

TITLE: I work abroad at Japanese theme park. The virtual mascot is threatening me

[My girlfriend Aiko and I had rescued a missing child.](#)

You might think I deserved to feel like a hero, that I might be filled with pride or honor. But instead my chest tightened with a damp, foreboding heaviness.

The kid did not look right. His eyes were permanently open, and his lips were frozen in a sinister smile. I know it might've been some crazy symptom of paralysis, but seeing the boy like that just *felt so off*.

Aiko was worried about him too, so she joined his late night ambulance ride to keep an eye on his breathing.

That night I walked back to my accommodations at Aiko's aunt's cottage, and I wished the story would just wrap up there. Just a nice: *We were Heroes! End of Adventure!*

But it only got much worse.

You see, my phone started getting random notifications from the theme park app. The application called *Bakery Park Hunt*.

I was walking home, in the middle of sending encouraging texts to Aiko, trying to help her feel brave for her emergency ride, when my phone would bombard me with: *"Cinnamon nearby! Would you like to pick some?"*

I clicked on it, and immediately my phone entered camera mode, showcasing the dirt road at my feet. A cartoon stick of cinnamon walked into frame and it spoke with text below reading: 私に従ってください! (*Follow me please!*)

I didn't feel like playing the Pokemon Go knockoff, so I closed the application. But that didn't stop my phone from opening back up and pinging me ceaselessly.

"Cinnamon nearby!"

"Vanilla nearby!"

"Saffron (RARE) nearby!"

It was enough to kill the battery and end my communication with Aiko completely. So I did the only thing I could, I just snuck back into my room at the cottage, and went to sleep.

I woke up to the smell of green tea drifting through my room. Out of habit, I peered over to my left to see if Aiko was awake, but her bed was as empty and unmade as she left it.

On my phone I could see several messages from her:

1:04am - Remember 2 tell Nana

1:06am - Cant txt more. Guard.

1:32am - We're at helipad.

1:45am - The paramedic says the boy is stable! He is alive! I can't believe we actually saved someone, its like the movies. We did it. We saved his life!!

1:50am - I didn't want to be around that guard. So I took the paramedics offer and I'm taking the last seat in the helicopter. I can act as a placeholder guardian.

2:07am - I feel so much better being away from those guards! ε-(´·`) ㄿ-

2:08am - Tell Nana I will be at the general hospital in Shimado, I should be back in 1-2 days!

2:10am - I'm so sorry they put you in that holding cell. It's unfair you're in that jail. I hope they don't keep you there long. (◦´^`◦)

2:11am - But forget those stupid guards, they don't know what they're doing. Let me know when they let you go please! I hope they treat you okay (;_;

I wish I had a chance to respond to these messages. Aiko still thought the other guard had taken me under arrest. Thankfully that wasn't the case.

2:14am - WOW the view is beautiful from up here. I'm so sorry for dragging you through this. But it was worth it. We saved the boy. The medics say he's going to live. He's in some kind of shock, but he will live.

2:16am - I promise no more adventures like this again. I don't want you to get in trouble. I don't want the police to get involved.

2:20am - I didn't even think about how this could affect your visa. I'm so stupid stupid stupid stupid. What a mess. I am so sorry. I feel terrible. Please text me as soon as you're free. I know they probably took your phone away.

2:27am - It was my idea to save the boy. I'll tell them I forced you to help me. I'll make everything my fault.

3:06am - Made it to the hospital. They're giving me a room. I hope to hear from you soon.

6:05am - *The boy's family is here! And yes we were right, it is Kaito! This is crazy.*

6:07am - *Mom and son reunited (♡'·_·`♡)*

Attached was a photo of Kaito in a hospital bed, still hooked up to some kind of respirator. His mother was there, in tears, but clearly happy to be able to hold her boy's hand again. I don't normally gush over this kind of stuff, but it honestly warmed my heart.

6:10am - *Text me please. I'm so worried about everything.*

I did text her. I explained my phone had died, and that I wasn't in any jail. I told her that I was so happy she was OK, and that she could text me throughout the day. More than anything I wanted to hear her voice, so I said to call at any time.

