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## THE BIG DRY

The gathering of the clouds was usually at the end of each month, but Mother Nature had called an early meeting. “We may have underdone it with the spring weather,” she announced to a sky full of clouds. “There wasn’t enough rain. Some places are already drying out and we’re only just into summer.”

“That’s your fault, Buckets,” said Bianca the snow cloud. “As our major rain cloud it’s your job to make the spring wet happen, but you spent too much time chit-chatting to Scalywag, and we all know what he’s like – swanning around with his bunch of dotty clouds that do absolutely nothing.”

“I’m just up here to add pretty patterns to the sky. Isn’t that right, Mum?” Scalywag the mackerel-sky cloud said to Mother Nature, and when she agreed he went on: “And you have to remember that even though I don’t carry water anymore, not like when I was younger, I cover a big area and shelter the land below from the sun. Heavy water drops are a job for you youngsters.”

“Hang on a minute,” Buckets cut in, “I’m being accused of not raining in spring, but what about the huge wet I made in winter?”

“I remember that only too well,” said Bianca irritably, casting an angry scowl at Buckets, “And when did you do it? Right at the wrong time! Thanks to your stupidity my beautiful white blanket of snow turned to slush.”

“And because of that, everything got flooded,” put in Sprinkle the shower cloud, then went on to say: “So, by the time his rain was really needed Buckets didn’t have enough left. Had he done what I always used to do and just dropped a bit here and a bit there he’d still have plenty. But that’s now water under the bridge. If it’s as dry down there as Mum says, and Buckets is almost empty, maybe Scalywag and I should come out of retirement.”

Booming laughter echoed across the sky. “Fat lot of good you’d do,” said Rumble the thunder cloud, “You’re too old, and even if you could work a miracle, where are you going to get enough rain to sort the drought? No, me and Cottonball can fix it, isn’t that right?” he asked the big, fluffy cloud next to him.

“Well, I’m not sure,” replied Cottonball. “I don’t think I’ve got much water left either.”

“You worry too much,” said Rumble. “Let’s give it a go. What do you reckon, Mum?” he asked Mother Nature.

“Hmm,” mumbled Mother Nature as she thought. Coming to a decision she declared: “We really have no choice. All of you must go off and do the best you can.”

Meanwhile, on the land down below, Two Hills Farm was looking very sad. The paddocks that were normally green were now beige, and the wheat stalks were drooping. “If we don’t get some rain soon,” said George Stubble to his wife, “We’re going to lose the whole crop.”

“And there’s no water in the dam,” added Brenda. “The cattle and sheep are paddling around in mud. What are we going to do?”

"Pray for rain, I suppose," answered George, his head dropping into his hands in despair. "If it doesn't come our only option will be to sell the farm." Getting up from his seat at the kitchen table he trudged to the window and looked out at the two distant hills that the farm was named after. "Not a cloud in the sky," he moaned, closed his eyes briefly and sighed. Heading for the door he said: "I'm going to take what's left in the tank water to fill up the troughs for the animals."

He was in the process of doing this when his children John and Millie raced into the yard on their trail bikes. "Hey, Dad," said John excitedly, "I reckon the rains might be here soon."

"We saw some clouds coming towards us the other side of the hills," added Millie.

"Well, I hope you're right," said their father, "But we've seen plenty of clouds and none of them have had any rain in them."

"Maybe these ones will have," offered John.

Hearing her father's defeated groan, Millie pleaded: "Don't give up, Dad, Please. We can get through this." She turned to look back at the hills in time to spot a cloud rising over them in the distance. "The clouds we saw are definitely coming this way."

The clouds the children had seen were Sprinkle and Scalywag. "This is terrible," said Scalywag. "Everything is so dry."

"I know, my old friend," muttered Sprinkle, "And I only wish I had more water to give the land some rain, but I haven't enough to do any good."

They were past the hills now and were cruising over George and Brenda's farm. "Oh, will you look down there," said Scalywag despondently. "Those poor cows and sheep have no water, only mud. Could you at least rain a bit in their dam?"

"That I *can* do," replied Sprinkle, and she coasted closer to pause over the dam where she began to let down quite a heavy shower.

George Stubble had noticed and was frowning. "Peculiar," he said in surprise. "That cloud was passing over; now it's stopped. And you were right about the rain, guys. At least the animals will have something to drink."

Sprinkle was happy that she'd been able to do that, but she was concerned about something else: "Those fields could do with a good downpour before the wheat dies; but after filling up the dam I don't have that much water in spare. If only I could get some more from somewhere."

