently hadn't thought twice about rushing off across the galaxy owning nothing but the clothes he stood up in and a lightsaber he didn't know how to use. Han also had this nagging intuition that the destruction of the Death Star would not be the only significant consequence resulting from Luke's precipitous departure from Tatooine. In the meantime, one of the minor short-term consequences was that, other than the Alliance uniform which he couldn't be seen in here, everything Luke had to wear had been meant to fit someone else. This particular shirt, Han reckoned, must have belonged to Dokril, one of the people from whom Luke was learning unarmed combat, who was as nearly tall as Han and about twice as broad. Presumably the shirt being so obviously far too big for him, and the way it was falling off one shoulder, was why Luke currently looked even younger than he had when he'd walked into the Mos Eisley cantina. And also smaller than he actually was. Maybe his bare feet and still-damp hair, and the way he was half-kneeling beside Han, looking demurely down at the deck, had something to do with it, too.

At least Luke had had the sense not to put the tool-belt with his lightsaber hanging from it back on.

Throttling Luke would probably also give a bad impression and offend Han's guest (Galen's sect approving of murder only under specific circumstances), but Han decided to belay that until later. Instead he settled for patting Luke on the head and saying, "He's not very bright, but he can be quite useful."

"I'm sure," said Galen, who apparently hadn't yet completely pickled her ability to be sarcastic. "So do you know anything about this Skywalker character?"

Han didn't answer that immediately, mainly because he was still looking at that Skywalker character. There was another problem with Luke's shirt. Okay, not with the shirt. With the almost-healed but still visible scratches on Luke's shoulders and chest that were all too obvious the way the shirt was hanging off him. Han supposed it was possible that if you didn't know that they had been put there by an afterwards terribly apologetic Darysian, you could find some perfectly innocent explanation for them. Only Han couldn't think of one... Apparently M'rvou had found human-Darysian sex much more interesting than she'd expected, and despite having meant what she'd said about keeping her claws sheathed (Darysians were felines, like the Trianni), had just got a little carried

away. Since Han couldn't come up with any remotely plausible accident Luke could have had that would explain the scratches, he just bent down and hauled the shirt up so that it was sitting properly.

"Well, they say he's a good pilot," Han said, as if he didn't believe it. He had let his hand rest on Luke's shoulder, in case he had to stop Luke leaping up and saying something he shouldn't, but so far, the kid was just sitting there quietly. Han should probably be grateful that it was Luke and not Leia. And grateful that Luke's late uncle had somehow got it through to him that there were times he should stop asking questions and just keep quiet.

"Would you recognize him?"

In his peripheral vision, Han noticed that Luke was fidgeting with something on his left wrist. After a moment, Han realized that it was a length of the fine chain that he and Chewie used for attaching various caps, covers and keys to their appropriate instruments, so that they wouldn't get lost, or float off should the artificial-gravity unit fail. Chewie and Luke had been doing some repairs earlier, and Luke had probably just wound the chain round his wrist for convenience and forgotten about it. Since he was unlikely to know the significance that could be implied by his wearing the chain, it was probably the effort of not leaping up and demanding to know who was looking for him that was making him play with it. There might be plenty effective buying and selling of people carried on in Mos Eisley, but it was of the more subtle sort, nowadays, and it was no longer legal to own another sentient there.

However, slavery was legal here, and Han really did not want a reputation for being the sort of person who approved of it. He grabbed Luke's wrist, covering the chain with his own hand, and, since he couldn't think of anything else that would look natural, put Luke's hand on his knee.

"Yeah, I think so." Han said, which seemed safe enough while he collected his thoughts. "Tall guy. " This was true enough, relative to Galen, if not to Han. "Light brown hair, sort of grayish eyes." Han was a firm believer in telling as truthful lies as possible, to avoid complications later.

Galen shrugged. "You humans all look so alike to me. I don't know how you tell each other apart, without sensible features like whiskers and tails, or horns or antennae." She sighed, presumably at this lack of human consideration, and took a large swallow from her glass, emptying it. "If you do know anything about where this Skywalker is, I could make it well worth your while."

"I'll ask around. Who wants to know, apart from Jabba?"

"Now, that," Galen said, sitting up straighter, nose twitching, "is interesting. No one knows precisely who. Whoever it is uses layers of middlemen. But she, he or it has high-ranking Imperial influence, that's for sure."