That sunken feeling in my chest had lifted a little. *Maybe things weren't so bad.*

In the kitchen, Nana-obasan was already working on her sudoku. There was an egg and rice meal waiting on two different placemats at the table.

I remember it feeling very strange to have a morning alone with Aiko's aunt, especially after such a weird night. I didn't really know what I was allowed to share yet, so I did my best to keep my composure.

"Good morning, Nana," I said.

"Good morning." Her focus was on solving one of the columns.

I tried to word my 5th grade Japanese in a way that would explain what had happened without scaring or alarming Nana. Eventually, halfway through my breakfast I produced my declaration:

"Nana, you should know that last night, Aiko and I saved a child who had gone missing. We called for help and an ambulance took the child away. Aiko was a real hero and even accompanied the child on the helicopter ride. She is currently at Shimado hospital, and she says she will be back in 1-2 days."

I held up my phone to show her the texts, but quickly realized she couldn't read our English exchanges. So I lowered the phone and said. "She texted me all this in English. But you can call her if you want."

Nana lowered her tea and looked at me briefly above her reading glasses. I think she believed me, but she only really seemed to focus on the tail end of my speech.

“So, Aiko is coming back in a few days?”

“Yes.”

She went back to her sudoku. “Okay.”

Although Nana-obasan may not have appreciated what happened last night, I kept replaying events in my head in total disbelief. Focusing on the positive

Aiko's hunch proved true. We had saved a kid. *We were heroes.*

I avidly re-read all of Wakako's texts, imagining her type them. There was a flutter in my chest from the anticipation of hearing more from her.

I took a shortcut rounding the forest edge to get to work, I still had shift at Bakery Park today, and I felt it was critical not to show up late. I'm sure I would be asked a dozen questions about last night, and would have to explain Aiko's absence.

As I walked along the gravel road I tried to get my story straight. I would focus on the good news: Aiko and I had rescued a kid for god's sakes. Surely, that would render our trespassing meaningless? Did anyone actually care that we had snuck into the park late?

Then my phone chirped. “*Candy floss nearby! Would you like to pick some?*”

For fuck's sake. I clicked to close the app, and suddenly I was staring at a polygonal version of Bakery Park's premiere mascot.

It was **Mashumaro**, the marshmallow tanuki.

Just like in the Confection Showroom, half his face was missing. It's like his pixelated skin couldn't quite cover his skeleton wireframe. He was dancing in a field of cotton candy. His voice was garbled, yet loud enough to peak my phone's speaker.

ジェームス・ナカ従業員#604373、こんにちは!
(James Naka Employee #604373! Hello!)

I tried to turn down the volume on my phone, but the interface was frozen.

昨夜は遊んでくれてありがとう!
(Thanks for playing with me last night!)

This virtual mascot found a way to hijack my phone. None of my buttons worked. I freaked out a little. Before I could stop myself, I yelled: “Stop it!”

The virtual mascot's smile lengthened. He switched to English. "Stop what? Aren't you glad you saved little Kaito's soul? Hehehehehehe."

I was surrounded by nothing but trees and the asphalt beneath my feet. It was just me and this digital nightmare. I was irrationally afraid, but I covered it up with anger.

"Who the fuck are you?"

The tanuki wagged his rear toward the camera, grabbing cotton candy from the field. "That's a little rude. I don't talk to rude boys."

"Are you a hacker? Are you kidnapping kids at Bakery Park?"

Using the cotton candy as pom-poms, Mashumaro danced to the left and right, performing a little macarena. "You better not be so mean next time. Or else."

The app closed immediately, bringing up my home screen.

I tried to open it again, but all that loaded up was a benign-looking inventory. It said I had collected candy floss.

Jesus Christ what was that?

Thinking back, the biggest question mark for me was the Confection Showroom last night. We encountered a glitched version of Mashumaro there too, floating as a hologram.

I wondered if it was just a technical bug in the unused building. Maybe my face was recognized in one of the security cameras, which triggered some half-baked projection sequence that randomly grabbed orientation data. It could *almost* explain everything...

