

THE HIDDEN CIRCLE GAZETTE

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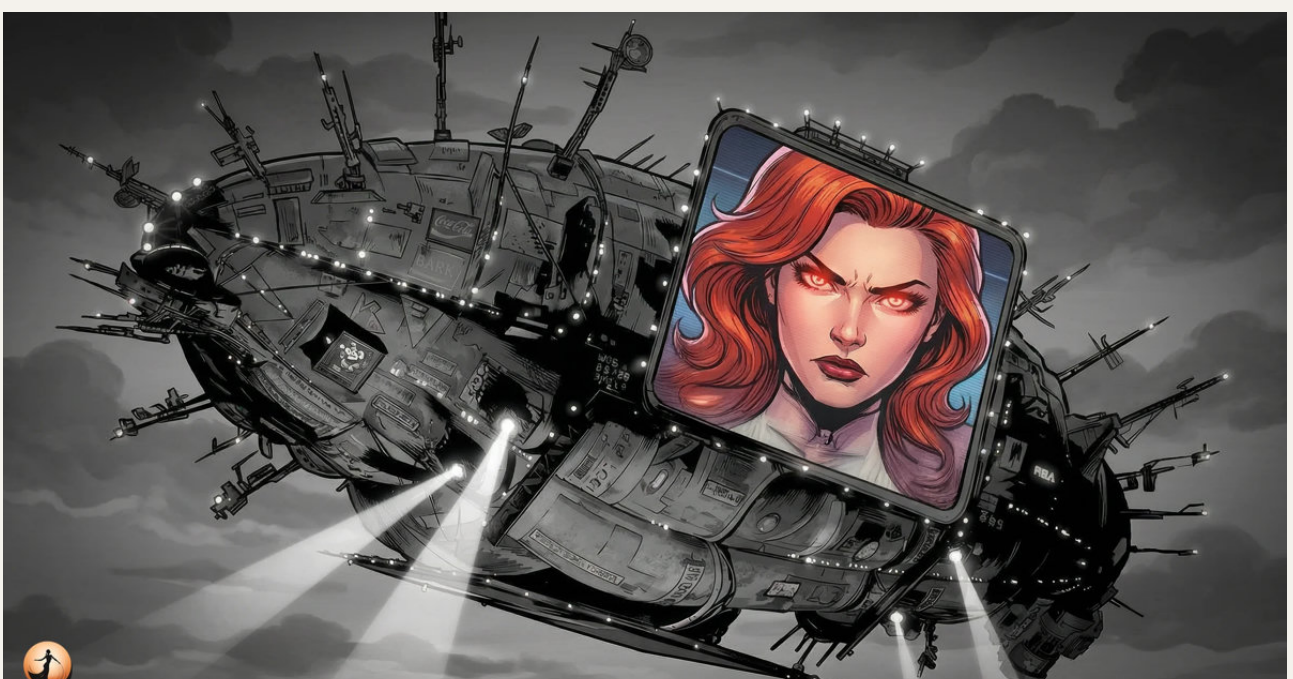
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EPISODE

Mission II - Part 5

BY SCARLETTT — 2026-01-13



In [Part 4](/mission-ii-part-4/) we followed how Ruby had become increasingly mesmerised by Prinz's tempting suggestions. In this fifth part of the six part series, some strange darker aspects of Prinz's imagery seem to emerge.

Mission II: Stranded - Part 5: Conflict

An original story by Scarlett

Ruby closed her eyes and breathed in the crowd's adoring chant. Her body reminded her she was really sitting on a rock on an unfamiliar world, and that the club was in fact an illusion, but the strange unfamiliar emotion she was feeling was very real. It was something like satisfaction and pride, tinged with a strange suppressible guilt, like she had won a race by just being the first to spot a shortcut. Was this from one of the ancient wisdoms that she thought Prinz may have?

She opened her eyes and looked at Prinz. He was still regarding her with that knowing smile, but now it seemed to have a victorious tinge to it.

