

STITCH IN TIME

by Dayle A. Dermatis

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Her fingers hurt.

The light outside was dying, so Kaylin scooted the chair closer to the lamp and went back to squinting at the needle. The bone-white silk was so delicate that if she pricked it in the wrong spot, the hole would never properly smooth out.

Melissa Steiner's wedding dress could be nothing less than perfect.

The needle whispered through the silk. Kaylin flexed her aching fingers and selected another seed pearl. Only a few hundred more to go, she estimated. With the wedding tomorrow—one of, if not the most important, weddings in the Inner Sphere—she would be working through the night.

She had, in fact, been working steadily for the past week. She hadn't even been able to see much of the Hilton Head hotel complex where the wedding was taking place. She'd caught a whiff of sea air and felt the warm sun as she'd been hustled from car to building, and that was it.

There was no question of her attending the ceremony, either. She wouldn't see Melissa in her mouthwatering creation of silk and pearls and lace, with a train that would trail behind her like a mermaid's tail.

Servants weren't invited to attend the blessed union of Steiner and Davion any more than the royalty would attend Kaylin's wedding—if *that ever happened*, Kaylin thought with a sigh. Working the hours she did to make Melissa's clothes, Kaylin had no time to meet anyone.

She knew that Melissa's betrothal had been arranged to create a union between the Federated Suns and the Lyran Commonwealth, but Kaylin didn't care anything about treaties or alliances or politics. She noticed only that Melissa's fiancé, Hanse Davion, was an incredibly handsome man, with flashing eyes and a firm jaw.

Kaylin smiled as she daydreamed about a prince to sweep her off her feet. It took the prick of the needle in her flesh to wake her,

and she stuck her finger in her mouth, frantically searching the delicate cloth for any spots of blood.

There were none. Kaylin took a brief moment to regroup, then slipped the needle through the silk and tugged the thread firm.

No time for woolgathering. The dress had to be finished in time.



"It's perfect!" Melissa said.

No, thought Kaylin, *Melissa was perfect*. Her hair was piled artfully on her head and fastened with silver pins. On the ends of the pins dangled silver leaves that fluttered whenever she moved. A flush of color highlighted her cheekbones—whether from excitement, nervousness, or artful makeup, Kaylin couldn't tell. She smelled of some expensive perfume that made the inside of Kaylin's nose itch.

The dress was Kaylin's primary concern, however. Her fittings had been perfect, and the gown highlighted the swell of Melissa's breasts (with modest décolletage, of course), the narrowness of her waist, the curve of her hips.

The tedious pearling had resulted in the brilliant designs of the Steiner's Fist and the four center-pointed triangles crest of Donegal on the bodice.

"You look lovely, Your Highness," she said. She stood behind Melissa, putting a few strengthening stitches in the back, as Melissa gazed at herself in the ornate mirror. The suite was more opulent than Kaylin could ever have imagined. Room after room, with two gleaming black grand pianos and baskets of fruit and champagne, and walls of windows that overlooked the glittering ocean.

"Thank you," Melissa said. She didn't move, her back ramrod straight, although Kaylin thought she saw a smile reflected in the mirror. Melissa was always kind to her.

It had been like a fairy tale. Kaylin had been working in a dress shop when Melissa's limousine drove by. Melissa had fallen in love with a dress in the window and ordered the driver to stop.

By the time her visit to the shop was over, Melissa had bundled Kaylin into the car and hired her to make her wedding dress. The wedding dress of a princess.

It almost made the ache in her fingers worth it.

Almost. Being at the wedding itself would have made the fantasy complete.

Around them, servants and bridesmaids bustled, in contrast to the soothing cello concerto that poured from hidden speakers. Outside the door stood two armed guards. Despite her official pass as a member of the royal retinue, they had regarded Kaylin with suspicion, and had almost insisted on relieving her of her scissors before she could enter the suite. Melissa's chamberlain had intervened, pointing out that the seamstress couldn't do any work without her tools.

Kaylin deftly tied the last knot and snipped the end of the thread.

The chamberlain approached, her arms full of peacock-blue fabric. "This needs mending," she said, and dropped the dress in Kaylin's arms. "You don't need to bring it back until after the honeymoon, but it will give you something to do."

Kaylin dropped a curtsy to Melissa's back and the room in general, and left.

She was barely down the hall before an idea so outrageous that it caught her breath swept down and carried her away.



The bathroom at the end of the hall was empty, probably because the entire floor was taken up by the Steiner suites, and they had enough bathrooms. Kaylin's footsteps echoed in the marble and gold vastness. She ducked into a stall that was bigger than her bedroom back home. Perching on the edge of the toilet, she pulled out needle and thread, and with deft fingers mended the small tear in the lace collar.

