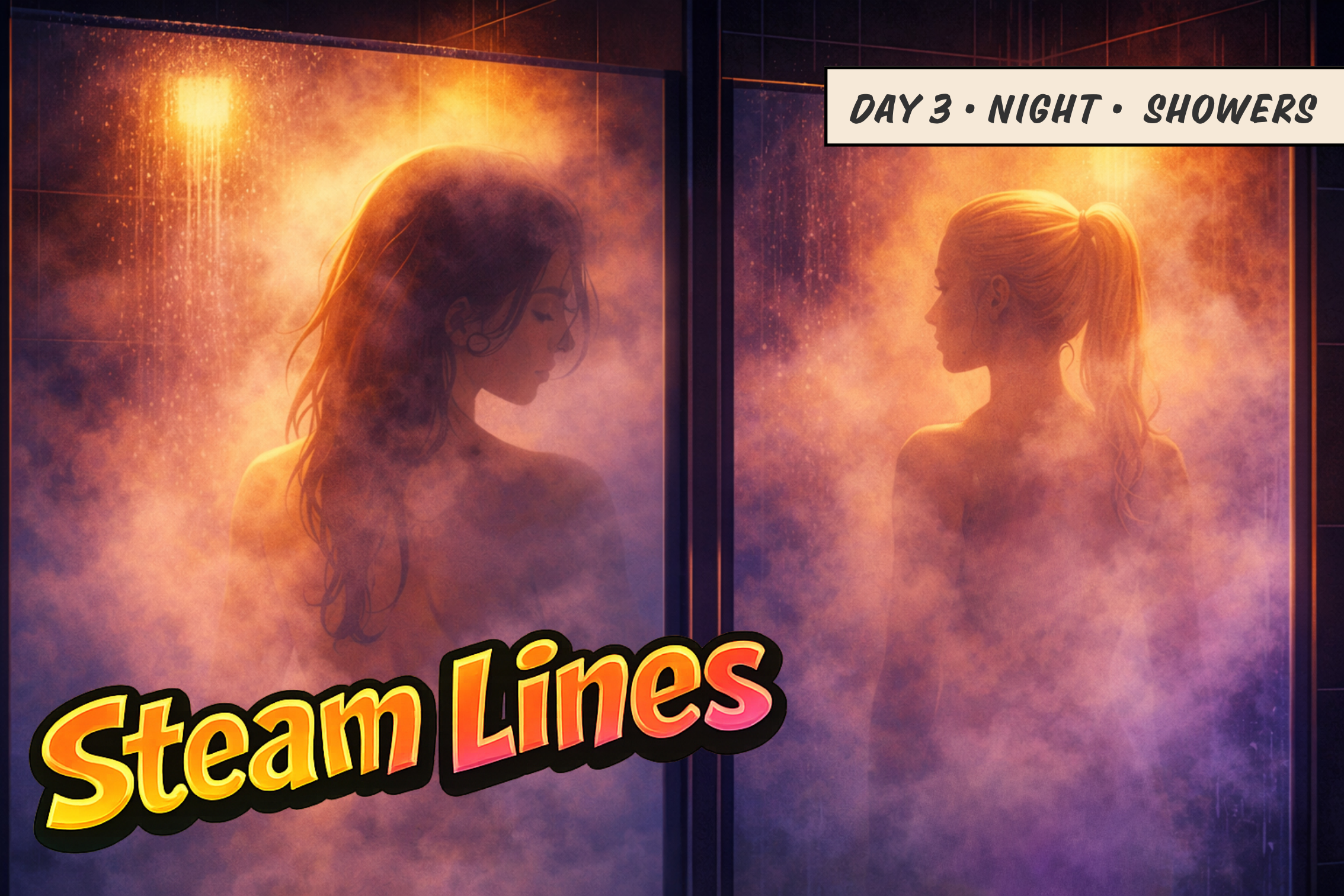


DAY 3 • NIGHT • SHOWERS

Steam Lines



6. Steam Lines.

The gym showers were a trap of white tiles and heavy, citrus-scented steam. At this hour, the humidity wasn't just weather—it was a weight on the skin, thick enough to make every breath feel like an invitation.

Monica pushed the door open with her shoulder, her skin still humming from the post-workout stretch. Her muscles were loose, her mind drifting in that pleasant, post-exertion fog. The tiles were already sweating, the air thick with the scent of salt and sharp citrus. She paused.

Water was running in the far stall. It was rhythmic. Controlled. Infuriatingly precise.

"Of course," Monica murmured to herself, a slow smirk tugging at her lips.

She recognized that silence. She recognized the fold of the towel on the hook—geometric, exact, surgical. Rebecca. The Engineer. Monica hung her own towel next to it. She let the wet fabric drop





in a heavy, careless heap—a deliberate mess beside Rebecca's sharp, clinical folds.

