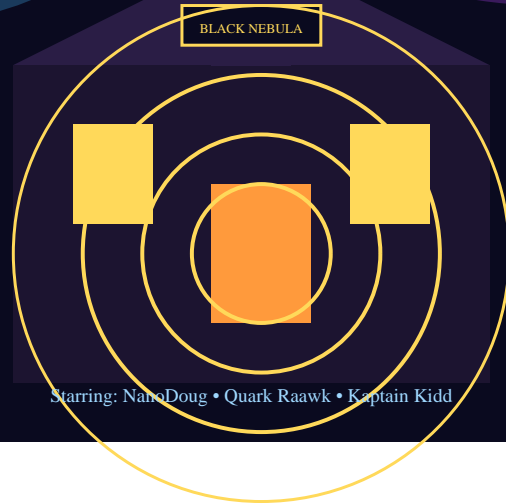


★ THE BLACK NEBULA TAVERN ADVENTURES ★

Mission 3:

The Horn of the Falling Stars

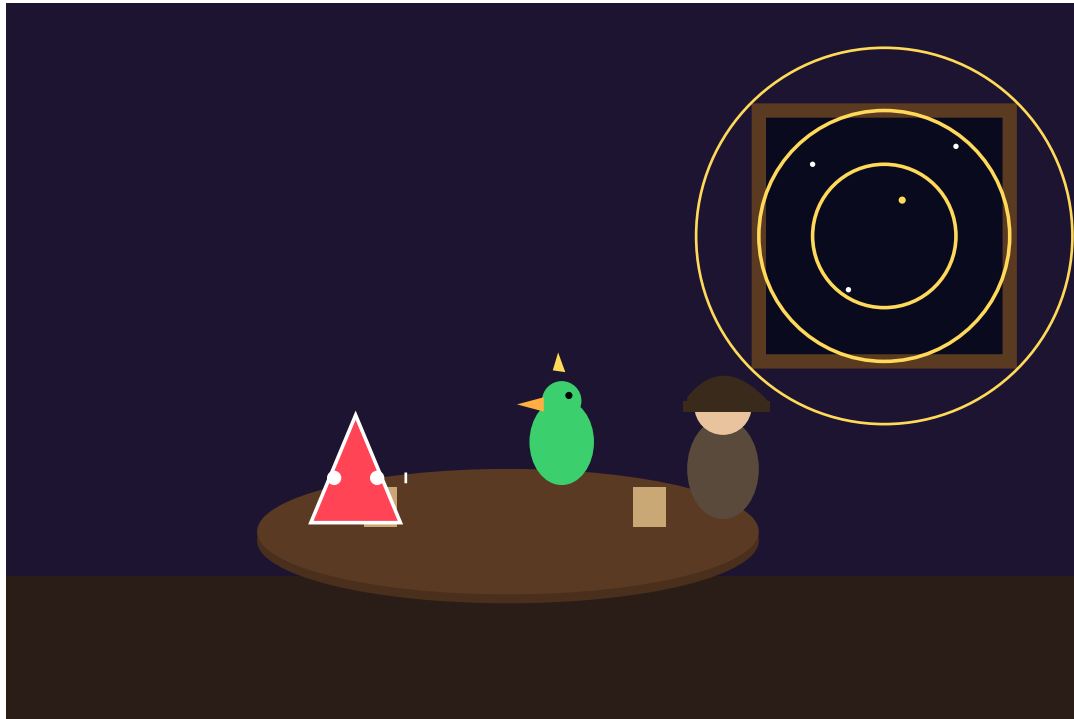


Starring: NanoDoug • Quark Raawk • Kaptain Kidd



Dedication

To every Tavern crew member, big or small, who's ever stopped scrolling long enough to really listen to the person right beside them. That's where the real signal lives.



It started, as most strange things at the Black Nebula Tavern did, with a sound nobody could explain.

