Protection

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PC's upgraded to Vista, but the honeymoon may be over. NOTE: This is going to make a bunch more sense if you've seen the most recent ad. If you haven't, http://apple.com/getamac/ads *. It's the one called "Security".*

1 - Protection

PC had a reputation for being a little cryptic sometimes. Especially when he wasn't feeling well. It wasn't entirely his fault; sometimes "an unknown error has occurred" was the best explanation he could manage. But with Mac, he was different. Not completely different (or they might have been able to skip the counseling) but still much more straightforward than people gave him credit for. He didn't mind coming right out and saying what was on his mind, for better or for worse; if he didn't want to talk about something, he was more the type to just stay quiet than to hint and imply.

So Mac wasn't sure what to think of the IM he'd just gotten.

Mac. You really don't get viruses?

It was weird mostly because it was out of the blue. He hadn't seen PC in a few days – when Vista's new security features had started rearing their ugly, overprotective heads, it'd quickly become clear they weren't going to be able to have a decent time together. If they couldn't even hang out uninterrupted, the chances of any networking were basically shot to hell. When neither of them could put up with it any more, PC had apologized for the whole mess, and that had been it. This was the first he'd heard from him since. Weird conversation starter, he had to say. Still, that implied a conversation, and Mac had been starting to miss those.

no viruses, buddy. why? are you okay?

After all, PC knew that already. Which set off a little chain of concerns in Mac's mind. Why would he ask? Had something happened to his memory during the upgrade? Why bring it up now?

Come over. Please. But only if you're sure about that.

Visions of PC, absurdly disguised and trying valiantly to protect Mac from the same attacks he was hiding from, drifted to the forefront of his mind. Was he sick, then? Trying to make sure Mac didn't catch it too? Still, this...this wasn't like PC. And the idea of him getting a virus after all that loathsome new security was both disheartening and a little hard to believe. Mac was starting to worry.
He grabbed his coat.

"PC?" he called, knocking again. "It's Mac...you okay in there?" The brief quiet that answered him made his current background worrying spike; when PC answered, he sounded shaky, far-off.

"Mac?" Silence again, then, "How did we meet?"

At first, it seemed like a confirmation of his earlier fears – something had happened to PC's memory. Could be as minimal as a loose connection or as serious as a failing drive---
Wait, no. That wasn't it. That was a security question, he realized. A passcode. Mac would know the answer, but hardly anyone else would.

"Our dads were friends. Can I come in now?"

That must have been enough for PC, because he heard the tentative clicks of a few locks and firewalls being undone, and the door opened just enough for him to squeeze in.

"Oh, *geez*, PC...what happened?"

The sneakers were gone. And the sweater vest, and the new glasses, and the widgets. He still looked a little slimmer than he had pre-Vista, but that sense of being healthy and confident had disappeared.

"'Classic' skin," he mumbled in reply, which explained the first few things. It didn't explain why he looked like he hadn't slept in days, or why he'd looked twice as anxious till Mac closed the door behind himself. The overattentive security guy was nowhere in sight, which could have meant any one of a number of things, none of which had Mac feeling great right then. His place was even more meticulously neat than usual – good god, had PC alphabetized his entire bookshelf? – but Mac's attention stayed on PC as he coaxed him over to the couch to sit down. Something was seriously off here. He stayed quiet, trusting PC wouldn't have asked him over if he didn't plan to talk about it, and sure enough,

"I turned off the security."

"I noticed," Mac replied carefully, waiting for the 'but' or 'and' that had to be coming. PC had only even known about that level of protection for a few days; either something had gone wrong with it to make him do so, or having done so was what had him in this state. Neither option made a lot of sense just yet. PC was fidgeting, in a small but distracting way that made Mac need to look elsewhere for a moment; doing so brought his eyes to the tall stack of well-ordered files towering over PC's desk. Work files, if he recognized the extensions correctly. That might have been the most troubling thing yet. "PC...you haven't been in to work?" The guy was like the postal service – no rain or sleet or Trojan would get in the way of his job. And even if he couldn't get to the office, for some reason, "you could have sent those in anyways, right? Is something wrong with your network connections?"

"They're fine." He didn't look up. "I've had them disabled, except for when I instant-messaged you."

Well. PC had just admitted to basically turning himself into a hermit for the past few days. Which was not something PC generally did. Not on purpose, anyways. Mac was getting a little freaked, but he hid it well, moving a hand to settle over one of PC's and still that fidgeting.

