

Unknown Sender

Drax Henton stared at the text message for a long time. If it had been an e-mail he would have deleted it almost immediately, for he got lots of junk e-mails. He didn't get many junk texts, though. For that matter, he didn't get many texts period. His circle of friends was, shall we say, "select" and not much given to texting. Or at least, not to Drax. And this text said it was from an "Unknown Sender."

Drax was almost 100% certain the text was a scam. Or at best, a hoax. There was a tiny bit of doubt in his mind, though, and that doubt kept him from deleting the text. After all, it didn't ask for money. It seemed like a personal note to Drax. And best of all, it praised his book.

Loved your book.

The problem was, Drax's book "The Cyborgs of Euclid" hadn't been published. Drax wasn't even certain any of the publishers he'd sent it to had bothered to read it. Their rejection notes certainly didn't sound as though they had. Drax didn't think any of them would bother to pull a prank on him. He'd only told a few close friends about his book, and they knew it was too important to him to joke about. The few jokesters he knew weren't close friends and didn't know about the book. And even then, they didn't play jokes as much as they kidded him about trying to get people to call him by his pen name "Drax Henton." Of course, they didn't have burned-out hippie parents who named them "Aquarius" in a fit of 70's transcendentalism. Worse still, they hadn't bothered to hallucinate a matching last name so he was stuck with the family name. Aquarius Birnbaum. That was not a name you would associate with an epic novel about a desperate mission through time to save the universe from an army of cyborgs. No, a book like that could only come from a name like Drax Henton.

Drax's curiosity finally got the better of him and he decided to reply. Obviously the sender already knew his phone number, so what harm could there be in replying?

Who are you, and how do you
know about my book? It hasn't
been published.

Drax stared at his phone for a while waiting for a reply, but none came. He finally gave up and returned to reading a well-worn flyer for "SciFiCon - The Science Fiction Writers and Publishers Conference." He had saved almost enough money to attend this year. There must be some way he could get the rest. All he needed was an audience with the right publisher. . .

By the following afternoon Drax had completely forgotten about the mysterious text. Then he received a reply that surprised him even more than the first text.

What year is it?

Surely this was a joke, and they were carrying things too far. He almost ignored the text completely, but the opportunity for sarcasm was too tempting.

It's 2014 here. What year is it in your universe?

He didn't expect a reply to this note and he wasn't disappointed. At least, not until the next day.

Sorry. Bad Calc. Book will be pub 2017.

What made this joker so sure his book was going to be published in 2017? And what the hell did he mean by "Bad calc?" Drax was beginning to get irritated.

How do you know? And what's this bad calc business?

He fired his reply off immediately, but once again he had to wait until the following day for a reply.

Calculations off. Sent text too far back.

Too far back? What did that mean? The only thing Drax could think of was that someone was trying to get him to believe they were texting him from the future. He'd call their bluff!

Are you saying you're texting me from the future? Prove it!

He was not surprised that this mysterious texter didn't reply to that message! He'd written the whole thing off as a bad joke. The next day, however, he received the most surprising text of the series.

You crush on 3rd gr teacher. Your autobiography.

This was not at all what Drax had expected. If someone from the future were trying to contact him, wouldn't they tell him about some earth-shattering event that was going to happen in a few days? Not a trivial event that had happened years ago. OK, so he did have a crush on his 3rd grade teacher. It's not unusual for boys that age to become infatuated with

their teacher, especially if she's young and pretty like Miss Allison was. It's true he had never told anyone about it. Maybe someone guessed it at the time? Unlikely. Drax didn't have many friends in 3rd grade, and he seriously doubted that any of them would have noticed, let alone remembered. Was it just a lucky guess by the texter? Possibly, but it would be a long shot. Not only would they have to have guessed correctly, the crush would have had to have been memorable enough that Drax would still remember it over 20 years later.