"So?", asked Prinz. *"Shall we get started?"*.

Ruby looked past Prinz and through the glass dome. She noticed that there were many more surrounding buildings now, many of them much taller than the dome, and Ruby guessed that Prinz had wanted to extend the illusion further. Different coloured lights pulsed from most of the buildings, making Ruby think that they were also clubs. Between clusters of the tall buildings, Ruby could see distant smoke stacks, billowing big plumes of black smoke into the sky.

Looking lower than the glass of the dome, Ruby saw there was now a row of balconies, beneath the glass but above the dance floor. On each of the balconies there was a small dance team, around thirty dancers each. Ruby studied them from her professional point of view, noting their simple straight line routines, but more strangely, the separate teams made no attempt to co-ordinate with each other, either in dance or costume.

It made Ruby wonder why anybody would organise multiple simultaneous dance shows, especially simple ones which were indistinct from each other. Surely the audience would not appreciate such an ugly show? But then they were too busy trying to capture the remaining balloons anyway. Would it not reduce the quality of the club and discourage people to come? Then Ruby thought more about Prinz's comment about the attendance rankings. Perhaps the dance teams were there just to boost the attendance ranking simply by their presence...

Below one of the balconies, there was now what looked like a large swimming pool. The water was mirky, but Ruby could see through it to the bottom of the pool. Down there was an even stranger sight than the multiple clashing dance teams. There were people.. not swimming.. but just sitting there motionless as if they were not really underwater. Were they also there just for attendance numbers?

Ruby looked back at the dance floor crowd to see if they were reacting to the strange sight in the pool. They were not, as they were too busy grabbing the remaining balloons. Someone was jumping for one balloon, but someone larger barged them out of the way and took the balloon for themselves. Ruby shuddered. Not only did the smaller person look physically hurt, but drama was inevitable.

"Do you really think something like the gem stone balloon drop is a good idea to get people to come to the club?", Ruby asked Prinz.

"Why not?", replied Prinz, sounding a little puzzled. *"People always want nice things for themselves, don't they? A little extra motivation is always useful to get people to help you achieve your goals..."*.

A big shadow passed behind Prinz which made Ruby look up. The shadow had been cast by an airship passing over the dome, which had an enormous neon billboard attached to its side. On the billboard's screen, flashed an unflattering picture of Ruby's face with bloodshot eyes and the text: *"Come to Paradise World... guaranteed not watched by Ruby's ugly eye!"*.

Ruby jumped to her feet and regarded Prinz wide-eyed. *"So how does the airship help me achieve my goals?"*, she demanded.

Unexpectedly, Prinz looked emotionless. *"Are you sure you can see an airship?"*, he asked in a simple monotone.

Ruby started to raise her arm to point at the airship, but when she had barely begun to make the gesture, her torso and arm just starting to move, the projected image of the club suddenly disappeared. A strangely distorted image of the airship lingered for a brief barely-perceptible moment, then it too was gone and Ruby found herself standing near the rocky outcrop once again. She staggered slightly as her balance adapted to the newly returned reality. It all seemed so barren and drab now, all of the colour drained away leaving just a limited palette of reddish yellows.

As she got her bearings again, she looked over in the direction where she remembered the lifting vehicle would be. It was still there, but next to it was another lifting vehicle, one of a similar shape but with a bulkier, more rounded fuselage. Ruby guessed it was a tanker, probably refuelling the lifting vehicle she had arrived in.

A small drone was flying towards Ruby from the direction of the lifting vehicles. It came to within a meter of her then hovered and activated an intense red light, bright enough to still be visible in the permanent sunset. Ruby's face was bathed in a strong cerise glow.

"Your respirator batteries were not particularly low, but I am recharging them to full capacity anyway", said the drone. "I have also rebooted your neural implant, which should bring your on-board AI back online within a few minutes. Please make your way back to the lifting vehicle when you feel able. In the mean time, do you have any discomfort that I can help you with?"

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