"Imperial influence?" Han asked, revising his opinion and deciding that canceling the entire medal ceremony would have been the best idea. An x-wing pilot's life expectancy was quite low enough without the Imperials being after Luke even when he wasn't flying. He nudged Luke. "Make yourself useful, and pour my guest another drink, boy."

Luke glanced up at Han, who had the distinct impression that the only reason he hadn't got a reply along the lines of 'yes, oh lord and master'" was because Luke couldn't have kept a straight face saying it. Evidently Luke didn't trust himself to say anything, because he just silently went and did as Han said. He must have picked up about the chain, too, because he didn't push the sleeves of the shirt out of his way, but let them hang down over his wrists. Galen sniffed her refilled glass appreciatively (well, even the cheap stuff did grow on you, especially after half a bottle of it). She settled herself back more comfortably on the couch, with an air which suggested that she was priding herself on her tolerance.

Luke knelt back down beside Han again, put his arms on Han's knees, and leaned his head on his arms. This at least meant the chain was hidden and Han had a free hand to grab his own drink with.

"Yes," Galen was saying. "Various Imperials, and they want him alive."

And that meant that Han felt he needed a drink. A large one.

Plying Galen with the rest of the bottle of brandy didn't gain much more information than the rumors already circulating around the Alliance. Just vague stories about political plots and counter-plots, and that there was even more back-stabbing than usual in the Imperial Court and the corridors of power of the Core Worlds. That the Emperor had control over the Imperial Navy (and there was no reason to think he would lose that) was far more relevant out here. But Han had gleaned the name of a contact on Gandra who might know more about who it was that wanted Luke, specifically, and why.

Han was wondering whether he'd have to signal Chewie to announce a suspected reactor leak to prompt Galen to leave. His co-pilot was in the cockpit, monitoring the conversation, as one of them always did in such circumstances. Fortunately Chewie had stayed there, and had refrained from rushing in and growling at Galen. She might not be that well-respected a citizen, but she was a pretty well-known one, and Han didn't want to have to explain to the port authorities that she'd had a fatal heart attack due to his co-pilot's sometimes mis-

guided sense of humor. Chewie sometimes just found scaring people fun, but Han doubted that a nervy little creature like Galen would find the experience amusing.

But once the bottle was empty, and another one wasn't immediately forthcoming, Galen got up to go.

"It's been so good talking to you, Solo, but I have other business to attend to. Since you're so eager, I'll leave you with your -" Galen frowned disapprovingly "- boy." What could Luke have been doing to prompt that 'eager' remark? As far as Han could tell, he'd just been kneeling there, doing nothing more suggestive than looking up at Han occasionally. Then Han belatedly realized that although his reason for keeping a hand on the back of Luke's neck was so he could grab him by the collar if he did do something rash, it probably didn't seem that way to Galen. If the rumours Han had heard were correct, her species' rather formal mating ritual began with one party biting the other just about where Han's hand had been.

Galen was looking thoughtfully at Luke, which made Han worry again what dreadfully improper thing Luke might inadvertently be doing, but she just said, "He does have good manners. He's so nice and quiet."

Since Han had been surprised that Luke was capable of staying this quiet and this still for so long, he nearly replied, 'not usually.' Only he didn't want to think about how Galen might interpret that.

"He has such beautiful eyes. And such lovely long lashes."

To judge by the way he was shaking, Luke's staring so fixedly at the deck was not so much a becoming degree of modesty, but more an attempt not to burst out laughing.

"Yes, he does, doesn't he," Han agreed, since compared with Galen's little beady red ones, anyone's eyes could be classed as beautiful, and no member of her species possessed any eyelashes at all.

"And he's very affectionate," he added, patting Luke on the head again, as Luke made a choking noise and buried his head against Han's leg.

"So if you ever want to sell him," Galen went on, "Do let me know. I could easily find a buyer for him."

Shit. Galen had noticed the chain. Maybe Han should just shoot her where she stood. Otherwise it was going to take forever to live this down. But she would have made sure plenty of people knew where she was, so that wasn't a good idea.

"Thanks, but not right now. I've been pleased with him, so I'll keep him another year or so." Han didn't dare glance at Luke to see what reaction that got. "Besides, he can cook, too, you know."