She stood and hung the dress over the stall door. In less than a minute she was stripped to her simple underwear, and then she was shimmying into Melissa Steiner's dress.

Her own daring made it hard for her to breathe. If anyone recognized the dress, she would certainly be fired, never to be hired by another major family.

At worst, she might be jailed or executed. Kaylin wasn't up on the law regarding this sort of thing.

To make herself feel better, she convinced herself that she was simply borrowing the dress.

She had no time to take her sewing supplies back to her workroom, and no pocket to keep it in. She couldn't leave it behind. Instead, she picked open a few stitches in the dress hem and slipped the needle, spool of thread, and scissors into the space. Her own clothing she tucked behind the toilet, to retrieve later.



Her heart pounded. Surely someone would stop her.

But her servant pass got her into the white pavilion that marked the entranceway to the cathedral. Her lie that she had been called to help with some alterations was accepted without question; they directed her to a side door. They didn't bother scanning her for weapons, because they were scanning people as they entered the hotel complex.

Through the side door, down the hall, double back, and slip in the main room between two groups of obviously important people.

Then she simply sat in the back row of pews, tucked her feet as far under as she could so nobody would notice her plain work shoes, and willed her racing heart to calm.

She gazed around in awe. Above her arched the vaulted ceiling, heavily frescoed. Around her were beautiful people in exquisite clothing.

The smell of flowers was cloying. All along the aisle, white roses were bunched in silver vases large enough to hide a small child. Swags of greenery hung from the back of each row of pews, with more roses tucked in each upswing. The canopy at the front—and

it was so far away that Kaylin had to squint—was completely covered as well.

The adrenalin churning in her stomach started to subside. Maybe, just maybe, she would pull this off, and get to see the wedding after all. It was something she could tell her grandchildren about. If she ever had grandchildren, that was.

Gold-embossed programs dangling with gold tassels sat at each place, and she hid her face behind hers when the music swelled and Melissa walked up the aisle, looking like an angel in the dress. Kaylin felt a rush of pride when she heard the appreciative murmurs around her.

The ceremony started, but she was so far back that she really couldn't hear anything. So when *he* entered, she heard the faint commotion and turned.

He was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen.

Thick black hair that defiantly brushed the collar of his dress uniform. Eyes as blue as the uniform. Broad shoulders and slim hips, a long stride that bespoke strong legs and confidence. A ceremonial sword hung at his hip, and he walked with one hand against it to keep it from banging against his boot and making noise.

If she'd ever paid any attention to politics, she would have recognized his rank by the symbols, who his family was. He was obviously nobility, but that was as far as she could tell.

To Kaylin's astonishment and dismay, he slipped into the seat next to her. He leaned in, and she smelled a musky aftershave.

"I can never remember," he said, his voice pitched conspiratorially low, "is the bride's side the left or the right?"

"The left," Kaylin whispered, amazed that her voice didn't squeak.

"Damn," he said. His eyes were very, very blue, and they held a hint of amusement, belying his curse. "Wrong side, then."

Kaylin glanced across the aisle. There were several empty seats.

He followed her gaze. "But if I moved, I would no longer be sitting next to the most beautiful woman in the room—bride excluded, of course."

He settled back and opened his program, leaving Kaylin gaping at him.

She couldn't concentrate on the ceremony after that. She was too aware of the man at her side. She wished that the ceremony would go on for hours so she would have an excuse to be next him for longer.

As the bride and groom exchanged rings, he leaned over to her again.

"Lawrence Kennersley," he said. "And you are? I can't keep thinking of you as 'that stunning creature' all afternoon."

This time, it took Kaylin several tries to respond.

"A lovely name for a lovely woman," he said, and raised her hand to his lips.

Kaylin was lost.

When the ceremony ended and everyone applauded the happy couple (or the useful union), Lawrence insisted on her accompanying him to the reception.

Panic constricted her stomach. "Oh, I couldn't."

He smiled indulgently. "Why not?"

"I don't have an invitation."

"My invitation allows me to bring a guest, and I didn't have one—until now, that is."

"No, I can't." Guests were streaming out of the cathedral, not sparing them a look. Still, she felt on display. Someone would recognize her as Melissa's dressmaker and raise a cry...

Lawrence's face fell. "There's someone else, isn't there? Stupid me, of course there is. A beautiful woman like you wouldn't be alone. You're married."

"No..."

"Engaged."

"No."

"Then I have a chance?" He smiled again, and she caught her breath at the brilliance of it.

"No—yes—I mean—" What was she going to do? If she told him who she really was, he would leave, and that would be the end of it. But she didn't want it to be over; she wanted to be near him, just a little longer, and he was offering that to her.