But it sure didn't explain how Mashumaro literally released a child from a locked washroom. Or how he was contacting me on my phone just now.

It seemed to me like there might be some *nefarious hacking* happening. Like some terrorist had been able to exploit software at Bakery Park to capture a kid in the first place. And now he was trying to manipulate me.

The thought chilled my bones.

And it was possible that this was the *same* hacker who was responsible for kidnapping the other two missing children. And if that was true, who knows how many future kids could still be at risk...

I decided I would have to tell the park staff my whole story. Everything. Children's lives could be at stake.

I typed out last night's events in English on my phone, converting it as coherently as possible into Japanese. I had taught how to assemble speeches and essays for two years, so it was about time I wrote my own.

Whether or not Mashumaro could still spy on my phone and see what I was doing --it didn't matter to me. Let him see. Let him be afraid. All this disorder had to stop.

I arrived at the entrance to Bakery Park just before my shift was supposed to start. A big, bowing animatronic of Mashumaro in an apron greeted me by the front gate. His eyes had the typical upside-down V's of anime joy.

^^

Normally, this bowing statue would pep me up a little, make me excited to start my day, but today it only reminded me of the corrupted doppelgänger on my phone and at the abandoned building. I got goosebumps.

Without wasting time, I bee-lined to the employee check-in station. I wanted to tell one of the supervisors I had important news regarding the Confection Showroom, I had a whole, concise speech written out.

As if reading my mind, one of the supervisors actually came to *me* after I punched in. "Naka-san, good morning. I want you to follow me. You're wanted at the head office."

All my training had been at the welcome center, so I had never actually been at the head office. Unlike the rest of the park with its pink, yellow or other candy-colored buildings, the corporate building was unapologetically beige, hidden behind trees.

The supervisor took me past the lobby, and we rode the elevator to the top floor, where we arrived at an empty reception area in front of a couple offices.

"Wait for a minute, I'll let them know you're here."

I sat as straight and still as possible. I was about to silence my phone, so I didn't get a ping during the meeting, when I received one more text from Aiko

9:12AM - *Something is wrong with Kaito. He's making weird guttural sounds that the doctors don't understand. And he's talking now. But in an old man voice. Like a really old man voice. He keeps saying "More will come. More will come." I'm really scared. The parents are angry with*

me, they think I did something to their son. They're not letting me leave.

Huh?

I quickly messaged back: *'Katio's parents aren't letting you leave? What do you mean?'*

A minute passed. Then another. I was glued to the screen, checking for at least a checkmark, a confirmation to see if Aiko had at least read my text. Nothing.

The door into the largest office opened. "Please come."

It was the tall guard from last night who ushered me in. The one who was supposed to put me in a 'holding place'. My gut contorted with so much stress that my intestines may have formed a balloon animal.

Instead of his night guard uniform, he was now wearing a brown suit and tie. He introduced himself as Keibiin (which literally translates to 'security guard.')

I was imagining a small desk and a window, something akin to a school principal's office, but instead I had walked into an enormous penthouse suite, with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the layout of Bakery Park. It smelled like coffee, cigarettes and a weaker version of the same sweet scent they pump throughout the whole park.

"Welcome to Satou-san's office," Keibiin gestured wide.

Mr. Satou stood facing one of the large windows, coffee cup in hand. He was a short man, wearing big horn-rimmed glasses, slacks, and a dress shirt. No tie.

I proceeded to bow, deeply and formally. I knew how important decorum was Japanese office culture.

Satou moved to go sit at his desk and dismissed my gesture as if it were unnecessary. He pointed at the many chairs close to him. "Come, come, please join me."

Myself and Keibiin followed. As I sat, I noticed the walls were overloaded with framed newspapers, magazines and articles all featuring glowing praise for Bakery Park. The majority looked quite old.

“So, I heard you were quite the savior last night, yes?” Mr. Satou asked, topping up his cup.

“Yes ... we ... we found a missing boy.” Is all I managed to say.

“Good. We want to make sure our guests feel safe on our island. Quite important don't you think?”

“Of course. Yes.”

“And when the guests feel safe on our island, they will keep coming back to our park, yes?”