Han got up, his mouth on automatic pilot, saying polite things about how nice it was to see her again, and how he mustn't keep her from her undoubtedly urgent business. He took Galen by one spindly forearm, waited impatiently for her to arrange her tail over the other arm, and ushered her towards the main hatch.

Han hadn't even got the hatch secured behind Galen, but Luke was running up the passageway already.

"Cabin boy?? What the f - what the hell did you tell her that for?"

Han might not think those big blue eyes were beautiful, but he could hardly have missed their being indignant. Deciding that attack was the best form of defense, he yelled, "And what the hell do you think you were doing with that chain? Now that buck-toothed idiot thinks I own you. What's that going to do to my reputation?"

"What about mine?" Luke yelled back, hitching at his shirt, which was slipping off his shoulders again.

"You're supposed to be too innocent to have one. Despite all the evidence to the contrary." Han grabbed the shirt and hauled it in back in place to cover those scratches up again.

"Will you stop doing that?!"

"Haven't you figured out how to dress yourself yet?" Han had been going to pointedly do the shirt up, but then realized that the reason it wasn't fastened was because there weren't any fasteners on it. He hadn't yet decided on an alternative course of action when Chewie ambled down the gangway and said,

Having a little lovers' tiff, are we?

"No, we are not!"

At least you're agreed on that. Chewie smiled sweetly as he sauntered towards the lounge.

"AND NO, WE AREN'T, EITHER!!" they yelled, not having got past Chewie's first remark.

There was a pause as Chewie vanished into the lounge, and then his furry head re-appeared round the bulkhead, grinning hugely. *You sure about that? I thought maybe you'd just been very discreet about it.*

Han and Luke stared at each other for a moment, came to an unspoken agreement, and both charged after Chewie.

"Chewie, what are you thinking about? You're not thinking that this will make a nice amusing story for when we get back to the Fleet, are you?"

Why not? asked Chewie, innocently. *When there are already so many rumors circulating about Han's being a big bad pirate, and how close the two of you are?*

"Chewie, you are not to mention this to Leia."

"Or to Sylla," Luke added.

"Sylla?" Han asked, confused. "I didn't think you and she were....."

"We're not. But anything Sylla hears, the whole ship finds out about."

Chewie's grin got even broader. *You know, that's true. Thanks for reminding me.*

"Good one, Luke," muttered Han.

"Hey -" Luke had evidently decided that actions would speak louder than words, because he started to swing a mock-punch at Han. Only Chewie grabbed his arm, and scolded,

"Now, now. You're supposed to be a quiet and good-mannered little cabin boy. You could be in real trouble for attacking your owner, you know. If these scratches are what he does to you when he's in a good mood, just think what he might do if you annoy him."

"Chewie, if you don't shut up about this -" Han swung a punch of his own at Chewie. It had been intended to be harder than Luke's, but Chewie's grabbing Han by the scruff of the neck didn't do a lot for his aim.

"Will you be careful of my good shirt!" Han yelled, as well as he could when said shirt was half-strangling him.

Okay, said Chewie, cheerfully, abruptly letting Han go, so that he fell backwards. Unfortunately, the nearest thing Han could grab to stop his fall was Luke. That might have worked had Chewie not given Luke a shove, too.

They ended up in a tangle on the floor, with Han's shirt half over his head, and Luke's falling off his shoulders yet again, while Chewie leaned triumphantly against a bulkhead, grinning toothily down at them both.

Just hold it right there, the two of you, Chewie said, *while I get the holo-camera.*

Back on the Sa'Tiochrahan, the Falcon was docked in her normal corner of Hangar Two. As usual, the hangar was crowded; berth space was at a premium on the old converted cruiser, because some of the smaller docking bays had been converted into missile launch tubes or energy weapon platforms. However, sharing the hangar with other ships and their ground-crews and support personnel did have advantages. Access to diagnostic equipment that Chewie and Han could never have afforded on their own was one. Getting a fresh perspective on some of the Falcon's more persistent intermittent faults was useful, too. And having all these technical experts around also meant that Chewie could find someone to help him with his current problem.

