A BLACK WATER RIVER ADVENTURE

BESSIE

and the

BLACK WATER SIGNAL



One river. One invasion.

A whole world worth defending.

AN ILLUSTRATED SCIENCE-FICTION ADVENTURE / AGES 12+

Before the signal

Morag is fifteen, on holiday in the Highlands, and convinced nobody notices her. The river is about to prove her wrong.

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THE NIGHT COUNCIL

Bessie and Morag; Morag's mum; the robin, red squirrel, pine marten, snowy owl and red kites; the Highland stag, cow and unicorn; the trout and salmon; Harri Haggis; and the two kelpies of Loch Garve.

An original story set around the real Black Water near Inchbae, Garve. Its technology, talking creatures and events belong to fiction. Contains suspense and creatures in peril, with no graphic violence.

CHAPTER 01

The river that answered



The first time the Black Water spoke to Morag, it used her own voice.

She was standing on the bank, recording the river for a school sound project she had already decided would be rubbish. Behind her, the lights of Black Water Holiday Lets shone through the October dusk. Her mum was inside, unpacking enough food for a small expedition.

Morag pressed play.

Water rushed. A bird called. Then, very quietly, someone whispered, "Don't let it finish."

Her fingers tightened around the phone.

THE RIVER THAT ANSWERED

She listened again. The whisper had gone. In its place came five clean notes, a pause, and five more. Under the bridge of noise was a pulse so low she felt it in her teeth.

"Funny," she said to the river.

Five rings spread across a pool.

Morag stopped smiling.

At fifteen, she was excellent at noticing things nobody asked her about. She noticed when a friend left a group chat. She noticed the exact pause before a teacher said her name. She had noticed, three weeks earlier, that every plan for the holidays had been made without her.

She had not expected anything to notice back.

Across the pool, the current divided around something that had not been there a moment before.

First came two dark, rounded humps. Then a long neck rose between the reflections of the pines. Water ran from a small, intelligent face. The creature regarded Morag with the weary patience of someone whose doorbell had been ringing all afternoon.

Morag took one step backwards. Her boot struck a stone.

"Careful," said the creature.

This time the voice came from the water beside her feet.

Morag sat down abruptly.

THE RIVER THAT ANSWERED

"You can't be real."

"That's usually my line."

Below the surface, violet light flickered. For one impossible second, every stone in the pool cast its shadow upstream.

The creature turned sharply.

"My name is Bessie," she said. "And if you heard that signal, we have less time than I thought."

Morag lifted the phone. Its recording screen showed a shape she had never drawn: five circles linked by a straight line.

"What is it?"

"A door," Bessie said. "Something on the other side has started knocking."

The river rose without rain.

Morag's first clear thought was that she should run. Her second was that she should get her mum.

Bessie nodded towards the lights.

"Good. Tell someone where you are. I need a person who can listen, not a person who disappears."

Morag ran up the path.

Behind her, the five notes began again.

This time, a sixth note tried to join them.

CHAPTER 02

The vessel beneath the water



Her mum believed the rising water. She believed the strange lights. The river monster took a little longer.

They returned together, stopping well back from the bank. Bessie surfaced under a pale strip of sky.

Morag's mum made a noise that was not quite a word.

"Yes," said Bessie. "That covers most of it."

Bessie explained that she could carry meaning through water. Near her, a listener heard it as speech. Morag's phone had caught the same pattern by accident, translating a thought into a familiar voice.

"The warning was yours?" Morag asked.

"It was meant for anyone who might hear."

THE VESSEL BENEATH THE WATER

A line opened across the pool.

It was too straight to belong there.

The water folded away from a black oval hull, longer than a bus. Ribs of metal flexed like the bones of a fish. Violet circles lit beneath its skin. Though much of it remained hidden, Morag could see it was far too large for the stretch of river that concealed it.

"It folds the space around itself," Bessie said. "I can feel the extra distance."

A platform slid from the vessel to a shelf of rock. On it stood something like an eel that had learned to walk badly: translucent skin, four jointed forelimbs, a crown of fine sensory threads.

A voice cracked across the water.

"River One. Anchor established. Living resistance: negligible."

Morag's mum pulled her behind a tree.

"River One?" Morag whispered.

The alien raised a limb. A projection unfolded over the pool: Earth, wrapped in a web of purple lines.

Not roads.

Rivers.

Bessie went very still.

The voice continued. "At first light, the Meridian will bind the first channel. All connected waters will be surveyed. Further anchors will follow."