“... Yes.”

He was keeping the Japanese slow and simple for my sake, which I appreciated. But it also made me feel like a four-year old.

“And it would be bad to start any unnecessary rumors, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Because we don't want to scare our guests, right?”

Keibiin turned in his seat to look at me. He reached into his jacket's breast pocket and pulled out some cigarettes. The corners of my phone dug into my thigh, as if the speech I had written was nudging me. I smoothed my pants.

“No. we don't want to scare our guests. That would be bad.”

A cigarette was lit. Mr. Satou continued.

“It is regrettable that we've also had children go missing on the island. But unfortunately, that's what we get with an untamed forest and free-spirited parents who let their little ones run wild. I've had my Bakery Park scoured many times for them.” Satou took a sip of his coffee, and briefly glanced out the window. “Obviously we would release a statement if a guest had been

confirmed missing at our park, but so far there simply has not been any evidence, has there, Keibiin?”

Keibiin took a slow drag. He spoke without exhaling the smoke. “None.”

“So Naka-san, tell me ...” Mr. Satou leaned forward on his desk. I could see two tiny, hunched versions of myself in his glasses. “... Where exactly did you find the missing child last night?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. My phone felt like it weighed twenty pounds.

“We found the boy crumpled on the ground. Unconscious I think ...”

It became very quiet; the AC unit had cycled off. I looked at my hands, at the stamp I was forcefully given last night at the back of my palm.

森
(Forest)

I could feel both of their eyes scanning me up and down. Searing through me.

“... He was in the middle of the forest.”

Keibiin exhaled a long plume of tobacco. Mr. Satou leaned back in his chair.

“Well thank goodness you went looking. Very noble of you. I can see you have the forest reserve’s official ink-brand. So that all adds up.”

“Yes it does.”

Satou lifted his cup and nodded back. “I had no clue I was employing such selfless heroes at my company. How long have you been working here?”

I looked up and pointed to myself. “Me? About two months.”

Satou drank deeply from his cup, emptying the whole thing. Then he circled the rim with his finger, playing with some thought. “Well Naka-san, you have proven to be very exemplary in your short time being here. I have a new position that would be very well suited to a Westerner actually. If it interests you.”

“What do you mean?”

Satou looked over at Keibiin and released a small laugh, “I mean exactly what I say.”

There was something in the Japanese I wasn’t understanding.

The small man reached into his desk drawer and pulled out some paper covered in kanji. He scribbled something along the bottom, then inscribed his signature.

“How would you like a promotion?”

In the elevator down I had trouble processing what just happened. Had I been bribed? *Is this what a bribe feels like?* I held onto what I assumed was my new contract and tried to make out the characters.

I could read ‘Bakery Park’ and ‘change of wage.’ It looked like they were going to pay me triple what I was making before. But was this good news? Or had I agreed to something terrible?

I didn’t know who I could trust at this park anymore. The person I needed to talk to was Aiko. I checked to see if she had responded to my message.

It was still unread.

My fingers started texting a follow up—if she didn’t respond by noon, I would try calling her on my break. Before I could hit send however, I got a notification from the Bakery Park app.

*“Molasses nearby! Would you like to —**SAVE ANOTHER SOUL?**”*

Once again, I was staring at a polygonal version of Mashumaro. His head hadn’t loaded properly, so it was just his smiling face floating above his torso. His body was backstroking through a well-rendered brown liquid, reflecting white light.

ジェームス・ナカ従業員#604373、こんにちは！
(James Naka Employee #604373! Hello!)

契約にご署名いただきありがとうございます。
(Thank you for signing the contract.)

“What?” I said in English first, to which Mashumaro didn’t react. So I repeated in Japanese.
“What are you talking about?”

The screen turned blinding white.

あなたは今、私のものです
(YOU BELONG TO ME NOW)

The whole elevator shook, and then--dropped abruptly.

I was tossed about a foot in the air, landing hard on my back.

The lights went out immediately.

I’m not normally claustrophobic, but in this situation I was hit with an intense fear that something was going to cave in on me. I curled hard.

