

Head Designer Elizabeth Turnée pushed open the door to the server room to be greeted by a mass of congratulatory cheering. Having only been quickly messaged about a “major Network event,” she was clueless as to the reason she had been called all the way to HQ at such a late hour. She had told her daughter, who was dawdling on the computer, not to let anyone in the house and there was still some lasagna left in the fridge if you need anything to eat, I’ll have my cellphone on me. She blinked in cervine astonishment as she was patted and hugged warmly, lauded for a success of which she was unaware.

“Congratulations!” said intern Avery Hall, for maybe the third time. He hadn’t been sure he’d been heard the first two, so he was making sure she heard this time as he took her hand and shook it firmly.

“Uhm,” said Elizabeth, disoriented. She was struggling to feel like she was being heard, too, under the noise that was all directed at her. “What happened?”

“We’ve hit over ten thousand users in-Network!” Avery told her, absolutely glowing. “What a milestone!”

“Ten thousand?”

“Ten thousand,” came the confirmation.

Elizabeth pushed at her scalp in amazement. “The highest we’ve ever had at once is five. How are the servers handling this?”

“Who knows?” That was the server operator, who happened to be within earshot. “But they’re running just fine. Better than usual, even. We haven’t got a lag report all night.”

“What are they all doing?” Elizabeth asked quietly, of no one in particular. Avery heard her.

“What’s who doing?” he asked, curious.

“The users.” She turned to look at him, brow furrowed. “Why are there so many?”

“We’ve got record attendance and you’re wondering *why*?”

“Well, yes. There might be a good reason.” She edged through the crowd to get to one of the server computers. Codes and commands were tumbling down its screen like digital jumbled streaks of a reversed waterfall. Nothing unusual. “I want to know what it is.”

“That’s the server,” said the server operator, who had followed her along with Hall.

“I know what *this* is,” sighed Elizabeth, exasperated. “I mean the reason so many users are online.”

“Here’s what I know,” the server operator, whose name was Ivonne, offered. “It’s just like any other big event you’ve set up before. Users get excited for these things, they all get online at once.”

Elizabeth's throat was dry. "Big event?"

"Sure," Ivonne soothed. "You had one planned for tonight, remember?"

"No," Elizabeth breathed, "I don't."

Ivonne was quiet. Avery spoke up after a moment's hesitation. "...You sure?"

He was too quiet, and Elizabeth turned to shout at everyone else in the room to be quiet. The room fell silent and she returned her attention to him. "What?" she asked, curtly.

"I, uh, I asked if you were sure."

She glared at him for a moment, then turned to the crowd. "Katherine, access the user files and check for hackers. Ivonne, look for any traces of malicious software. And I'll need you to send an alert through the chats on every line. World, general, local, whisper. Sign it with my username. Tell everyone to get offline. Their files could all get corrupted."

The room was suddenly much more busy and purposeful than it had been, and the employees had all returned to their desks and had gotten to work. Briefly. Then a new phrase filled the air.

"I can't get online."

"The server's locked me out, did you send us the right password this morning?"

"The database says I don't have the clearance for this!"

"Elizabeth, I can't get in."

That was Ivonne. Elizabeth leaned over her chair and peered at the codestream, which was now shooting up the screen much faster than before. It was blinking red. "What do you mean, you can't get in?"

Ivonne put in the password to show her. The password was rejected, and the server text began to move faster and blinked with even more fervor. "I can't change anything, put in any codes. I can't send that message. I can't even access the game from the executable, it says the server is down. But you can see that it obviously isn't." She gestured helplessly at the screen.

Elizabeth's hands clenched on the back of the chair until her knuckles turned white. "Get Val on the phone. Now." She turned to address the room. "Someone get Professor Alexander on the phone! We need to get to our users!"

An errant thought suddenly tumbled out of her brain to wedge itself in both her heart and stomach. She had to blink before she was able to realize it fully. Sam.

That was her daughter, who played the game regularly, who had been on the computer when Elizabeth left home.

She scrambled for her own phone and called her daughter's cell. There was no reply. She called the home phone. The only one to answer was the processed voice of the answering machine.

Elizabeth Turnée began to choke on her own fear without truly realizing why.