The more Drax thought about it, the more brilliant this clue seemed to be. Sure, predicting an earth-shattering event would be more dramatic, but they don't happen every day. If someone in the distant future were flipping through history books looking for an event to describe, they might only find things that happened months or years in the future. If they used that as proof, they'd have to wait months or years for the event to occur so they could be proven correct. On the other hand, if the person they were writing to was going to write an autobiography at some future date, and that autobiography included details the person had never told to anyone, all they'd have to do would be to describe the details and the target would know immediately that it was true. Of course, Drax hadn't written an autobiography, but if his book was to be published and he was to become famous enough so that someone in the future knew who he was, then maybe he would write an autobiography. And that's the type of intimate detail people were always putting in their autobiography. "I never told this to anyone, but . . ."

Drax sat back and smiled at the cleverness of this message. His smile faded when the significance of his conclusion hit him. If this was in fact a clever way to prove that the person sending the texts was from the future, then he was in fact communicating with someone in the future. Someone who knew what was going to happen, and who knew what Drax was going to do years before he did it. Excitedly, he picked up his phone and typed a message:

So time travel is possible!

Almost as soon as he sent the message he began to regret it. For whatever reason, the person in the future only sent one text per day, and very short ones at that. He'd just wasted a day sending a question when he already knew the answer: "Yes." Time travel must be possible or he couldn't receive the texts. He wondered what kind of an elaborate machine they had to send messages back through time. But he didn't have any such machine. How were they able to receive his messages? Once again he began to suspect this was an elaborate hoax. He typed out a second message on his phone:

How are you able to
receive my messages?

“Let’s see them try to explain that one” he thought to himself. Then he turned back to his book. Writing it had been fun, but editing, correcting, improving, and rewriting it over and over was hard work. This was at least the fifth time he had rewritten the chapter where Grindle had constructed a time machine out of computer parts he found in Nubinia’s house, and it still wasn’t right. It seemed forced and awkward. He had to make it flow, make it more believable. He struggled with that chapter until long after midnight.

The next day he received an unexpected bonus. The answers to both his questions in one message.

EM Wave yes. Matter no.
NSA Archive.

So it was possible to send electromagnetic waves back through time, but not matter. Drax guessed it was because electromagnetic waves had no mass. Contrary to what Einstein had predicted, they could go faster than the speed of light, which meant they could go back through time. Sadly, though, this meant that it would not be possible to send people back through time. That was bad news for his book. More to the point, it meant that it would never be possible for him to travel through time, which was something he often dreamed about.

The second part of the message was chilling. The press was full of rumors about the government spying in on people’s private conversations and recording every phone call, e-mail, and text message ever sent. Drax had always dismissed these rumors as the raving of right-wing fear mongers. Sure the government wiretapped the bad guys. Probably without court orders, too. But that was only a concern for terrorists and Mafia dons. They couldn’t possibly listen in on every conversation. And why would they even want to spy on him? But if these messages from the future were correct, and he was finding less and less reason to doubt them, then even now the government was listening in, recording every word he said and every comma he texted. Filing it away so that some unknown researcher hundreds of years from now could look at a file and see what he had just typed. And did that mean the researcher knew what he was going to type tomorrow, and the day after? And if he already knew what Drax was going to type tomorrow, did that mean that Drax didn’t really have any choice about what to write? Was he predestined to write what others had already read? But they hadn’t already read it. They were in the future. But one of them was writing to him now. . . As a kid Drax had joined his parents in phone calls to his older brother, who was stationed in Japan. On the other side of the International Date Line. When they talked to his brother it was already tomorrow in Japan, but his brother didn’t know any more about the future than Drax did. It was all very confusing. This was more confusing.

Drax consciously turned away from this line of reasoning. There was no way to know the answer, and thinking about depressed him. Drax also put the NSA out of his mind. He couldn't control what the government did or did not do. He would have to content himself with being one of the millions of mindless sheep who happily followed the shepherd because he provided protection from the wolves, regardless of whether the path they followed led to the pasture or the slaughterhouse. One thing Drax could control, however, was his next question. Or at least, he thought he was controlling it. Just to be certain, he deliberately misspelled a word:

Why do you send only
one message per day?

