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I have lost SSH access to my server: the four usual causes

VPS & Servers

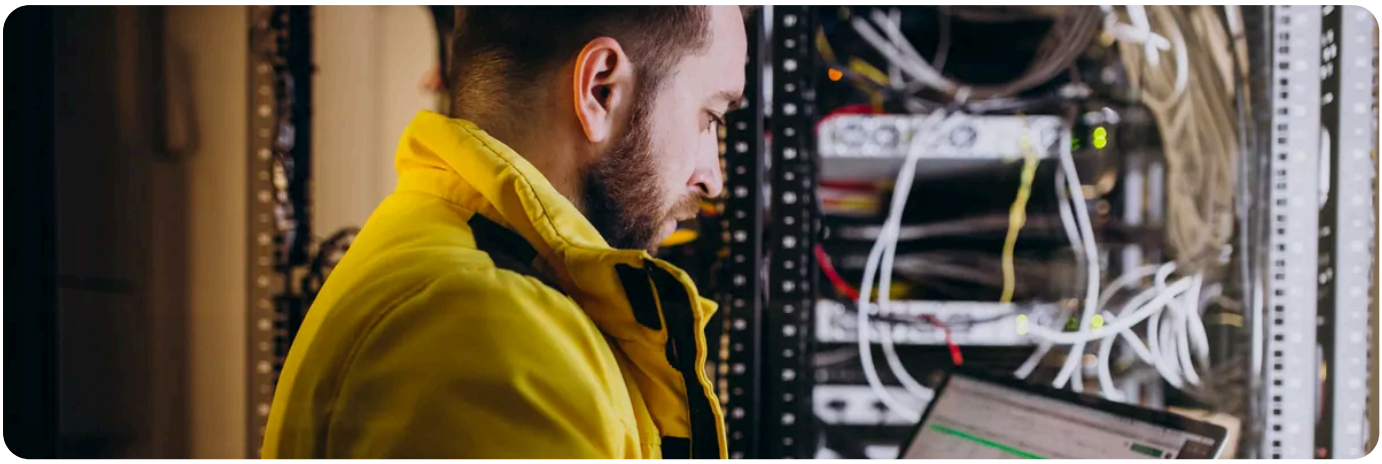
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I have lost SSH access to my server: the four usual causes

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The server answers *ping*, but SSH gives *Connection timed out* or *Permission denied*. In the overwhelming majority of cases the server is fine - what happened is that you locked yourself out.

These are the four causes we see, in order of frequency, and what to do about each.

1. You enabled the firewall and forgot port 22

By far the most common. A `ufw enable` with no rule for SSH closes the very door you were coming in through. The symptom is clear: ping answers, port 22 times out.

> **Before enabling any firewall.**
> Allow the SSH port first, enable second: `ufw allow 22/tcp` and only then `ufw enable`. And confirm in a **second connection** while the first is still open - if something goes wrong, you still have a way back.

2. You disabled passwords and lost the key

Setting `PasswordAuthentication no` leaves you depending on the private key. Lose the key and SSH answers *Permission denied (publickey)*, and no password will help.

There is no way to recover a lost private key - that is the whole point of it. The route is to get in outside SSH, through the console, and either restore password login or install a new key.

3. *fail2ban* or the firewall banned your address

If you got the password wrong several times, or someone else in the same office did, your public address may be banned. The tell-tale sign is that it works on another network - mobile data, say - and not on yours. See **how to unblock your IP address** and **why your IP gets blocked by the firewall**.

4. You changed the port and did not write it down

An SSH moved to another port times out on 22 exactly as if it were closed. If you moved it, try the new port. If you inherited the server from someone else, you will have to find out through the console.

How you get in when SSH will not let you

All the cases above are solved the same way: **a console that does not go through the network**. It is the equivalent of walking up to the server with a keyboard and a screen.

1. Open a request stating **the plan name, the server domain, and what you did just before losing access**. That last part saves hours - "I enabled UFW" leads somewhere different from "I lost my key".
2. We give you console access to the server, or go in ourselves if the plan is managed.
3. Through the console you undo the firewall rule, re-enable passwords or install a new key. The server does not need reinstalling.

> **Do not ask for a reinstall as a first resort.**
> Reinstalling wipes everything on it. Losing access almost never justifies losing the data - and there is almost always a way through the console. Only after that fails does **reinstalling the operating system** come into it.

What is ours and what is yours

On an **unmanaged** server, what runs inside it is your responsibility: we do not hold your passwords or your keys, and we do not go in unless you ask. What we do is give you the console, check the network, and confirm the server is running on our side.

On a **managed** server, we handle it. The difference is in **managed or unmanaged VPS: which to choose and who does what** and the general line in **how far our support goes**.

So it does not happen again

Habit	Why
Keep the private key in two places	One copy on the computer and one off it. A lost key cannot be recovered
Leave passwords on until the key is tested	Only disable password authentication after you have successfully signed in with the key
Test in a second window	Before closing the session where you touched SSH or the firewall, open another and confirm you can get in
Write the port down, if you change it	Put it where you keep the credentials, not in your head

And if what you have is a different error - memory, disk, reboots - see **common VPS and Cloud errors**.

NEED A HAND?

Locked out of your own server?

Ask us for the console →

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