

Dream HQ

“Every night, when you close your eyes and drift off to the Dream World, he is there. You don’t see him, nor do you hear him or feel him, but he is there. He lurks behind you as you traverse the neverending fields of your mind, and then, in the morning, when your alarm clock rings and you regain consciousness into the Real World, he is gone, because unlike humans, he only exists in the Dream World. He remains in the dimensions of unconsciousness.

“He does not have a body. He does not have a face. He does not have a soul. He is not anyone or anything, he simply is.

“And here at Dream HQ we call him Bob! Everyone give it up for our Dream Catcher of the Month!”

A woman standing to the right of the stage reached back and took out a glass jar. She carefully unscrewed the lid and in a few moments, a dark substance fogged up the air at the front of the auditorium.

The crowd erupted into cheers and applause. “You rock, Bob!” a woman standing at the very back of the packed room called out.

“Thank you for helping our Nightmare Disorder research department!” a man in glasses near the front agreed. He didn’t have to strain his voice as much for Bob to hear. “You’re helping out the people in the Real World so much.”

Bob seemed to bend and separate into a smiley face.

Before we go on, let me give you a bit more context. You must be confused.

For the longest time, the Real World and the Dream World were separated. The only path between worlds was when you drifted asleep. Only then was your mind free to ascend to the other dimension. But in 1964, legendary American neuroscientist Ron Marshall discovered a

way to cross between the two worlds without falling asleep. With a giant team and lots of government funding, Marshall and fellow researchers explored the Dream World. It was a strange place. Your mind had to be unconscious when in the Dream World, in order to see the things you saw. To the conscious mind, it was just empty, unfilled space.

But the most interesting thing Marshall and his team discovered were the creatures that resided in the Dream World. They didn't look anything like the organisms in the Real World. They were more like gases, and indeed, no one would have thought these black mists to be a form of life if they hadn't moved and communicated with them.

Marshall learned that these creatures were essential to dreams. With the help of a substance he nicknamed Dream Essence, they took the elements of the dreamer's mind to create the dreamscape. They then fed on the dreams they created. Once consumed, these dreams would never again occur in anyone's mind. The dreamscape would be lost, forever. He called them "Dream Catchers" because of that. Basically, Dream Catchers converted thoughts and feelings into food, and the asleep mind experiencing it was just a side effect. It was kind of like photosynthesis, he'd explained to the other scientific minds at the time. Like how plants took in water and carbon dioxide, then used sunlight to produce glucose to feed itself. The oxygen was just a byproduct.

Marshall's young daughter at the time was suffering from night terrors, and so he built Dream HQ, the first company to have its headquarters located in the Dream World, not the Real World. He had one goal in mind: eradicate nightmares.

The presenter on the dais cleared his throat, and the audience quieted down, the attention back to him. "Bob is just one of our many Dream Catchers. We award this prestigious title of *Dream Catcher of the Month* to the most hardworking Dream Catcher: the one who has caught the most traumatic dreams and nightmares of our people down in the Real World. And a

reminder - this work is perfectly humane. The partnership between humans and Dream Catchers has given this supernatural species a steady food supply, and brought their population to thriving numbers. Besides, Dream Catchers eat what they like, and they usually prefer nightmares. They have more substance and more detail.”

He turned to the screen behind, clicking a button on a remote in his hand. The screen lit up and went into focus, revealing a white slide, completely blank except for “BOB” written in Verdana 84-point font, capitalized just like that. “Bob has traveled over the seven continents, yes, even to the penguins in Antarctica, to catch ten thousand of the worst dreams of humanity and forever exterminate them from the mind of any being in the Real World. Bob here is extraordinary. His numbers are triple that of the previous record for nightmares caught in a month. Past catches include the tornado from the Strawberry Shortcake Wizard of Oz episode, giant anteaters terrorizing the neighborhood, and your hamster growing up to be a chinchilla.” The crowd nodded in sympathy for whoever had dreamed up that last one. It was unpleasant to even think about, really. “Now let’s look at some of Bob’s catches, shall we?”

He looked down at the remote in his hand, clicking another button. The slide on the screen changed. The crowd blinked, staring at the snapshot taken of the “nightmare” Bob had caught.

It was a sunflower field, with the yellow-petaled flowers stretching in a seemingly endless expanse. Golden sunlight shone down on the plants as two little girls ran around in frilly white dresses.

The presenter didn’t seem to notice. He just read what was on his script, barreling on like nothing was wrong. “Running through a sunflower field with your nieces you haven’t seen in three years.”

He paused and did a double take, turning to stare up at the screen. He let out a nervous chuckle, as a murmur rose up from the crowd. Confusion. Skepticism. He coughed into his fist. “This might be odd, since, normally, the dreams are little more... er... traumatic. But we don’t know what this specific dream meant to the dreamer,” he added, saving himself. “What seems perfectly innocuous to us could have had terrifying implications to them.”

The audience nodded in agreement, and he exhaled, feeling a wave of relief wash over him. He glanced over at Bob, who was beaming with pride, and even shifted to form a heart. This was strange, but at worst it was just a minor mistake. Even the most hardworking and most able of Dream Catchers had off days sometimes.

He clicked onto the next button. At first glance the image on the screen was dark and the presenter felt a huge weight lift off of his shoulders. This was what it was supposed to be like, finally. This was how all the previous Dream Catcher of the Month award ceremonies had gone. Then he glanced down at this script, then back up at the image, and that was when he really noticed what was going on the image.

“Fostering an adorable black kitten named *Anaconda*,” he said between gritted teeth, hating every word that exited his mouth.