"Why?"

"Because I'm vulnerable," PC answered, and everything from the tone of his voice to the minimalistic interface he'd reverted to confirmed that feeling. Mac was instantly sympathetic. He always felt bad when PC caught something, or had to fend off whatever malware was going around, largely because feeling bad was all he *could* do – it wasn't something he'd ever had to go through himself. He was glad, because it looked hellish, but his heart went out to his friend on that account.

"Hey, hey," he countered, trying to be positive. PC brooded easily, but he wasn't usually hard to cheer up, if Mac could appeal to his sense of logic. "So...you turned off the new security. So? You never had it

before and you were mostly fine. C'mon, it's no reason to shut yourself off from the world---"

"Do you know what's *out there*?" PC interjected, and Mac actually got a chill at how *serious* he seemed about that. He'd seen PC paranoid before. He'd seen him overreact and get defensive. It'd never been this bad. "There are malicious scripts *everywhere*," he continued. "Every networkevery web page, every download, anything could just...there's so *much* of it"

"Easy..." Mac cut him off from his rambling then, eyes darting down to his hand – there was no network in place, obviously, but PC was squeezing his fingers like he expected Mac to disappear at any moment. Gently, Mac squeezed back. "PC...there's no more bad stuff out there than there was before you upgraded," he pointed out. PC had to realize that, right?

"I just never *knew*."

The enhanced security had been...well, really enhanced. It had protected him from *everything*. (It'd nearly hit Mac in the face when he made the mistake of trying to steal a kiss from PC in its presence.) Before the upgrade, PC had known about all of the big threats, the ones he really had to look out for, and he'd been steadily learning how to fend them off. Then Vista came along, and suddenly *everything* was the enemy. Downloads from the office. Software updates. Mac. It'd been more than he could take.

At first, turning it off had been an improvement. He could go five minutes without the refrain of "cancel or allow?" again (boy, had that gotten old fast). He could get his files as he needed them without having to confirm that no, Spreadsheet1.xls was not out to get him. He could *breathe* again.

The relief hadn't lasted. Vista was great. Vista had great security. No need for anything to supplement it, that had been the reasoning. So that was all he had. He'd lost plenty of unnecessary things in the extended overhaul – what he'd discovered as soon as he disabled Vista's own protection was that he'd also lost anything he could have turned to as a replacement. No Norton. No Spybot. He'd checked every subfolder in Program Files, certain that there had to be *something*, that he wasn't completely on his own beyond that which had come with the new OS. There wasn't.

It'd been okay for a little while. He'd been nervous, but everything seemed to be okay. Until he got an email from someone he was pretty sure he knew from work, an email with an attachment, and he hadn't been able to download it. There was no Vista security telling him what was inside, checking to make sure it was what it claimed to be, and that scared him. The constant watch had been irritating, but the complete lack of any protection was terrifying.
He'd closed down his connection without ever opening the email.

It wasn't something either of them could have seen coming. PC had been so *happy* with the new upgrade. He looked great, he was feeling better – for the first day or two, before the security features were up and running, Mac had been the lucky one to help PC test out his newly-installed processor. For...stamina and things. It was quite the little honeymoon. The PC he saw now, a painful combination of exhausted and hyper-alert, couldn't have been a farther cry from the one of a few days ago. Moving closer on the couch, he brought his free hand to join the other, protectively wrapped around PC's.

"If you're worried, can't you just download---"

"I can't," interrupted PC. It took Mac a moment, but then he got it.

"You don't want to open a network connection at all like this," he realized with a sigh, and PC shook his head in confirmation, visibly a little humiliated. It occurred to Mac then that it couldn't have been easy for him to ask for Mac's company while he was feeling like this, and he smoothed his thumb over the back of PC's hand, trying to provide some comfort while he thought. PC was in a Catch-22. He didn't have any protective software, so he needed to get online and download some – but he couldn't get online because he'd be exposing himself to all the things he craved protection from. It really didn't seem fair. PC slumped a little; every time he'd started to go to sleep, his worries had jolted him back awake, and it was starting to take its toll.

"I could get it for you," Mac finally said. PC looked up. "I could download something...anything you wanted. Spyware tracker, virus protection, whatever...It'd be safe," he promised, in response to the clear apprehension on PC's face. "Even if the sites I got the stuff from were infected, I wouldn't download those parts. I could just transfer the files over to you. Heck...if you're still worried, I could even open them up in Parallels and make sure they're legit."