THE VESSEL BENEATH THE WATER

"They're starting here," Morag said.

"They chose somewhere quiet," Bessie answered. "They mistook quiet for empty."

Morag zoomed in. Three little lights flashed along the platform. Two answered from the banks. The pulse in her teeth returned.

"Those are the anchors?"

"Listening devices," said Bessie. "They learn the river's rhythm. Once all three agree, the ship can hold the water still."

Inside the vessel, something small pressed against a round window. For an instant Morag saw a face with enormous dark eyes.

Then a shutter closed.

Her mum was already calling for help. The call failed as violet light passed over the trees.

"We get back to the buildings," she said. "Warn the others. No one comes down alone."

Bessie watched the sealed window.

"They have brought their young."

"Then they can take them home," Morag said.

For the first time, Bessie looked hopeful.

"That," she said, "is a much better plan than sinking the ship."

CHAPTER 03

The night council



The council assembled in a sheltered patch of woodland, away from the shifting water. Morag's mum stayed near the lit path with a torch, warning the other guests and keeping everyone back.

Morag had expected animals.

She had not expected an argument.

A snowy owl thought they should strike from above. A Highland stag said antlers were perfectly adequate at ground level. A pine marten was already looking for something expensive to bite.

"That is not a strategy," Bessie said.

"It is the beginning of one," said the marten.

A red squirrel dropped a violet sliver at Morag's feet.

"Found this under their listening thing. It fell off."

THE NIGHT COUNCIL

The sliver pulsed. On Morag's phone, the five circles appeared again.

A robin landed on a branch above her head. "They're wrong, those notes."

"Wrong how?"

"Same every time. No breath in them."

Morag played back her recording. The robin was right. The alien rhythm repeated perfectly. The real river never did.

From the dark came a shaggy Highland cow, a white unicorn and Harri Haggis, carrying a coil of wire that seemed considerably too large for him.

"Why have you got that?" Morag asked.

"Because somebody always needs wire," Harri said.

Under the bank, a brown trout broke the surface beside a salmon. They had counted three anchors: one on a rock, one below the water and one beneath the vessel.

Then the shadows between the trees gathered into two black horses with streaming manes.

"The kelpies of Loch Garve," Bessie said.

"We came by the old ways," said one.

THE NIGHT COUNCIL

Morag decided not to ask whether the old ways had a bus timetable.

The kelpie's wife wore a small golden star at her throat. "The stone you helped us find still remembers your kindness, Bessie."

Morag looked round the circle. She knew almost nothing about spaceships. The animals knew nothing about phones. Bessie knew rivers, but could not reach the controls inside the vessel.

None of them could do this alone.

"I need to hear what each anchor is doing," Morag said.

The trout and salmon could listen below the surface. The owl and a pair of red kites could watch from above. The squirrel and marten could reach the platform without crossing open ground. The stag, cow and unicorn could keep the woodland route clear if anyone had to retreat.

"And me?" Harri asked.

Morag held up the fallen sliver.

"I think I really do need that wire."

Bessie dipped her head.

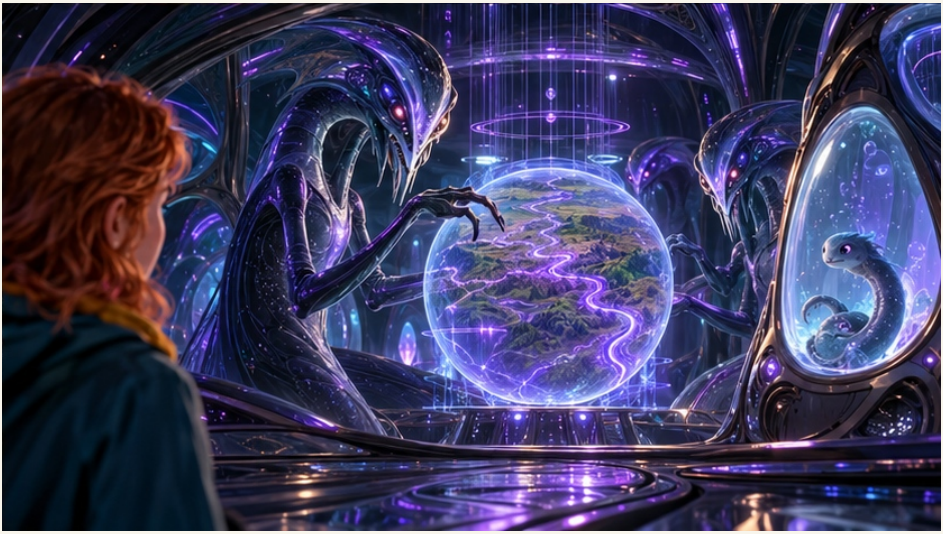
"One rule," she said. "We bring everyone home."