"I've had an idea about that," said Scalywag, looking up above him where wispy, white clouds streaked across the blue sky. "The High Clouds are *all* water. Maybe we can both fill up from them?"

"Not simply water, Scalywag," retorted Sprinkle. "They aren't called the Ice Maidens for nothing. Even if we could get anywhere close, we'd freeze."

"Yeah, you're right..." then he paused in mid-sentence. "Hey, Sprinkle, my old buddy, I've just had a better idea. Come with me." And Scalywag began to rise.

"Where then?" puzzled the shower cloud.

"You'll see," replied her friend. "Trust me."

George Stubble saw the clouds going higher and higher. "I guess that's it, then," he sighed dismally. "So much for the rains."

The air was getting colder as the two friends continued to rise higher and higher in the sky. "When you were talking about filling up with water," commented Sprinkle, "You said WE."

"That's right," said Scalywag with a chuckle. "I don't see why you should have all the fun: I'm coming out of retirement, and I'm quite looking forward to raining once again." He paused to look up. "Almost there. That's who I was hoping to find."

Sprinkle frowned. "What, Bianca? She's a winter snow cloud!"

"And snow is frozen water," Scalywag reminded her. "If she loads us up with snow, by the time we go down it will have melted and turned into water."

"*If* she agrees to let us have some," droned Sprinkle doubtfully.

Bianca was wary at first. "I don't know about that," she said. "It takes me a long time to make my snowflakes because they all have to be different patterns. Then they're supposed to float down gracefully to land and make everything white and pretty. What you're suggesting will turn them back into water ruining the patterns."

"But it would be for a good cause," coaxed Sprinkle, "And winter is a long way off yet. You'd have plenty of time to make more snowflakes."

Bianca went quiet as she pondered the matter. Finally she declared: "Okay, you can have as much snow as you can carry; and as a bonus, once you've dropped all my beautiful snow as ordinary, ugly rain drops, you can come back up to refill." So Bianca began to snow on the two clouds, as she did so musing: "I think I shall make some really different, extra pretty flakes for next winter, lots and lots of them."

On their way back down, Scalywag was commenting: "I feel quite strange carrying water after so long. Now I have to remember how to spread it around so that I don't flood everything like Buckets."

"Stop worrying," Sprinkle assured him. "Just do what I do and you'll be fine. A bit here and a bit there is what's needed, just for a start anyway. Now let's go and give this farm some long-awaited rain."

On his way back to the farmhouse, George Stubble hesitated as he found himself unexpectedly in shade. Looking up, his eyes popped as he saw clouds above him coming lower and lower; and he was sure they were the two he had seen before. "Well, I'm blowed," was the best he could come up with; until a few moments later the clouds began to rain on him and he said: "Well I never. This is really weird."

Sprinkle and Scalywag coasted around Two Hills Farm, first making all of the dry ground moist; and once they had, up they went again for Bianca to fill them with more snow which would turn to water as it melted and give everything a real soaking. They were on their way up for the third time when Sprinkle noticed something in the distance. "The other clouds are coming. Let's hope they've been raining on the rest of the countryside."

Approaching the two hills at the edge of the farm, Buckets was grumbling: "You should have known better, Rumble. Thunderstorms are fine as long as there's rain; but all you came up with was a load of noise and a lightning bolt that set light to a paddock. I had to put out the fire and used up what was left of my rain."

"Just as well you had at least *some*," said Cottonball. "All mine went into that dry lake, and it didn't do much good either. Hey," she said, pausing for a moment. "There up ahead. Is that who I think it is?"

"Looks like Sprinkle and Scalywag," growled Rumble. "What do those two old codgers think they're doing?"

"If I'm not mistaken," replied Buckets, "I'd say they're raining, and from here it seems like lots and lots; but that can't be right," he added with a frown. "Where did they get the water?"

A soft, very gentle whisper echoed from on high: "Perhaps, my children," said Mother Nature, "You should ask them; but I suggest you do it nicely."

Although it wasn't in his nature, Rumble asked the question very, very nicely, and quietly for a change. Then Buckets also asked if they would be able to fill up with water as well."

Following a brief discussion, the two older clouds thought it might be possible; but first they would have to seek permission from Bianca because it was only right. And as it happened, she was happy to oblige; with a warning to all of them not to rain on her snow when next winter came. As for Sprinkle and Scalywag, they were really pleased with themselves. "We didn't do bad for a couple of oldies," said Sprinkle.

"No, we didn't," commented Scalywag. "And I reckon that makes us smarter than the average clouds." And Sprinkle had to agree.