What if Melissa saw her? Kaylin could imagine the look on her patron's face: surprise, shock, disappointment. It was the disappointment that twisted her gut. She couldn't disappoint Melissa.

She took a deep breath, and let it out as she spoke quickly, before she lost her nerve.

"I can't go because I wasn't invited because I'm not anybody special. I'm a seamstress. I made Melissa's dress, and I wanted to see her in it when she walked up the aisle, so I snuck in. But I can't go to the reception because I'm just a servant."

She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his fallen expression. She waited to hear him get up and walk away without a word, no doubt disgusted that he'd wasted his time talking to her.

She heard the murmur of guests' voices echoing in the vaulted heights of the cathedral ceiling. She heard the rustle of fancy dresses and the shuffle of feet against the carpet. He must have left silently, slipping into the line and moving away.

She opened her eyes, and nearly squeaked with surprise. He was still sitting next to her. And he was staring at her with...admiration?

He took her hands in his. "That dress," he said, "was magnificent. You are not a mere servant. You're an artist, a visionary."

Well, she *had* done a good job on the dress, Kaylin acknowledged. She wasn't sure about being a visionary, though.

"You should have been invited to the reception," Lawrence continued. "You should be given credit for your exquisite work. I've half a mind to stand up right here and tell everyone who you are."

"No!" Her voice did squeak, but terror outweighed embarrassment.

"All right, I won't." He smiled again. "You're so charmingly demure about your talent. How can I possibly let you go so soon? Come to the reception with me," he urged again. "I won't tell anyone who you are."

In the end, he wore her down. She promised herself she'd keep as far away from Melissa as possible. Just a few more hours to be with him...

He managed to sweet-talk their way past the guards, flashing his own pass and holding her close to make it clear she was with him.

After that, he continued to find excuses to touch her, guiding her to a hexagonal table in the corner. A shift in his seat made his thigh brush against hers. A touch on her arm to get her attention.

He brought her champagne, which she'd never drunk before, but solicitously didn't press her to over-drink. In fact, for her second glass he obtained nonalcoholic sparkling *paffel* cider. He insisted they dance, and for a moment Kaylin forgot about her ordinary work shoes and how they'd look with the dress. No one seemed to notice, and it seemed to her that they danced on air.

She had found her prince. Or, more correctly, he had found her.

Oh, she knew he wasn't a prince, but he was *somebody*, and she'd never known any man, much less *somebody*, to give her more than the time of day. It was just like out of one of the old tales, the ones that her grandmother had told her when she'd been tucked into bed at night.

A gold-handled spoon tinkled delicately against a champagne flute that cost more than Kaylin's monthly wages. The wedding guests fell silent. Lawrence rested his hand over Kaylin's on the embroidered linen tablecloth.

Hanse Davion, looking extraordinarily dashing in his wedding finery (although less handsome now that she had met Lawrence, Kaylin decided), stood and held out a hand to Melissa, now Steiner-Davion. They walked to the massive wedding cake, all four tall tiers of it, with champagne flowing down around it. Together, they slid the sword into the confection.

Melissa gently fed her husband a piece of cake, telling him that her wedding gift to him was a regiment of BattleMechs. Kaylin thought that was a terribly strange wedding gift. She wondered whether she should ask Lawrence about it, or if that would make her seem foolish.

Then Hanse lifted a piece to his new wife's lips.

"Wife, in honor of our marriage, in addition to this morsel I give you a vast prize. My love, I give you the Capellan Federation!"

Silence. Utter and complete.

Kaylin glanced around the room, uncomprehending. Whatever Hanse Davion had said, it apparently had been big and unexpected.

Unwelcome, too, given the expressions of most of the guests. One man was turning purple, and Kaylin feared for his life.

She looked at Lawrence. A slight frown creased the skin between his brows. Anxious for something to do with her hands, she lifted her champagne flute to her lips.

A murmur swept through the crowd like a river running between large rocks. Grew louder, as if a dam had broken...

And then all mayhem broke loose.

A man began shouting, startling Kaylin so badly that she dropped her champagne glass. She was horrified, but nobody seemed to notice. They were too busy screaming.

And throwing cake.

"Well, *that's* interesting," Lawrence said. "Did you know that was going to happen?"

Earlier, when Kaylin had revealed her true occupation, he hadn't seemed to care about her lowly status, which made her all the more enchanted by him. It truly was like one of the old tales, where the handsome prince swept away the servant girl and made her a princess.

Why he thought she'd be privy to something that was to happen at the reception, however, was beyond her.

"Of course not," she said. "It's not as though I'm invited to tea and we chat about things."