Morag thought of the small face at the window.

"Everyone," she agreed.

CHAPTER 04

What the ship remembered



The damaged sliver was not a battery.

Morag discovered this when it tried to sing to a teaspoon.

They had brought it to a dry table near the holiday lets, with her mum beside her. Harri laid out his wire. The unicorn stood in the doorway, casting a faint silver light over the pieces.

When Morag put the sliver beside a bowl of water, symbols spread across the surface.

"It's listening for the others," she said.

Her phone's microphone caught the tone. On the recording display, a narrow spike appeared exactly five seconds apart.

She played the sound back.

The sliver answered.

WHAT THE SHIP REMEMBERED

Morag looked at Bessie, who was listening from the shallows well beyond the table.

"It's a conversation."

"Most invasions are," Bessie said. "One side simply refuses to listen."

Morag changed the recording's speed. The answer changed too. A shape rose from the bowl: an image of the alien vessel's interior, saved in the fragment's memory.

They saw a grey world under a copper sky. Dry channels cut across its surface. Enormous machines stood where water should have been.

Then came a name, translated through Bessie's water-speech.

Veyr.

The next image showed a river being fed into a machine. The machine grew brighter. The river grew smaller.

"They used up their own world," Morag said.

"Some did," Bessie replied. "Now their commander wants ours."

The image shifted to the ship's nursery. Small creatures drifted in suspended spheres of water. Beyond them hung a navigation map, and beside it a single blue route.

Home.

Morag leaned forward. The sliver darkened.

The route vanished before she could record its full pattern.

"We need the whole map."

WHAT THE SHIP REMEMBERED

"We need to smash their engine," said the stag from outside.

Morag almost agreed. It would be quicker. The ship was threatening her mum, the guests, everything in the river.

Then she remembered the nursery.

"If it breaks while they're inside, they might never get back."

A new voice sounded from the bowl, sharper than the others.

"Command decision: local life does not require consent."

The words chilled the room more than the night air.

Morag switched off the recording.

"They know exactly what they're doing."

Bessie lowered her head until their eyes were level.

"Then we stop them. Understanding why someone came doesn't mean letting them take your home."

Morag turned the phone over in her hands. Until that evening, its most important job had been telling her whether people had remembered she existed.

Now it held the only way to talk to an enemy ship.

"I'll get the map," she said.

Her mum took a breath.

"From the edge. With a way back. And the moment that changes, you leave."

Morag nodded.

A promise was harder to make when you meant to keep it.

CHAPTER 05

Across the threshold



The ship opened its service platform when the three anchors sang together.

The team gave them a different song.

Below the surface, Bessie carried Morag's recorded tone towards the underwater listener. The trout and salmon guided her through water that was beginning to move in tight, unnatural circles.

Above, the red kites crossed the moon. The owl watched the platform.

The kelpies laid a glamour over the bank: a reflection of empty trees where Morag and Harri waited. It would last only while the golden star remained warm.

ACROSS THE THRESHOLD

"Not invisibility," the kelpie's wife warned. "A misunderstanding. Don't get close enough to correct it."

The pine marten slipped beneath the platform. The squirrel raced along its edge and knocked twice on the metal.

Clear.

Morag crossed dry rock to the vessel. Her mum's torch shone steadily from the path behind her. Bessie rose beside the platform, close enough for Morag to reach if she needed help.

Harri followed, dragging the wire.

Inside, the air smelled of wet stone and hot electricity. Water floated through transparent channels in the walls. Every surface seemed to be waiting for permission to become a different shape.

Morag reached the navigation display.

Blue meant home. Violet meant conquest.

She began recording.

A nursery sphere drifted past the doorway. Inside it, the little alien watched her. It put one limb against the glass.

Morag lifted her free hand.

The creature copied her.

Then every violet light turned white.

The commander appeared at the far end of the passage, sensory threads spread like a broken umbrella.

"Native intelligence confirmed."

ACROSS THE THRESHOLD

Morag backed towards the platform.

"I was hoping you'd work that out."

