

THE HIDDEN CIRCLE GAZETTE

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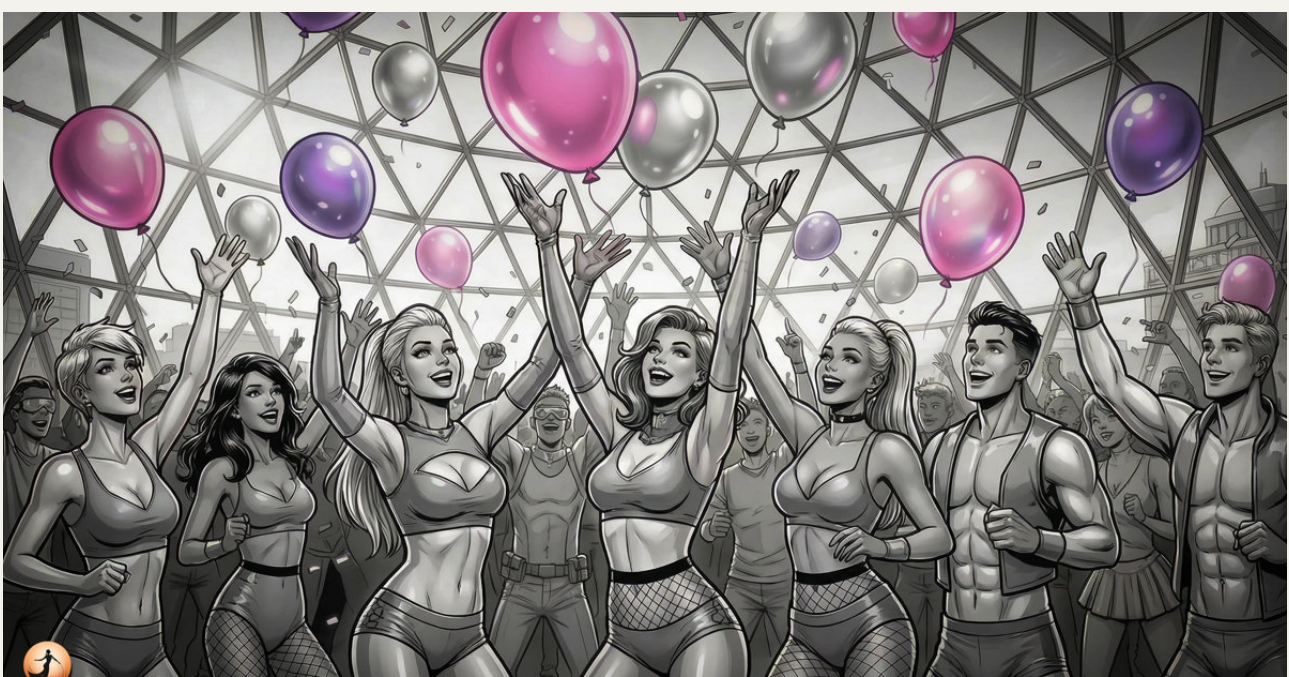
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EPISODE

Mission II - Part 4

BY SCARLETTT — 2026-01-07



In [Part 3] (/mission-ii-part-3/) we followed how Ruby, despite herself, started to get tempted by Prinz's persuasive and charismatic advice. In this fourth part of the six part series, Ruby is further tempted by the images Prinz offers.

Mission II: Stranded - Part 4: Club

An original story by Scarlett

Ruby frowned in contemplation, looking inwardly at the images placed in her mind by Prinz's comments. It was true that she could not imagine her normal AI advisers making these sort of suggestions to her. Were they... overlooking something?

She looked back at Prinz. He was still regarding her with that 'knowing' look.

"I can see I have piqued your curiosity", he said. "And why should I not have? I am offering you an opportunity you just have to reach out and take. It would be that simple..."

Prinz's smile broadened. *"I can show you more and add more substance to the things you are imagining. I have the spare capacity with my holographic projector".*

His arm raised again, Prinz turned in a full circle. As he turned, a building seemed to materialise around them. It was indistinct at first, simple wire frame shapes, but over a few seconds, objects seem to solidify until they looked fully there.

They were now inside a huge glass dome, made out of large triangular glass sections. Outside the dome were numerous tall buildings of various shapes, more glass and steel struts like a team of architects had tried to out-do each other with the complexities of their designs.

Where Ruby and Prinz were standing was now a raised open semi-circular bay, the rounded side lined with a couch which was thickly padded with a material that looked like latex. In the middle of the straight side there were the air-turntables for a human DJ, who would overlook the enormous dance floor below.

Prinz guided Ruby to a spot in the centre of the couch and bade her to sit. Ruby did so but it did not feel too comfortable. After all, she realised, she was actually sitting on a hard rock in reality, despite the realism of the illusion of the club.

With another wave of his arm, Prinz conjured up the DJ and the crowd on the dance floor. The dance music boomed now too, a slow and simple beat, overlaid with quick staccato human lyrics. It wasn't a style Ruby was familiar with; the aggressive quick tone of the lyrics seemed to clash with the rhythm. She could not easily think of a dance sequence to match. But the crowd did not seem to have any such doubts, as they all gyrated in a way which, in Ruby's eyes, seemed clumsily unco-ordinated with each other and the music.

The DJ's co-ordination was, of course, much better. He swayed his hips gently, at the same time gesticulating smoothly above the air-turntable sensors, skilfully dropping in the base beat of a new track while scratching away the lyrics of the old. Despite the unfamiliar genre of music, Ruby smiled at the skill. The DJ turned and smiled at Ruby, in a way that showed he was happy to get her approval.

Ruby's couch was now also full of people, an equal number sitting on each side of her. There were guys and girls, all dressed in exquisite and revealing costumes, and all looking directly at Ruby. She was momentarily surprised at feeling a little self-conscious, after all she was used to dancing complex precise sequences in front of thousands, but this feeling passed. Ruby started to like the idea of all the attention.

"You could have all of this...", said Prinz, *"...so, so easily."*

Ruby looked up at Prinz. *"You just need to start following my advice and it would all be yours..."*, he continued.

The DJ started to work on another transition. With a theatrical slow raising of his arms, the music welled up to a crescendo, accompanied by build-up of bright flashy holo-fireworks... then drop! A steady slow beat was all that was left and at the same time hundreds of coloured balloons were released from the top of the dome and started to fall, in a slow and meandering way, onto the dancing crowd.

Forgetting their dancing, the crowd were jumping up excitedly, trying to catch the balloons as they came down to be almost reachable. Ruby could make out that something was inside each balloon, something small but heavy enough to ensure the balloon would descend. As each balloon would be captured by a member of the crowd, it would be popped mercilessly, and the something would drop out onto the floor. The something was a gemstone, which would glitter briefly in the flashing lights of the club before being quickly pocketed....

The crowd chanted. *"Ruby... Ruby... Ruby!!!"*