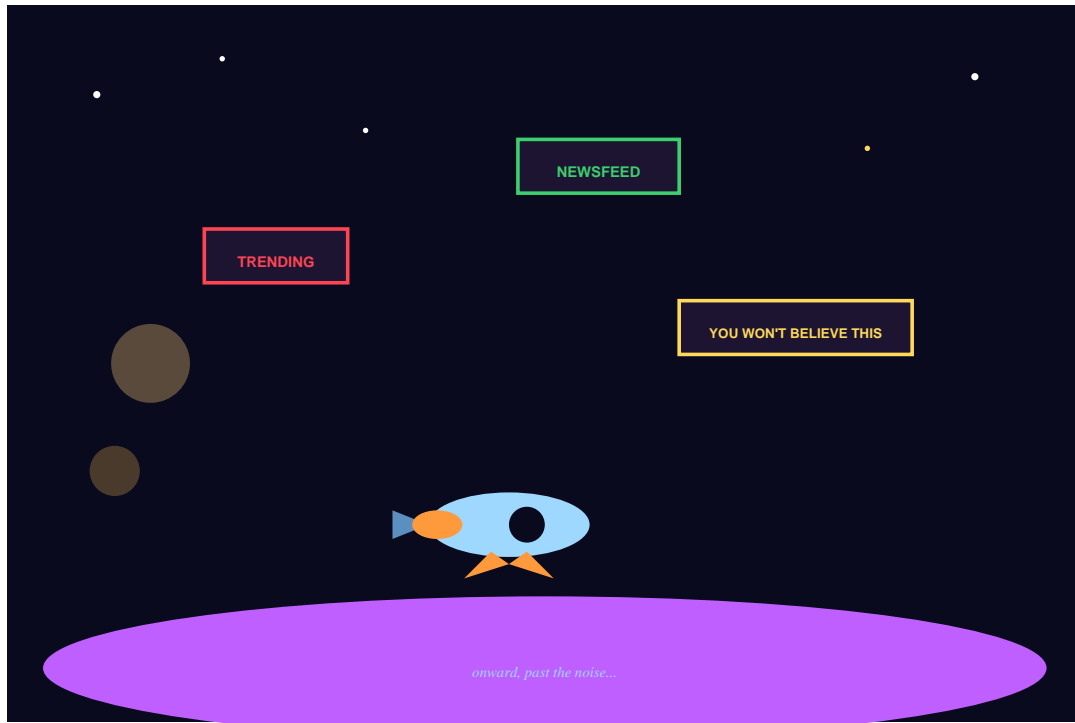
It wasn't a beep. It wasn't a buzz. It was warm and round and golden, like a giant had hummed a single note through a seashell the size of a house. The tavern's mugs rattled. The starfield outside the window flickered. And NanoDoug — who never jumped at anything — jumped.

“That,” said NanoDoug, “is a French horn.”

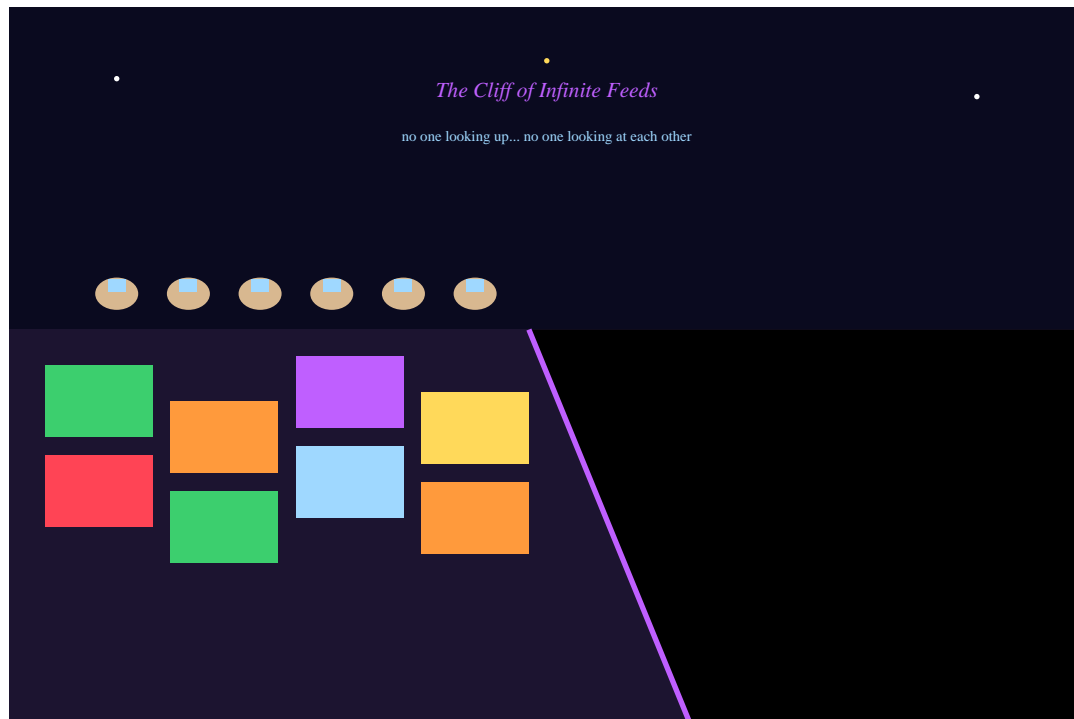
“A what now?” said Quark Raawk, fluffing up his feathers like he'd been personally insulted by the noise.