A door slid down behind Harri.

The marten shrieked from somewhere beneath the floor. Harri shoved his coil into the narrowing gap.

The door stopped with a grinding whine.

"Wire," he said, a little breathlessly.

Morag grabbed his arm. Together they scrambled out.

A violet beam swept the platform. The kelpie's glamour broke.

On the bank, the stag lowered his antlers and dragged a fallen branch clear of their escape path. The cow planted herself on firm ground, holding the end of the rescue line Morag's mum had brought. The unicorn lit the safe footing.

Morag did not run blindly. She followed the light, one rock at a time.

Behind them, Bessie struck the water with her tail.

The beam shattered into ripples.

They reached the trees just as the platform folded back into the ship.

On Morag's phone, the blue route glowed.

Below it appeared a countdown.

Thirty-one minutes until first light.

CHAPTER 06

A river cannot be owned



Morag spread the navigation image beside the anchor recording.

The ship needed three listeners to agree before it could open a route between worlds. That was how it had arrived. That was how it intended to reach other rivers.

"Make them agree on home instead," she said.

Bessie listened to the pattern.

"The return route needs a living current. Their engine expects a river inside its reservoir."

"So we give it one."

"Not ours," said the trout.

"No." Morag looked at the map again. "The water already aboard. A closed loop. Nothing connected to the Black Water."

A RIVER CANNOT BE OWNED

They could use the broken listener to send the return pattern into the vessel. But the other anchors would keep pulling it towards Earth unless they were removed at exactly the same moment.

The owl gave a low call.

At the river, violet pillars were rising around the ship.

The commander was calling every scout home.

It had seen the recording. It knew they had its route.

"It's pulling back to protect the engine," Bessie said. "Then it will finish the binding from inside."

"Good," said Morag.

Everyone looked at her.

She felt the strange, unpleasant thrill of having a plan that might actually work.

"If they're all aboard, we don't leave anyone behind."

There was one more problem.

The ship would reject an outside signal unless it came from something already marked by its scanners.

Morag's phone had been marked in the passage.

Her phone would have to go into the reservoir.

The whole recording would go with it. The ship. The creatures. Bessie speaking. Proof that the most extraordinary night of her life had happened.

A RIVER CANNOT BE OWNED

There was no connection to upload it. No time to make another copy of a file the alien sliver had written directly into the device.

For a moment she saw it: everyone at school watching, everyone finally asking her a question.

Then the robin landed on the phone.

"What do you want to keep?" he asked.

Morag looked past him at the river.

"That."

She stood.

The plan passed round the council. The fish would free the submerged anchor. The squirrel and marten would release the bank listener. Harri would connect the broken sliver to the marked phone. The kelpies and unicorn would draw the ship's own reservoir into a returning circle.

The birds would give the signal.

Bessie would hold the channel open.

Morag would send the route.

"And if it doesn't work?" she asked.

Bessie watched the sky paling behind the pines.

"Then we will need each other for the next idea."

Somehow, that helped more than a promise that nothing could go wrong.

CHAPTER 07

The sixth note



The river stopped.

Not slowed. Stopped.

A leaf hung above the pool as if caught in glass. In the silence, Morag could hear her own breathing and the tiny scrape of Harri's boots.

A voice rolled from the vessel.

"First channel claimed."

Bessie pushed into the frozen current.

For a terrible second, she did not move.

Then one dark hump broke the surface. Then the second.

"No," she said.

THE SIXTH NOTE

The word travelled through the water with enough force to rattle stones.

Morag stood at the edge of the service platform, which Bessie had forced open with the captured signal. She stayed outside the hull. Harri fixed his last wire to the sliver.

The nursery lights were all inside. The scouts had returned.

Above the trees, the owl called.

The trout and salmon knocked the underwater anchor free of its socket.

The squirrel pulled a fastening. The marten bit through the bank listener's soft cable.

Two violet pillars collapsed.

Morag lowered the phone and sliver into the vessel's open reservoir.

Blue light ran across its surface.

For three heartbeats, the map of Veyr appeared.

Then the commander rose behind the glass.

"Return refused."

A sixth note cut through the five.

Morag's pattern broke.

Bessie cried out. Thin lines of violet light tightened round her neck, pinning her against the stopped water.

Morag reached for the phone.

Too late. It slipped beneath the blue surface.

The screen went black.

All her proof was gone.

For a second, she wanted to follow it with her hand, grab it back, undo the last minute.