She stepped into the adjacent stall. For a minute, there was only the sound of water hitting tiles. Two distinct rhythms. Rebecca's: steady, unwavering. Monica's: turning, adjusting, letting the heat scald her shoulders before dialing it back down.

"You're washing by grid coordinates, aren't you?" Monica's voice drifted through the steam, low and honey-thick with amusement. "Sector A, then Sector B... Tell me—do you have a spreadsheet for your pores too, Engineer? Or is it just a prioritized checklist based on surface area?"

A pause followed. The water in the next stall didn't falter, but the silence felt pressurized.

"Hygiene is a sequence of optimization, Philosopher," Rebecca's voice came back, clipped and cool despite the rising heat. "I wouldn't expect someone who treats a floor plan like a suggestion to understand the necessity of a grid."

Monica laughed, a low, throat-deep sound that vibrated against the wet tiles. She lathered soap over her collarbone, imagining Rebecca on the other side—eyes closed, jaw set, trying desperately not to visualize the woman two feet away.

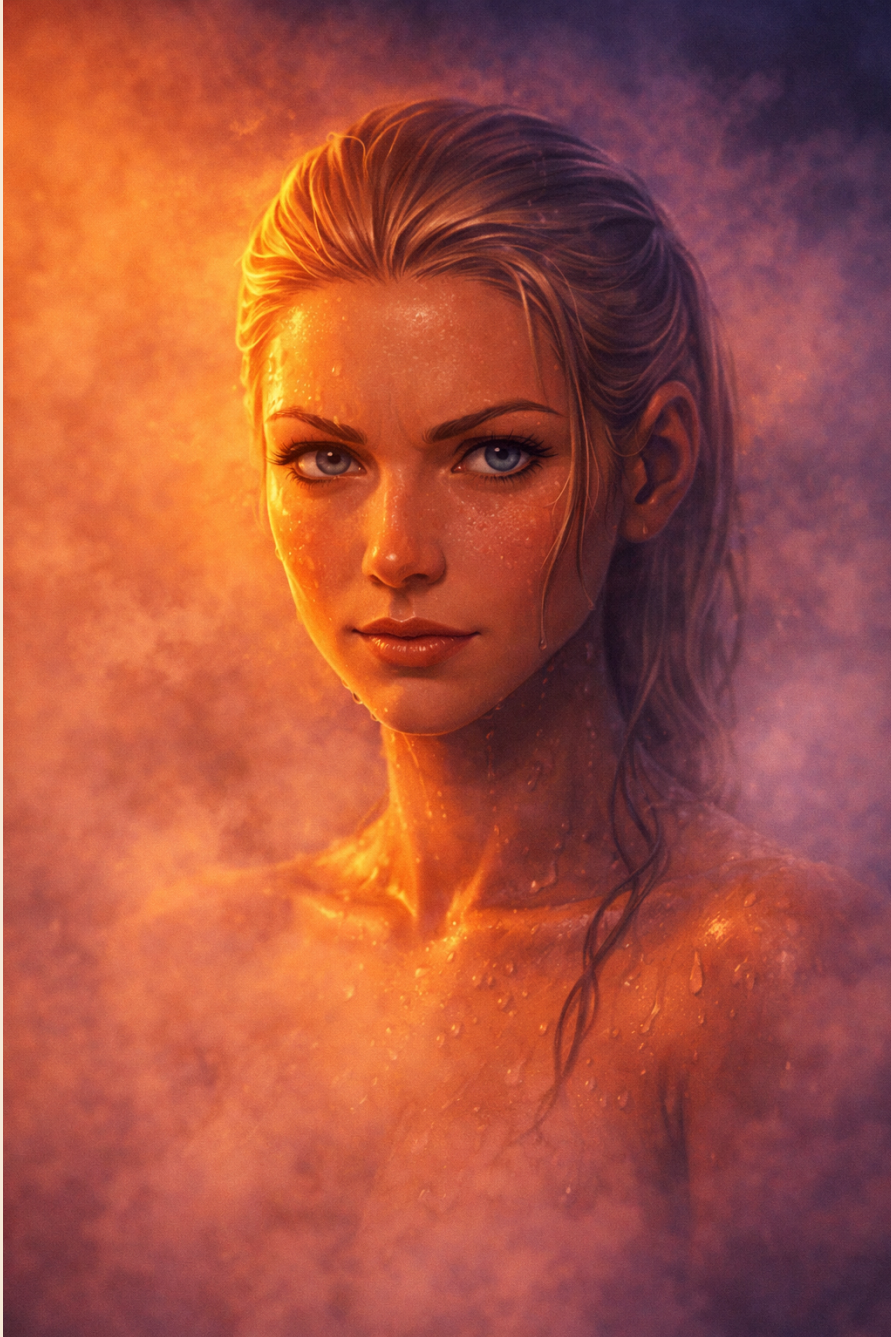
"It's not a dance. It's improvisation," Monica murmured, leaning her forehead against the cool partition. "I listen to what my body wants. Sometimes my knees need attention before my shoulders. Sometimes..." she let the water run over her breasts, her voice dropping an octave, "...sometimes I just stand here and let the heat soften the edges".