The logic was sound (and the risk Mac was willing to put himself at by stepping into PC's virtual shoes for a while didn't go unnoticed). Mac could be his protection, for just a little while, till he had what he needed to take care of himself. It was definitely a better plan than staying locked in his house, disconnected indefinitely, and he nodded.

"If...if you don't mind. I'd really appreciate that," he murmured quietly, feeling a little better for the first time in days. Mac nodded, and took back one hand to push himself to his feet. He only got halfway there, though; PC had gripped his hand tighter, and he stopped, looking over.

"Wait." He sounded a little breathless, the way he had when Mac had first come to the door. "Don't go."

"I can't get the programs from here---"

"I know," he answered quickly, casting Mac a somewhat pained look. "I know, but...can you get them later? For now, just..." He trailed off, but Mac got it, and had that confirmed when sitting back down made PC visibly calmer.

"You need to rest," he pointed out gently, hand reclaiming its earlier place atop PC's. "If I stay here, will you be able to sleep for a while?" He could understand it, to some degree. Personally, Mac preferred to be alone when things weren't right. Needed his space. But PC needed to be connected to something, *anything*, and in his current state, Mac was the most he could deal with. It wasn't a bad role to fill, and PC's hesitant nod in response cemented it. "Okay," he answered, hands guiding PC to move with him. A little rearranging had PC slouched against him, head tucked into the curve of his shoulder.

"Am I being pathetic right now?" he asked with a sigh, after a moment's quiet. He sounded resigned to the idea, but Mac shifted and set his arm around PC's shoulders, keeping him close.

"I wouldn't say 'pathetic'. You're stressed. And you've got good reason to be." That was apparently good enough for PC, because he gave a muted nod and closed his eyes. Mac was just starting to think

he'd fallen asleep when he spoke up again, words half-muffled against Mac's t-shirt.

"Could we...connect for a while?"

It was more or less the last thing Mac could have expected him to ask right then, but he had always been good at adapting to surprises, and put that to use then.

"I...Sure, yeah, of course. Lemme just turn off AirPort---" (It wasn't like he was picking anything up – PC's place wasn't wireless – but just to be safe)

"You don't have to," PC answered. That response actually bumped the previous comment out of its 'least likely thing to say' spot and took it for itself. Mac was a little mystified.

"Seriously? I figured...I mean, the odds of you getting anything through me are miniscule, but---"

"It'll be fine." The fact that PC sounded a little confident about that, more confident than he had at any point since Mac had shown up, was enough to make him stop and listen.

"I know I don't give you a lot of credit----"
"PC, it's fine..."
"---but I feel safe with you."

He'd been starting to get used to the unexpected statements, but that one shut Mac up for a good minute before he remembered that he was supposed to be doing something right about then. It wasn't the notion that he was safe that had been surprising to hear; he knew that. It was one of the reasons other devices flocked to him: for all his nonchalance and easy-going personality, he was amazingly reliable. What had thrown him off was hearing it from PC. PC saw him as a bit of a slacker. As immature. As too laid-back.
And, apparently, as safe.

It felt like sort of a responsibility, having that kind of trust in him. But fortunately, this was something he knew he could do. Nothing was going to get to PC through the two of them being networked, and he nodded, hand meshing with the one it still held. It was almost startling how suddenly the connection took hold – he realized then that turning off Vista's built-ins really had turned off everything, that even the small subtle firewalls he'd usually run up against were gone, and somehow that new knowledge made him feel...protective. Sure, this wasn't technically protecting PC. That would happen when he went to get those programs for him. But for the moment, there still seemed to be some value in just staying quietly connected to him, cheek tipped against his hair.

PC apparently thought so too, because with a distinct whirr he fell asleep just like that, hand going limp in Mac's and eyes sliding closed. Mac could have done the same, but he had a weird tendency to disconnect when he fell asleep. No sense risking that. Besides, even for someone like him – he liked to be doing things, and as many as possible at once – it wasn't so bad to just sit there and keep watch over PC. After all, that seemed to mean something to him. *Mac* seemed to mean something to him. Which was something to think about, just not right then. Maybe later, when he went home (or to the nearest Wi-Fi caf) to grab PC's downloads. Or the next time he couldn't sleep. For the time being, he loaded up iTunes at its quietest volume, closed his eyes, and stayed close.