

Part 2

You type **5463** into the keypad and turn the handle. The door opens. Inside the room sits a very frazzled-looking individual.

“Nice to meet you, Michael, I’m Tom,” they say, extending a hand to be shaken.

You shake his hand. “Likewise,” you say.

“Have a seat in the chair next to me, if you will,” he says. His voice is calm and secure, belying his true state indicated by his tired eyes and disheveled appearance. He looks deceptively young, maybe late 20s, but his eyes have the tiredness of someone older. Of course, they’re also slightly bloodshot, and you suspect he’s been here all night subsisting on office coffee. His face is flushed, he has a bit of scruff, and he’s wearing a beanie. You take the seat.

“How did you know I was Michael?” you ask.

He chuckles. “We haven’t hired anyone new in quite a while.” You silently feel relieved that you didn’t need your ID after all. “Look, Michael, I know you’re new, but today is a weird day, so we’re going to have to throw you into the deep end a little bit. How much do you know about what our company does?”

“You’re a software development company, right?”

Tom nods. “Yes, but what kind of software do we make? It’s okay if you don’t know.”

“Based on the name of the company, I figure you create software that helps other businesses accomplish certain things on time?”

Tom chuckles. “Yes, in a sense. We do a lot of programming with time zones, leap years, leap seconds, etc. This company was started because no one likes programming software implementations of time zones, so we kind of just do that for everyone for their own software.”

“I see,” you say. “So why is everything crazy today?”

Tom visibly tenses up. “Well, considering we do programming for time-based events, we like to run on an extremely tight schedule. You’ve noticed the clocks by now, right?”
You nod.

“Follow me,” Tom says.

You both arise, exit the room, and walk further down the hallway. There’s a large black door at the end of the hallway that looks as if it’s made of cast iron. Printed in red type are the words “EXECUTIVES ONLY,” but someone has scribbled out “IV” and replaced it with “ABL.” Tom pulls his ID from his pocket and swipes it. You hear a few loud clicks, as if multiple latches inside the door are unlocking. Tom grabs the handle and pulls the door open. It’s probably six inches thick.

You step into a meeting room. On the wall is a large digital clock. It reads **6:59:59.999**. Tom grimaces.

“This clock is synched to the true clock.” Tom says.

“What do you mean?”

“Essentially every clock in the world uses our software. We send out radio signals once per day that ensure the clocks are synched.”

“I thought that the clocks were synched from the NIST based on a group of caesium atoms.”

Tom laughs. “Yeah, that’s just misdirection because it sounds cool. Imagine if the world knew that it was just a few nerds in a hotel in Seattle controlling the time.”

“Okay, so why is the clock stuck?”

“That’s what we need your help figuring out. It’s very important that we solve this very, very soon.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best, but I’m not familiar with your codebase.”

Tom laughs again. “This’ll make more sense once you meet someone else. Follow me.”

You duck into a hallway and then an elevator with Tom. He pushes a button called “N.”

“We’re going to the Nth floor, where N is defined by what?” you ask.

Tom laughs some more. “You’ll see.”

The elevator doors open, and you're greeted with a bright white light, staggering you momentarily. As your eyes adjust, you realize that it's... snow?? As you step out of the elevator to follow Tom, a blast of cold air hits you, once again staggering you. Tom suddenly looks panicked.

"Oh, right, shoot, I'm sorry, I forgot, stay right there!"

You watch as he sprints off into the cold. Not twenty seconds later he returns with a very thick coat.

"Sorry about that, I promise this coat isn't made with any animal fur or anything like that, it's all synthetic, the shoes are too."

"T-thanks," you chatter. He helps you put them on, and you feel an immediate warming effect almost unnaturally quickly.

"You don't need any more layers in the cold?" you ask.

"It'll all make sense in a second," Tom says.

He guides you through the snow until you reach a small cottage. Out front is a barbershop pole. Again, you feel as if you're lucidly dreaming.

As you enter the cottage, you step into a very comfortable-looking living room. It's cozy, warm, and lit by a fireplace, some candles, and the residual light from a few computer displays. It's decorated very festively, with a few decorated evergreen trees, some holly and wreaths, and a lot of family photographs and Christmas cards. A number of people, probably twenty-ish, are sitting at a row of computers at a meeting table rapidly typing away. Other people are sitting in soft bean-bag chairs, sipping from mugs and reading books. The person at the closest computer notices Tom and turns.

"Hey Tom, glad you're back! Who's that you got with you?"

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

"I'm Michael."

"Michael! Yes, wonderful, we're glad to have you here. Today's kind of a busy day, y'know, the clocks and all," the person says. "I'm Sandy, I've worked here just about since the beginning, like Tom."

She reaches out and shakes your hand.

“Tom, are you taking him to see the big man?” Sandy asks, excitedly. The whole room of people suddenly all stop what they’re doing to look at Tom. There is an uncomfortably long pause.

“I’m going to try,” Tom says. The whole room erupts in cheers. A loud coughing fit from elsewhere in the cottage cuts through the celebration, and a pensive look flickers across the faces of everyone there. The celebration is cut short, and everyone returns to what they were doing. A distinct sadness lingers in the air.

“Well, get to it then,” Sandy says, reflecting the sudden melancholy.

