

Part 3

You pull out your box of matches and walk through the room, lighting the candles in the following order: **12, 1, 2, 4, 3, 11, 10, 9, 7, 6, 8, 5.**

The hearth ignites into a roaring flame, and you feel the floor rumbling. Suddenly, all of the flames in both the candle and the hearth go out then quickly ignite again. You are suddenly standing in a room that looks identical to the one you were just in, but now Santa is lying in the bed. Mrs. Claus sits at his side, holding his hand. She looks at Tom, eyes shimmering with gladness as she sees an old friend. Her eyes move to look at you, and she looks puzzled.

“Tom, I trust you, but... why is there a human here?” she asks. Her voice is much smoother and more stable than you expected from her appearance. If you closed your eyes, you’d probably think she was in her 30s.

Tom looks at you and nudges his head, as if telling you to introduce yourself.

“I’m Michael,” you say.

“Michael figured out how to reach you,” Tom says. “None of us elves could.”

Santa smiles, hearing this.

“That’s part of why we hired you, Michael. We knew you’d—”

A coughing fit interrupts his speech. Mrs. Claus turns to look back at him, and Tom looks as if he is close to tears.

“What do you want us to do, Mrs. Claus?” Tom asks with the utmost care and love in his voice.

“Have a seat, please.”

She gestures at the two chairs. You and Tom sit.

“Why is Mr. Claus sick?” Tom asks quietly.

Mrs. Claus sighs. “Santa is a magical being. He uses his magic to bring joy and gifts to millions of children every year...”

She sighs again. "But he also uses his magic to work on other things. Santa has been managing keeping all of the world's clocks synched for a very long time. Once a day, at 7 AM, he sends out a magical signal to keep all of the clocks running in sync. Because of all of the advances in technology, there are an unprecedented number of clocks around the world. He's been tired after managing them most days recently, but yesterday took too much out of him. He wasn't able to send out today's, as Christmas and the sheer number of timekeeping devices just overwhelmed him."

"Why is it Mr. Claus's responsibility?" you ask.

"He visits millions of children every year on the same night. He has the best sense of time of any being that has ever lived."

Santa croaks. "Not anymore, I'm afraid. Michael, you managed to get here with Tom. There is a way to fix all of this. Come here, please."

You do.

"What do you know about how the world thinks time is kept?" he asks, slowly and carefully, trying not to cough again.

"I was taught that the NIST keeps track of time using a caesium clock," you say.

Santa nods. "Yes, and they have all of the radio equipment set up for it, too. They could reasonably be handling the time syncs. Alas, I have been stubborn and unwilling to let them control it. My lack of trust in you humans is becoming my downfall."

He coughs again.

"We can give them control," Santa says. "But I need a human to do it."

"What do you need me to do, Mr. Claus?" you ask.

"Elves are funny creatures," he says. "They perceive time differently than you humans. How long have you been working for us, Tom?" Santa asks.

Tom perks up. "About 150 years, sir."

Santa laughs. "Yes, ever since Christmas was declared a federal holiday in the United States. The point is, we need a human's perception of time."

“What do you mean?” you ask.

Santa smiles. “Take hold of my hand, please.”

“Wait,” you say.

“Yes?”

“What will this do to me?”

Santa smiles. “You are not in any danger, I can tell you that.”

“One more thing. Why... why were the notes in Georgia? Like—”

He grabs your hand. You see a twinkle run through Santa’s eyes, and you are suddenly unable to speak. You feel your eyes closing as the world shifts and morphs around you.

Through the miniscule holes in the blinds that the strings pass through, the sun shines in at such an angle that it perfectly strikes you in the eyes, waking you via the sudden shock of bright red observed through your eyelids. You sigh and roll over to glance at the alarm clock on your bedside table. It reads 6:59 AM.

Funny, you think. Well, I guess that’s fine, since my alarm clock—

Your alarm clock’s vociferous beeping cuts through your thoughts. You reach over and turn it off. You laugh at the unlikely timing. You decide to forgive the sun for waking you and go about your morning, getting dressed and wondering what your new job has in store for you. The first-day jitters don’t really seem to be affecting you much, though—you’re confident in your capability to perform the tasks asked of you despite not knowing exactly what those will be.