“A French horn. Biggest, warmest, most patient instrument in the whole orchestra. You don't rush a French horn. It waits for its moment, and when it speaks — everybody listens.”

Kaptain Kidd leaned in from the doorway, hat tipped back. “Well, somethin' out there in the Nebula is playin' one. And it sounds like it's callin' for help.”



They followed the sound out past the tavern lights, past the asteroid belt, past the spinning signs that blinked NEWSFEED and TRENDING and YOU WON'T BELIEVE THIS — until the ship's window filled up with the strangest sight any of them had ever seen.

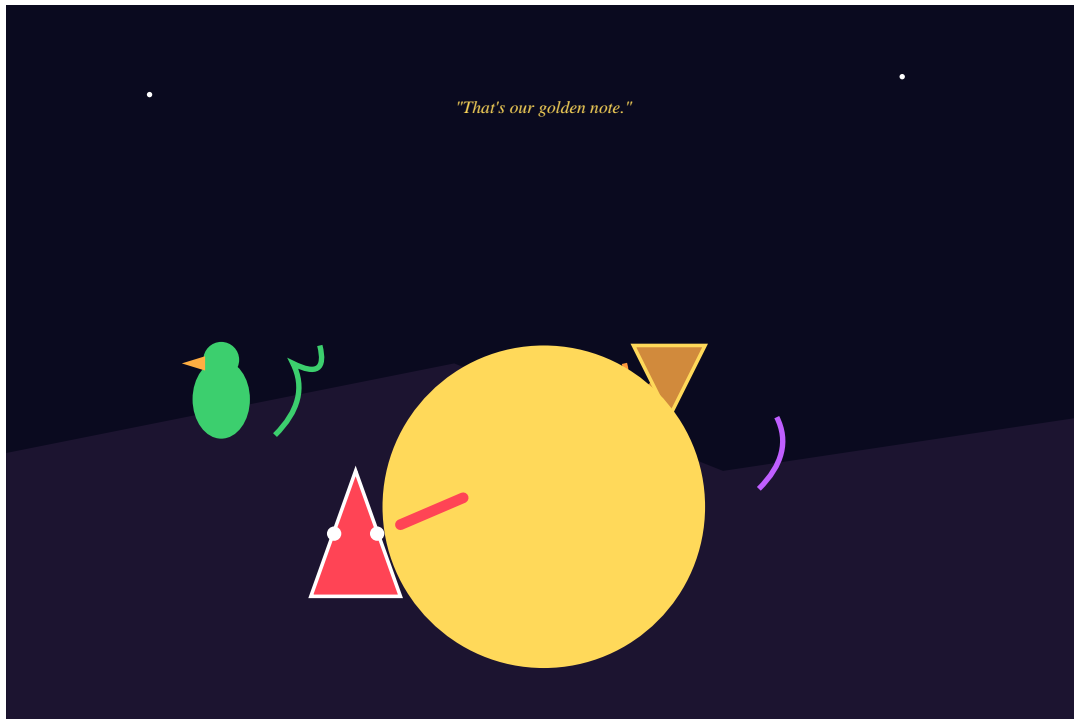


A cliff. A huge one, made of glowing screens stacked on top of each other like canyon walls. And marching toward the edge of it, in a line that stretched farther than anyone could see, were lemmings. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Each one holding a tiny glowing phone, eyes locked on the screen, feet shuffling forward one after another after another — straight toward open space.

“They're not even looking up,” Quark said, quieter than usual.