The crowd fell silent. The silence across the room was suffocating and the presenter forced a nervous chuckle, just to break it. He hit the remote and looked around for some help, any help. “Something must have gone wrong in the processing machine, when it was sorting the dreams Bob caught. It displayed the wrong images and the wrong summaries. It must have. I mean, I can’t think of any other explanation.” He tripped over his words, turning redder and redder by the second.

Bob, meanwhile, showed no signs of concern.

His supervisor in the crowd, in that sleek black suit and a crisp blue-striped tie, standing by the door at the back of the room, gave him a stern look and signaled for him to keep going with the presentation.

The presenter was pretty sure that continuing on with the presentation would just make things worse, but if his supervisor was telling him to do that, then really, he had no choice.

“Don’t worry,” he assured the crowd, “this is either a machine failure or someone’s idea of a practical joke.” He started clicking through the presentation with increasing speed, but it kept getting worse and worse (or better and better? He wasn’t sure which). Every mosquito disappearing from the face of Earth. A honeymoon at a hotel that was, quite literally, *on the moon*. Going on a backpacking trip in Europe with your grandfather except he was the same age as you. Eventually he gave up on reading out the summaries. He just let the images speak for themselves.

The presenter looked over at Bob. He didn’t seem agitated or confused. Could he... no. No. “It can’t be,” he breathed. “There’s no way...”

He looked back to his supervisor, who was clenching his jaw. His fists were balled and he looked like a balloon about to explode. Oh, no. He was going to lose his job now, wasn’t he? What was wrong with Bob? Why had no one noticed his abnormal catches before now?

He knew why. They operated under the assumption that every Dream Catcher only liked the bad dreams, the gruesome ones, the devastating ones. The nightmares. That’s what Ron Marshall’s research had supported. But that wasn’t true at all, and Bob was living proof.

His supervisor was making his way through the crowd now, definitely to shut down the failed presentation. His face was red and he huffed with every step. The presenter’s breathing was heavy as he watched Bob, so innocent, so oblivious. He had no idea what he had done. What Dream HQ had done.

He could already hear it. “Look at these dreams!” his supervisor would yell into his ear after pulling him backstage. “Animals! Family! Love! Gorgeous views of the world - lost. All lost!”

But the presenter was a changed man. As he watched the other researchers rush Bob back into the jar, about to screw the lid on and retire him to the shelves in the storage unit, to remain there for an eternity, trapped and starved and sedated, he did something unimaginable.

He couldn't take this anymore. He couldn't watch them enslave a living, breathing creature, no different than any of them in the room. He had rationalized it in the past, telling himself that the Dream Catchers were monsters who enjoyed human suffering. Who feasted on it. Besides, it was a mutualistic relationship. The Dream Catchers were fed, and the humans could have more peace in their sleep. But it was a slippery slope, and Bob changed everything. It shook everything he thought he knew, everything he'd learned from a young age, first enrolling in the Dream HQ Academy. Because Bob was just like him, and his supervisor, and any other person in this room. He liked the same things as a human being. He took pleasure in the same things as a human being. He knew what love was. He knew what happiness was. So how come he should suffer for that?

The presenter didn't know what to believe now. All he knew was that this wasn't right.

He was just one man. He couldn't save the entire Dream Catcher species. Dream HQ would get rid of him before that: a disappearance under mysterious circumstances and a fat sum of money paid to his wife and kids, so no questions would ever really be asked.

But he could still save someone.

Looking between his red-faced supervisor and the researcher handling Bob, he took his chances, lunging to the side and snatching Bob's jar away from his coworker before she could take him to the basement. She looked up, startled.

“Security!” she shrieked.

He wasn't paying attention anymore. His focus was on the window, just a few meters away. He made it, and forced an old man out of his seat. He grabbed the wooden chair with one hand and slammed it against the glass, which shattered and broke into a million pieces.

The jar with Bob was still in the other hand. Carefully, he unscrewed the lid, so that it was still in place, but Bob could also leave anytime he wanted. He reached out, holding Bob over the edge. From this height, Bob would be going at a speed so high by the time he reached the border between the Worlds, that he'd be able to break straight through from the Dream World to the Real World. That was how Marshall and his band of scientists had done it all those years past, although it was the other way around.

And then Bob would be free.

The presenter took a deep breath, mustering up all the courage he'd ever had, and let go.

In just a few moments, the jar and Bob was nothing more than a tiny dot, far, far below.

No Dream Catcher had ever been to the Real World before - had ever made it to wakefulness. The presenter wasn't sure what he had unleashed. It might have been a curse. It might have been a blessing. It might end up doing nothing at all.

But he thought he had a faint idea, as security officers grabbed him by the arms and shoved him onto his knees, his chin pressed against the floor. Maybe mixing the Real World and the Dream World wouldn't be so bad after all. Bob might be in the Real World now, but he still carried Dream Essence with him, so he could still create dreamscapes. The kind of dreamscapes *he* loved. He would consume those dreams, sure, but free from the shackles of Dream HQ, he'd be creating so many dreamscapes every second that it wouldn't even matter. No one would ever have the same dreamscape by Bob, and that was perfectly fine. Not everyone had to have the same thoughts.

Maybe, instead of nightmares completely out of their control, people could, for the first time, dream about the things they loved, the things Bob loved, all while awake and in the Real World.

Not nightmares, the presenter thought. *Daydreams*.

The bus lurches to a stop in front of a red light, and I'm pulled out of my thoughts. I look over at the man sitting next to me. He's staring mindlessly out the window, his eyes blank and his arms resting on his backpack. He's here, of course, in the Real World, but he's not really in reality. I glance at everyone else on the bus: the man with the sunglasses, the boy in the leather jacket, the blonde girl with the braids. I wonder if any of them know why their mind can travel somewhere else during the ride, beyond the cramped city bus, beyond this stiflingly chaotic planet.

I wonder if any of them were there the day we began to daydream.