A weird, familiar ‘chirping sound came out of my phone, stabbing and prying out some old memory that I couldn’t quite place.

After lying curled for a minute, I snatched the device and saw that the headless 3D model of Mashumaro was howling with laughter.

Then I placed the noise. It was the sound effect of a character laughing in Animal Crossing. A repetitive little chirp.

“Please. Tell me.” I asked in Japanese. “Who are you?”

愛子はとても良い助っ人でした。私たちも手伝ってくれないか？
(*Aiko was a very good helper. Will you help us too?*)

The mention of Aiko riveted me to the floor. I stared at the screen unblinking.

“What do you know about Aiko?”

私は彼女にもその子のことをメッセージを送りました。彼女は熱心に助けようとしていました
(*I messaged her about the kid too. She was so eager to help*)

My heart sank. Was *Mashumaro* the whole reason she wanted to go searching for the kid last night in the first place? Was she being manipulated on her phone?

“You messaged her last night?”

The tanuki dove into the shimmering lake of molasses. When he popped back up, his head had finally loaded.

私をフォローしてください、そしてあなたは見るでしょう。ふふふ
(Follow me and you will see. Hee hee hee)

Mashumaro swam up to a beachy shore, where he sat up and blew a kiss at the camera. The app closed, and briefly flashed: *You have collected molasses!*

I tried to swipe back to Mashumaro, but the scene had ended. The app just showed me a virtual jar of molasses next to cotton candy.

The lights turned on again, and the elevator resumed its descent. I stood up, feeling all the aches across my back. A goose egg formed at the back of my head.

When the door opened, I ran out--practically knocking a custodian to the ground.

Thinking back at it now, this was probably when I truly had my first panic attack. I remember that feeling of adrenaline in my throat and lungs. That shaking in my legs.

I ran until I was at the main thoroughfare of Bakery Park, away from all the buildings, away from anything that could trap me. Even though I was surrounded by guests flowing towards the attractions, I had never felt so alone in my life.

Aiko was my entire anchor. And she wasn't here to guide me. It was just me on this foreign island where I couldn't properly understand the language or dialect.

And a fucking mascot was sending me ominous threats in the theme park app.

I sat at a bench, held my head, and just breathed.

I was expected to work today, and pretend everything was normal, but everything did *not* feel normal. It's like I had opened a Pandora's box that only I was privy to, and the troubles of the world were going to swallow me up.

Over the next ten minutes I remember running through all my options to calm myself down.

1.) I could leave.

All of my stuff was at Nana-obasan's house, and if I wanted to be a dick, I could just grab it and go. But... I couldn't do that. How could I leave without Aiko returning? I didn't even know where Aiko truly was at this point. I at least wanted to make sure Aiko was safely back home.

And even if I wanted to ghost everyone like an asshole, I would have to book a ferry, and then book somewhere to stay. The whole reason I was working at this theme park was because I was broke and couldn't really afford to do those things...

In a very real sense I was kind of trapped here.

And so I settled on the next option.

2.) Push through.

The only way forward was through. If I could at least work through the rest of today, maybe I'd get some news from Aiko. Maybe she'd finally call me. Hearing her voice would cool everything down about a thousand percent. And when she came back, I'm sure she would explain away the creepy guards and intense CEO as some kind of cultural misunderstanding. There's no way, this is all as scary as I'm making it out to be right?

So that's what I told myself. Aiko would call me soon, and we could figure this out together.

After gathering enough fortitude, I marched back to employee check-in, chanting a mantra in my head: *Aiko will call me. I will get through this. Aiko will call me. I will get through this.*

When I arrived to grab my name-tag, my supervisor greeted me kindly. He explained that he had already been notified of my promotion.

My new role would be extremely busy and there was a lot to explain, which was music to my ears because I just wanted to occupy myself with anything.

"Good. I'm glad you're excited because I've got some fun news," he took my keycard and enabled some new permissions. "You're going to be working at our brand new attraction today. For the first time ever ... we are opening the Confection Showroom!"

"You mean, the abandoned building?"

"Not anymore," he smiled. "You're going to be using the Bakery Park App, and help kids assemble their cakes!"