“They're not talking to each other either,” said NanoDoug, watching close. “Look — every one of 'em's broadcasting. Posting, sharing, shouting into their own little screen. Nobody's listening to the lemming next to 'em. They're all sendin'... and nobody's receivin'.”

Kaptain Kidd squinted. “So that's the trouble. It ain't that they're followin' each other off a cliff. It's that not one of 'em's actually talkin' to the fella beside 'em. They've forgotten how.”



That's when they found it — wedged in a crack at the edge of the cliff, half-buried in old broadcast signals like seaweed: a French horn, brass gone dull, but humming faintly all on its own.

“That's our golden note,” NanoDoug said, picking it up careful as an egg. “One horn. One real sound, played right, cuts through every feed at once. Trouble is — a horn this size, you can't just blow it. You gotta play it true. Four notes. In the right order. Or it just adds to the noise.”

Quark hopped onto NanoDoug's shoulder. “And if we get it wrong?”

“Then it's just one more shout in a canyon full of shoutin'. We gotta play somethin' worth listenin' to.”

A Choice to Make

They had a choice to make, and they all knew it.

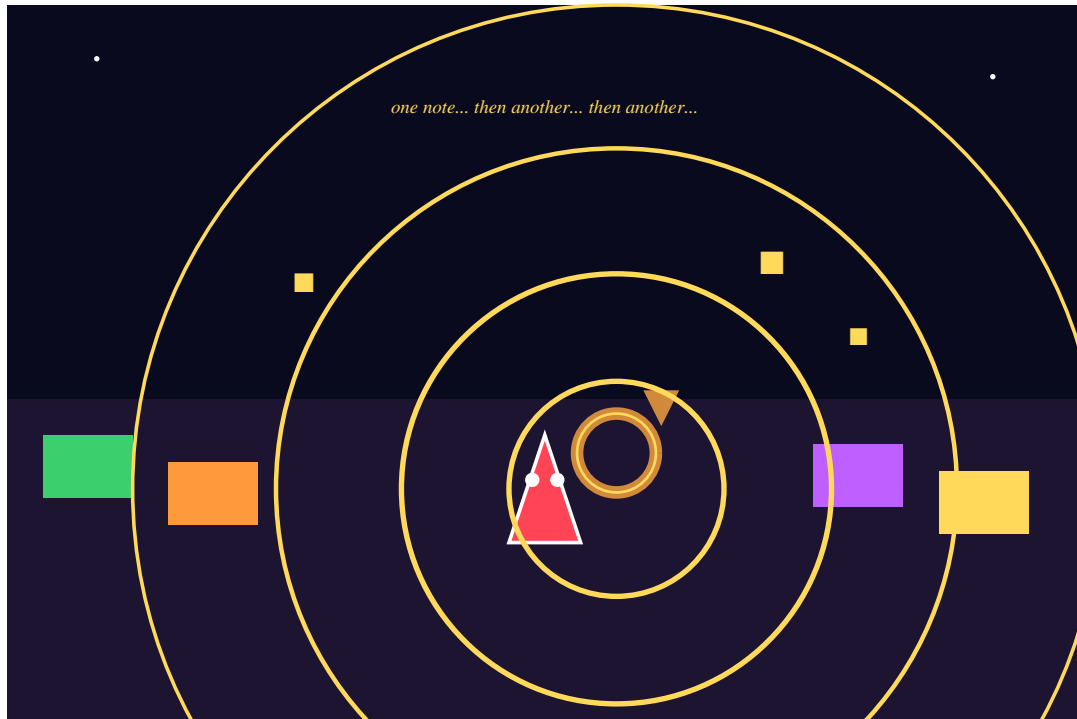
A Cosmist would've said: let the signal blast. Loud and fast and everywhere at once — overwhelm the noise with bigger noise.