"I've never met Melissa," he mused, with that small frown again. Then, as if suddenly having an idea, he said brightly, "You'll have to introduce me." He stood and held out his hand to her.

Kaylin felt a frisson of panic rising in her gut. "Oh, no, you don't understand. I don't really *know* her. I can't say she even knows my name."

She flicked a glance at the dais. Hanse was holding up his glass in salute to someone. Melissa, next to the cake, was surrounded by her bridesmaids. They seemed to be encouraging her to come with them, away from the furor.

"But she'll recognize you," Lawrence insisted.

"Yes, but..." She really didn't want to admit the truth about the dress she wore. Even if she could get away with saying that it was simply borrowed, the whole concept was hideously embarrassing. "It's really not appropriate." And Melissa would see her in the borrowed—no, be honest, stolen—dress of hers and be disappointed, and she'd get in trouble for just being here, and she'd lose her job, and...

He knelt in front of her, and confusion warred with the panic. What was he doing? None of this made sense.

"I'm sorry. I understand why you're hesitant," he said, his voice soothing, and she began to relax.

And then he slid the narrow, wickedly sharp dagger from the hidden sheath next to his ceremonial sword, and pressed it against her side.

Kaylin felt the prick of the point through the dress, like the prick of a very large needle.

Her first thought was that she'd never be able to repair the dress.

Her second thought was that she might not live to worry about any more mending.

Lawrence leaned in. To others, if they'd bothered to look, it probably looked like an intimate moment between lovers; the hand at her side was shielded by his body and the tablecloth, and no doubt seemed more of an intimate caress. Their lips nearly touched.

The fear Kaylin felt had nothing to do with the potential of her first kiss.

"However," Lawrence said, his voice calm to the point of conversational, "I don't really care what's appropriate, or how you feel. We're going to walk up there, and you're going to get me in front of Her Highness Steiner-Davion. Do you understand?"

She could feel his breath on her face, hot and dangerous. "I do," she said, a mock parody of the wedding vows she might never take.

"Stand up slowly when I do. If you make any sudden motions, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Her legs trembled so badly she thought she might not be able to get up, but somehow she did, rising in union with him.

Guests were snatching plates off the tables while the ComStar Acolytes who'd been serving them tried to bring things to order. Lawrence moved easily through the crowd, moving them out of harm's way as if they were in an intricate dance. He made it seem as though he were hustling her to safety, all the while keeping his arm around Kaylin in an outward show of intimate protection. In truth, the knife concealed in his hand could kill her in an instant.

Kaylin couldn't think. Time slowed, then compressed, flashing by. The rise and fall of conversation had no meaning. The chaos around them became a blur. All she knew was their studied movement through the pandemonium, the warm weight of Lawrence's arm, and the deadly weight of the knife in her side.

It was only when they had nearly reached Melissa and Hanse that two thoughts finally penetrated:

He was going to kill Melissa, who'd been nothing but kind to Kaylin.

And he'd been using Kaylin all along.

He hadn't found her pretty, or witty. He hadn't really wanted to talk with her or touch her. He certainly hadn't thought of anything beyond the moment, other than that she could prove useful to him.

Kaylin felt a hot flush rise up her neck, bloom in her cheeks. It wasn't embarrassment or self-consciousness.

It was anger.

And she knew what she had to do.

As they ducked a flailing arm, she tripped and fell to her knees. Lawrence, to his credit, moved swiftly, kneeling with her.

The pain of the knife piercing her flesh made her gasp. Not deep enough to dangerously wound, but enough to remind her that it could.

"Careful," he hissed.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice shaking.

In the second before they stood again, she slipped the sewing scissors from the hem of the dress.

In the second after they stood, she plunged them into Lawrence's side.

His knife did slice her, but it was a reflexive motion on his part. He staggered back, cursing. He looked down at the scissors handle protruding from his side, and the astonished eyes met hers.

Kaylin tried to scream, to warn somebody, but the shock of what she'd done closed her throat.

As it turned out, she didn't have to. There were enough guards around that one noticed, and hustled her and a bleeding Lawrence away before any of the plate-flinging guests had a clue.



In the end, Kaylin was found innocent. She'd been under suspicion because she wasn't supposed to be at the wedding at all and she could have been Lawrence's accomplice, but Melissa had petitioned for her release.

Kaylin was rewarded handsomely—but very, very quietly—for her bravery. The deal included signing a strict confidentiality agreement. She could never speak of what had happened.

No mention was made about the dress she'd borrowed.

Although she was asked to stay in the Steiner-Davion employ, Kaylin declined. With a reputation as a brilliant seamstress—based on Melissa's wedding dress—to bank on, she decided to seek her fortune elsewhere.

And, she mused, it would be wise to learn more about the tangled weavings of politics.