Tom nods and leads you into a back room in the cottage. It’s dark. Tom takes a flashlight out, turns it on, and points it around. It’s a cozy room, with bookshelves, two well-loved pleather chairs, two wardrobes, and a very large bed. Around the room on the various bookshelves and tables sit a number of candles. All of the furniture seems to face the wall to the right of the entrance, in which sits a hearth. On its mantel is a typed note, once again in Georgia. Literally nausea inducing. *What a terrible font*, you think. *No one should ever use it*. Alas, someone has used it again.

ONLY FOR EMERGENCIES

If you cannot enter despite authorization, it means Santa cannot

Wait, wait, wait. What?! Santa?! you think. You must’ve made some facial expression, as Tom begins laughing. He takes off his beanie, revealing ears with points on the ends.

“Yep, Santa. Keep reading!”

Your head spins as you realize the implications of this truth. You have so many questions.

How does he visit all of those kids? What about all of the Christmas movies and books? How is he here, in a hotel in Seattle? What was all of the cold about? Was the barbershop pole out front the North Pole? That doesn’t make any sense, we’re not even close to there. How does he have elves working for him? Are there other fantastic species alive? you think, and then force yourself to snap out of it and continue reading.

ONLY FOR EMERGENCIES

If you cannot enter despite authorization, it means Santa cannot automatically handle security at the moment. The entrance is now controlled via a puzzle lock. If you are staff, and it is urgent, please unlock it and enter.

You glance around the room, not seeing a lock. You look at Tom, puzzled. He shrugs.

“We don’t know where it is either,” Tom says, dejectedly.

“You weren’t trained on how to find it and use it in case of something like this?” you reply.

“Santa’s a magical being,” Tom says. “We didn’t ever think that he’d—” he pauses, then sighs. “We didn’t ever think that he’d get sick.”

“Oh,” you say, realizing the potential gravity of the situation. “It’s my first day here, why am I the one being tasked with doing this?”

“You’re the only human here. Did you not notice the ears of everyone in the other room?”

“I guess I didn’t.”

“That’s fair, there have been lots of other new things to focus on.”

“So why is my humanity important to this?”

“Well, despite being programmers, none of us are very competent puzzlers. Part of the reason we hired you is because we’ve seen some of the amazing puzzle work you’ve done over the years, and we knew that in case something were to happen to Santa, you’d be capable of opening this lock.”

“But why me, why a human? Why not another...” You pause, realizing you’re not sure whether ‘elf’ is offensive.

“Another elf? Partly because you were easy to find, partly because Santa and Mrs. Claus wanted our staff to be more diverse.”

“And you trust me with the knowledge that your CEO is Santa and the rest of the staff are elves?”

Another coughing fit reverberates through the room. Tom’s eyes reflect a distinct sadness.

“We have no other choice,” he says.

Sandy pokes her head in.

“Any luck yet?” she says, with the same tinge of melancholy.

“Not yet,” Tom says. Sandy nods and steps away.

You begin looking around the dark room with the assistance of Tom’s flashlight. You open drawers and rummage for what feels like ages. The shuffling is occasionally interrupted by large coughing fits. All you find is a box of matches.

Dejectedly, you retrace your steps, looking closer at everything in case you missed something. You spot a book on the shelf that strikes you as strange. Along that row, the authors are sorted alphabetically by last name, except for this book. The author is just listed as ‘Cutlass Ana,’ and you burst out laughing before pulling the book from the shelf.

“What? What did you find?” Tom says, confused but excited.

“Two things,” you say. “One, this book’s author, Cutlass Ana, is an anagram of Santa Claus!”

Tom gasps.

“And the other?” he asks.

“The author’s name is written in Georgia!”

“Is that a language?”

“No, it’s a font! It’s a horrible, disgusting font. Every note I’ve read so far today has been in that font!”

Tom laughs with you.

“What’s the book called?” he asks, still laughing but feeling confident.

“It’s called **12↑**,” you say. You look up as the arrow directs. Immediately above the book on top of the shelf is a candle. You counted twelve candles while searching around the room. You turn and observe the other candles. They seem to be spaced roughly equidistantly around the room.

You pull the book from the shelf and open it.

(Continued on next page)

Walk a path starting at this candle and ending at another. Below is a map for you to trace out the path before you take it, should you wish. The candles are the numbers in the circles. Light those candles in the order the path must visit them, including the beginning and end of the path. Every instance of a number must be passed through the same way (including direction of entrance and exit). No two different numbers may be passed through the same way, not including directionality (for instance, a number entered from the east and exited to the north is not the same as a number entered from the north and exited to the east). You must visit all cells in the below map and on your path. Your path must not intersect itself, you must not retrace your steps, and you must not visit any candles twice.

①				②				2				④
				9				③				
		1				7				6		
⑫	11		11		11	6	11		11		11	⑤
	1										2	
⑪	6		8		8	8	3		3		4	⑥
		2				11				11		
				⑨				⑧				
⑩				10				2				⑦

If you're the type to solve online, I've recently digitized this map for ease of interaction.
No one carries pens with them everywhere anymore.

<http://tinyurl.com/ytt6wlk8>

(Move on to part 3 once solved)