"Edges are necessary," Rebecca countered, though her voice sounded slightly strained. "Without edges, you spill."

"Spilling isn't so bad." Monica turned the tap, the water slicking down her back. "You should try it. Forget the list. Forget the sequence. Just feel the water. It's the only place on this island where you don't have to hold the roof up, Rebecca".

"I don't hold the roof up".





"No? I can hear your brain calculating the water pressure from here".

Silence. Then, the faint sound of a bottle being set down. Harder than necessary.

"You're projecting," Rebecca said. "Just because you enjoy chaos doesn't mean structure is a prison."

"Maybe I just want to see what happens when you unlock the door".

The air between the stalls thickened. It wasn't just steam anymore; it was gravity.

"Finish your shower, Monica," Rebecca said. It was a command, but it lacked teeth.

"Yes, ma'am".

They moved in tandem then, a silent choreography separated by a thin wall. When the water finally cut off—first Rebecca's, then Monica's—the sudden quiet was deafening.

Monica stepped out first, wrapping the towel high under her arms. A moment later, Rebecca emerged.

The steam had turned the room into a dreamscape. Boundaries blurred. Rebecca stood there, her skin flushed a deep, telling pink, droplets racing down the curve of her neck. Her hair, usually pulled back tight, was wet and dark, plastering against her skull, making her look vulnerable. Exposed.

Rebecca's eyes tracked a droplet sliding down Monica's sternum, disappearing into the white towel. She jerked her gaze up, but the damage was done.

"You look different without the armor," Monica whispered, taking a step closer. The wet floor made no sound.

"It's just water," Rebecca said, but she didn't back away. She was clutching her towel like a shield.

"Is it?" Monica stopped inches from her. The heat radiating off Rebecca was palpable. "You're breathing fast, Engineer. Is that part of the protocol?"





Rebecca swallowed. Her throat moved—a sharp, elegant line. A wet strand of blonde hair had escaped her slicked-back style, clinging to her cheekbone. It was an imperfection. A crack in the design.

"You talk too much," Rebecca breathed.

"And you think too much."

Monica reached out, her hand moving through the heavy steam like a ghost. The movement was slow, cinematic. She watched Rebecca's breath hitch, the sharp inhale audible over the distant hiss of the pipes. Rebecca's pupils were blown wide, dark voids swallowing the blue of her irises in the fog.

"The protocol is failing, isn't it?" Monica whispered, her fingers hovering just a fraction of an inch from Rebecca's flushed skin.

"There is no protocol for you," Rebecca breathed, her voice finally cracking.



The steam swirled between them, no longer a shield but a witness to the protocol they had just shredded. For a long moment, the only sound was the ragged, synchronized rhythm of their breathing—a raw admission that the grid had finally collapsed.

The heavy thud of the changing room door echoed like a gunshot.

Both women froze. The separation was instantaneous, violent in its speed. Rebecca jerked back, her chest heaving, hands flying to secure her towel. Monica slumped against the locker, eyes wide, breath coming in ragged tears.





"Oh—sorry!" Lucy's voice cut through the fog. She stopped mid-step, her eyes darting between Monica's flushed, wild-eyed stare and the rigid stillness of Rebecca's back. Lucy adjusted the strap of her bag with a small, nervous twitch of her fingers—a silent acknowledgement that the oxygen in the room had already been consumed.

Rebecca turned away sharply, her hands fumbling for her robe. They were shaking—a mechanical failure she couldn't calculate away. As she pulled the fabric tight, she realized with a jolt of pure adrenaline that the Engineer who had walked into these showers wasn't the one walking out. Monica watched her, tracing the rigid line of Rebecca's spine. The transformation was agonizing to witness—the armor was snapping back into place, plate by clinical plate. Rebecca was rebuilding the fortress before the steam had even cleared.

"I... we were just leaving," Rebecca managed to say. Her voice was an octave lower than usual, thick with a jagged edge she couldn't quite file down.

Monica peeled herself off the lockers, feeling the cold metal like a slap. "Right. Back to the grid."

Lucy emerged from the fog, gym bag on her shoulder, smiling. She looked between them—Monica, flushed and wild-eyed; Rebecca, rigid and staring intensely at a bottle of shampoo.

"Good workout?" Lucy asked, an innocent question that felt absurdly loaded.

"Intense," Rebecca said, closing her locker with a decisive click.

"Educational," Monica corrected, her eyes burning into Rebecca's profile.

They didn't look at each other again. But as Rebecca brushed past to leave, the air between them didn't just hum—it screamed.