He tracked down a couple of likely prospects in the partitioned-off corner of the hangar where the illicit still and fermentation kegs for the home-brew were hidden. Sorry, where the improvised production facilities for certain essential lubricants and solvents were located. Debrera was one of Red Squadron's ground crew, and their instrumentation expert; Gauchi was an imaging specialist in the counter-measures team. Currently they were deep in conversation with Wedge about upgrading the x-wings' targeting scanners. Wedge was fiddling with the temperature control on the still, and muttering something about how even if it didn't matter to the Darysians, who could tolerate both, he'd prefer it if the home-brew he was going to drink contained ethanol, not methanol. Chewie grinned. Wedge, it seemed, was doing a fine job of balancing both his official responsibilities (as Squadron Leader) and his unofficial, but nevertheless crucial to the smooth running of the ship, ones (as Assistant Distiller).

Gauchi must have noticed the battered piece of equipment that Chewie was holding in his paw, because he stopped discoursing on the trade-offs between field-of-view and resolution and asked, "Can we help you, Chewie?"

Chewie held what he was carrying out for inspection, and looked at it with what he intended to be a deeply mournful expression.

"Well," said Gauchi, looking like he was trying to not laugh. "I can see why you weren't able to fix that one yourself. What in space happened to it?"

"Whatever it was," Wedge added. Chewie considered the mangled remains, and decided that no, it wasn't at all obvious what they had originally been.

"It looks like it used to be a holo-camera," Debrera said, frowning at the charred pieces of debris. "A holo-camera that's been used for target practice, perhaps?"

Not exactly. Gauchi and Debrera didn't know that much Wookiee, but they could usually work out enough of what Chewie was saying to get by. He looked hopefully at them. *Can you fix it? Or at least download the images from it?*

Gauchi took the remains and shook his head over them. "I doubt it - it's been pretty effectively pulverized. Looks like someone not only shot it, but also lasered it in half and then took a ten-pound hammer to it, or something."

Sort of.

Gauchi and Debrera pored over the wreckage some more, poking and prodding in the camera's spilled entrails.

"Hang on," Debrera said, "the main memory core seems to still be intact." Chewie gave a gleeful little growl, as Debrera pulled a magnifier and a pair of fine tweezers from his tool belt. "Only..." he held the core up to the light, and squinted at it through the magnifier. "Only it looks like it's been dipped in acid or something."

Not acid. Cheap Correllian brandy.

The humans looked confused, and Wedge asked, "You did say 'brandy', didn't you, Chewie?"

Chewie nodded hopefully. The cheap stuff was pretty corrosive, and could be used to clean rust off the Falcon's landing struts at a pinch, but surely it wasn't quite at the concentrated acid level.

"Just as bad, I'm afraid, Chewie. Alcohol really shrivels the lattice spacings in these organo-crystalline holo-cores. What was it storing? If it's really important, there are some retrieval techniques we could still try."

Chewie sighed and shook his head. *Thanks, but there's no need to go to that much effort. It wasn't that important.*

__Just a joke I might have been able to get a little more mileage out of.....__

He looked across the hangar to where Han and Luke were working on the __Falcon's__ lateral stabilizers. Well, that's what they were supposed to be doing. At present there seemed to be some slight dissension over how exactly they were going to go about that.

Chewie obviously wasn't the only one to have noticed this, because he heard one female voice say, "Don't you think those guys are really cute when they're arguing?" and another answer,

"No.... I think they're really cute all the time."

Not only mileage, Chewie thought sadly. _If I'd been able to replicate those holos, I'm sure I could have traded them for all sorts of useful tools.... or at least been suitably entertained by the reaction when I threatened to do that..._

Chewie was still pondering that regretfully when he heard the access port in the blast doors between the hangar and the interior of the ship open. For some reason, that caused Han to almost drop the wrench he'd been holding. Strange, Han wasn't usually that clumsy with tools. One advantage of being a tall Wookiee was that Chewie could easily see over the partitioning that hid the still to check to what Han was reacting.

Ah, could his partner's sudden loss of dexterity be explained by the fact it was Senator Organa and General Madine who had just entered the hangar, and who were now advancing determinedly towards the Falcon?

Or, then again, Chewie thought, _maybe this is a joke from which I can extract a little more mileage, just by looking like I'm thinking of trying to..._

Thanks anyway, Chewie said, dropping the memory core into one of the pouches on his bandolier, in case it might still come in useful, and grinning to himself as he ambled back towards the _Falcon_.

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