A Terran would've said: don't touch it at all. Some things are better left quiet. Safer that way.

But the crew of the Black Nebula Tavern had never much cared for picking a side just 'cause it was a side. They picked the third thing.

“We don't blast 'em,” NanoDoug said. “And we don't stay quiet either. We play it soft enough that they want to look up and hear more. A real horn doesn't shout the whole song at once. It gives you one note, then waits to see if you're still listening before it gives you the next.”

Kaptain Kidd grinned. “Now that's communication.”



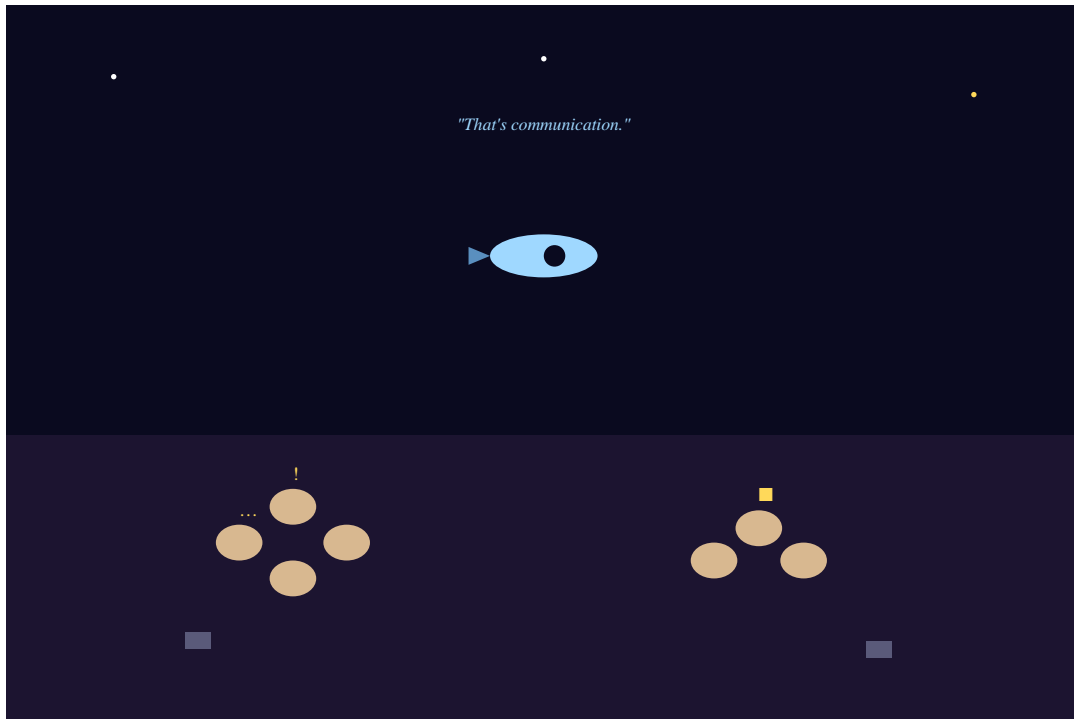
NanoDoug lifted the horn. Took a breath. And played the first note — low, warm, unhurried.

Nothing happened. Not right away. But somewhere in that endless marching line, one lemming's foot slowed down. Then stopped. He looked up from his little screen — first time in who knows how long — and for half a second, just listened.

NanoDoug played the second note.

Another lemming stopped. Then a third. The note rolled out across the canyon of screens like sunrise crawling across a valley floor, and one by one, feet that had only ever shuffled forward started turning sideways instead — toward each other.