Instead, she looked up.

THE SIXTH NOTE

"Robin!"

He sang.

Not the five perfect notes. His own rough, quick song, full of breaths and changes.

The commander turned.

The sixth note wavered.

Bessie had told Morag that the listeners learned the river's rhythm. But the machine had learned a recording, something fixed. Now it was meeting a living place.

"All of you!" Morag shouted.

Wings beat. Antlers struck wood. Hooves stamped the earth. Harri banged the empty coil against the platform. The trout and salmon broke the surface. The kelpies sent their old river-song through the reservoir, and the unicorn's light spread over it like dawn.

Bessie added a deep, uneven note.

The violet lines loosened.

Morag sang too. Badly. Loudly. Without checking whether anyone approved.

The commander's sixth note vanished beneath them.

Five blue circles joined.

The return route opened.

Water thundered back into motion. The leaf fell.

Through the glass, the commander stared at Morag.

"You are one small channel."

"No," she said, with the whole council behind her. "We're where you stopped."

Bessie lifted her head.

"Take your young. Take your ship. Leave our rivers."

The blue light became a door.

CHAPTER 08

What stayed



The Meridian rose without touching the banks.

Its great hull folded inwards, carrying its reservoir, its commander, its scouts and every nursery sphere. For an instant the open route showed a copper sky over a dry world.

Morag saw the little alien at the window.

It lifted one limb.

She lifted her hand.

Then the ship was gone.

The river fell back into its own shape.

WHAT STAYED

No purple lines crossed the stones. No perfect notes hid beneath the rush. The scouts' last devices floated free, dark and harmless. The marten collected them with the air of someone tidying up after a disappointing party.

Bessie drifted to the shallows.

Morag knelt on dry ground beside her.

"Did we send them all back?"

"Every last one."

"And the route?"

"Closed from this side. They cannot use our signal again."

Bessie sounded exhausted.

Morag put a hand against the cool curve of her neck. The skin there was scratched with fine silver lines where the binding had held.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I nearly cared more about the video."

"Nearly," Bessie said, "can be a very important word."

Morag's mum reached them and wrapped her in a hug that made speaking temporarily impossible.

Afterwards, the council dispersed. The red kites turned towards the brightening hills. The owl went looking for somewhere quiet. The cow demanded breakfast. The squirrel argued that saving the world ought to qualify him for extra nuts.

WHAT STAYED

Harri announced that he would be requiring more wire.

The kelpie's wife held up her golden star. Its light was dim, but still there.

"Some things are stronger after being shared," she said.

At Black Water Holiday Lets, the kettle went on.

Morag sat beside the window with a borrowed notebook. Her phone lay somewhere beyond Earth, inside an alien ship. She had no photograph of Bessie, no proof of the unicorn, no clip that would make her impossible to ignore.

She began writing anyway.

At first she wrote the facts as well as she could remember them. Five notes. Three anchors. One closed loop. A frightened creature at a window.

Then she wrote the part that mattered.

A river is not empty because you cannot hear everyone who lives in it.

Outside, a robin sang from a fence.

At the water, two dark humps appeared and slipped quietly beneath the surface.

Morag smiled and added a title.

Bessie and the Black Water Signal.

On the next line she wrote:

We were here.

And we said no.

After the water moves

The place

The Black Water and Inchbae, near Garve in the Scottish Highlands, are real. This adventure invents its ship, river-binding machinery and closed-loop return route. It is science fiction with a Highland folklore heart, rather than an account of real technology.

The creatures

Bessie is Black Water River's original, friendly sister of Nessie. The animal and mythical council draws on the BWR stories and lodge emblems. The kelpies return from Bessie and the Secret of Loch Garve; their golden star and friendship are part of that fictional series.

Questions for the journey home

What makes Morag's final choice difficult? Why does Bessie insist on saving the young aliens? When does being heard matter more than being seen? What does the robin understand that the commander cannot?

A note about the animation

The accompanying animated storybook is an abridged adaptation. It follows the same eight chapters, with illustrated scenes, moving light and water effects, Scottish synthetic narration, original atmospheric music, and captions.

Created for Black Water River Holiday Lets / October 2026

THEY MISTOOK QUIET FOR EMPTY.

When an alien vessel chooses the Black Water as the first river in its conquest of Earth, Morag has one night to help Bessie stop it. Their greatest weapon is everything the invaders failed to hear.



Discover the real Highland home of Bessie

Black Water River Holiday Lets



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