

# Fractured Affection

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I walked past them without a glance, my soaked clothes dragging like chains.

Back at the hotel, I ran a hot bath and soaked for half an hour before feeling somewhat revived. My stomach rumbled, and as I was about to head downstairs to the convenience store, I heard familiar voices outside.

“Adam, Sylvia’s eyes earlier... scared me. Do you think she hates us now?” Noah’s voice wavered. “We’ve been too cruel.”

“If we stop now, everything’s wasted. Do you want to watch her or Charlotte

“But...”

get erased?”

“Once I find a way to bypass the system’s rules, I’ll compensate Sylvia properly. She won’t suffer for nothing.”

Their familiar voices echoed down the empty corridor.

So they knew I was innocent. Yet, they still forced me to kneel in the snow and jump into the icy water, all to balance that damn affection points.

Before, their cruelty for Charlotte’s sake had merely hurt. Now, it felt like shards of glass shredding my chest.

I’d have preferred they genuinely loved Charlotte. But this so-called “sacrifice for my own good” was poison. What was my suffering worth, then?

I stayed *at* the hotel for three more days. Then, I received a message from Charlotte, asking me to accompany her to an event.

Her agent panicked mid-departure: “Paparazzi say sasaeng fans are blocking the route! They’re armed!”

Charlotte blinked innocently, her eyes fixed on me. “What should we do? Will they attack me? Sasaeng fans can be terrifying when they get crazy.”

There had been cases of sasaeng fans stabbing celebrities. We all knew that.

This time, Adam and Noah remained silent. But I volunteered, “I’ll drive your car; you can take another car to the event.”

I knew that whenever something involving Charlotte happened, Adam and Noah would instantly take her side, even if they knew it would hurt me. I’d better to choose the blade myself. Noah immediately objected. “No! What if the sasaeng fans realize you’re not Charlotte and crazy?”

I calmly asked, “Do you have a better plan?”

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Sylvia’s question hung in the air, choking Noah into silence. He sensed the shift in her—a tectonic crack he’d ignored until now.

Adam noticed it, too. Sylvia was far from her usual tearful self. However, the sasaeng crisis

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brook no delay and he couldn’t find a better solution, either.

Without waiting for a reply, I took the keys from Charlotte.

Once I was on the elevated road, I realized just how terrifying the sasaeng fans were. They started ramming my car from behind, trying to force me to stop.

My palms slipped on the wheel—I never mastered defensive driving. I pressed the gas pedal, but it was too late to turn, and I crashed into a pillar under the bridge. My head slammed against the windshield; blood instantly covered my face.

Seeing my car smoking, with the front end completely crumpled, the sasaeng fans, fearing responsibility, sped away. That was when I managed to pull out my phone and call the ambulance. My finger inadvertently clicked on a message from Charlotte.

It was a picture of Charlotte at the event, with Adam and Noah on her sides. She wore a beautiful princess dress and a crystal crown, while the two brothers stood beside her like knights. It was a picture of perfect happiness.

From the banner in the photo, I saw it was Charlotte's birthday. Today was also my birthday, but Adam and Noah had forgotten.

The next second, another message from Charlotte popped up.

"Sylvia, Adam and Noah meticulously planned this birthday party for me. Look how they adore me."

"If you're smart, you should just give up on your quest."

So that was it. Their "work trip" was a ruse for this gilded celebration. Once, they'd reserved such fairy tales for me. "You're our fragile princess," they'd said. "We'll shield you forever." Now their shields guarded another.

I deleted the chat, Googling a generic birthday cake image.

Make a wish, the caption urged.

I closed my eyes.

May the three of you rot together for eternity.