Third note. Fourth.



The whole golden motif rang out across the Cliff of Infinite Feeds, and for the first time in longer than anyone could measure, the lemmings weren't looking down at their screens. They were looking at one another. Some were even talking — actual talking, mouth to ear, no glowing rectangle in between.

“Would you look at that,” Quark whispered.

“That's the thing about real communication,” NanoDoug said, lowering the horn. “It's never about who shouts loudest. It's about who's willing to wait long enough to be heard — and patient enough to listen back.”

They didn't save every lemming that day. Some kept marching, eyes down, feet shuffling, lost in their own little glowing world. But a good long line of them turned around. And that line kept growing the longer the horn played.

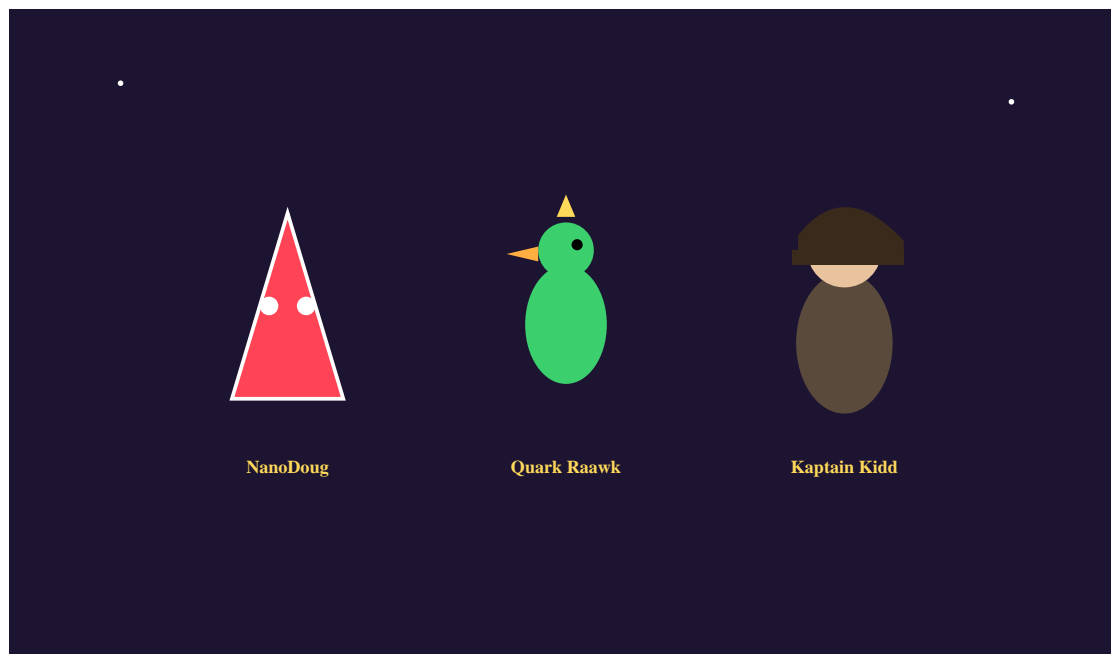
As the ship pulled away from the cliff, Kaptain Kidd looked back at the canyon, where small clusters of lemmings were now sitting in circles, actually facing each other for what looked like the first time in ages.

“One horn,” he said. “One true note. Turns out that's worth more than every shout in that whole canyon put together.”

NanoDoug just nodded, polishing the old brass horn before tucking it away — safe, for whenever the Tavern crew might need it again.

THE END... for now.

Next time on the Black Nebula Tavern Adventures: Mission 4 — coming soon.



About the Crew

NanoDoug

The commander and deep thinker of the Black Nebula Tavern. Always the first to notice when something's worth paying attention to — and the last to jump to a quick answer.

Quark Raawk

Loud opinions, sharp eyes. The crew's signal-scanner, always first to spot trouble — and first to say so.

Kaptain Kidd

Explorer, hat always tipped back, never in a rush. Has a knack for naming the real problem once everyone else has talked themselves in circles.