It pleased him to see the message classified as "sent" even with the misspelling. Of course, that pleasure soon turned into doubt. Did he really change the spelling of that word on a whim? Or was it already misspelled in that future NSA database? Drax felt trapped by history. Trapped by an intrusive government. Trapped by his own inability to distinguish free will from a future that was already cast in stone.

Drax was still feeling depressed the following day. While that day's message didn't cheer him up, it did put his worries in perspective.

Much power. Can't
spike. Police.

Apparently it took a lot of power to send a text message back through time. Was the government of the future so intrusive that it monitored everyone's power consumption, looking for a spike or other unusual activity? Why were the police involved? Was it illegal to send text messages in the future? Drax's mental picture of his correspondent changed dramatically. Before he had envisioned some sort of a gleaming, spacious laboratory with voice activated computers generating holographic displays. Now he pictured a cold, dark, windowless room. A thin scientist wrapped in multiple layers of clothing, glancing furtively over his shoulder while he tended to a home-made power unit. Scrimping on the power he was allotted for heat and light so he could save enough power over a day's time to send a brief text without registering a spike on the electric meter. And why? Was it illegal to send text messages? Drax felt he had to know.

Is it illegal for you
to send text messages?

The following day he got a reply that thrilled him.

Only time text.

Might change history.

So it was possible to change history! Drax wasn't constrained to only do what was "written." He had control of his own destiny. But if that was the case, why was this person texting him? In addition to the risk of getting arrested, was the danger of changing history that serious? What could someone in the future want from him that would make it worth the risk?

Then why are you
texting me?

The reply was far from satisfactory.

To prove it's possible.

So did that mean Drax was simply chosen at random? If the sender was proving a theory then Drax was presumably the first person to ever receive a message from the future. While that was an honor of sorts, he wanted to believe there was some reason why this future scientist had chosen him out of the millions of other possible recipients. His next question was more specific:

But why me?

The answer was more than he could possibly have hoped for.

Your book inspired
my research.

He wasn't chosen at random! Not only was his book going to be published, it would serve as an inspiration to the man who invented time messaging! It wasn't quite time travel, but it was a beginning. And he was the one who made it all possible.

When the excitement of realizing he would help shape the future died down the full import of what was happening finally dawned on him. He was actually communicating with someone from the future. Someone who could look back and see the results of decisions we had yet to make. Someone who knew which decisions would bring peace and prosperity to the entire world, and which actions would plunge it into warfare or environmental disaster. He felt guilty for wasting so much time on his petty questions and worrying about his personal impact on history when he should have been worrying about the world at large. He decided to immediately change the direction of his questions.

Any advice on what I
should be doing to ensure
a better future?

He stared at his phone for a long time after he sent that text, even though he knew he wouldn't get an answer until the following day. He spent the rest of the day wondering what astounding revelations the next day would bring. What could mankind do today to make the world of tomorrow a Nirvana? The answer was hardly what he expected.

Cortech Cybernetics.

What did that mean? Was this the key to the future? Something that should be encouraged? Or was it a threat to mankind? Most of all, what was it? He rushed to his computer and searched "Cortech Cybernetics." There wasn't much on it. It seemed to be a small start-up company in California that made animated props for movies. Hardly the kind of thing you would expect to benefit or to destroy the world. It didn't appear they were using ground-shaking technology, but it was hard to tell. Most of the references he did find focused on the company's financial health (or rumored lack thereof) and barely mentioned the product. Apparently the company had only recently gone public, and shortly afterward their biggest customer dropped them. Their stock plummeted and it wasn't clear how much longer they could stay in business.

Suddenly Drax realized his future correspondent had misunderstood his question. This wasn't an answer to ensure a better future for mankind. It was an answer to ensure a better future for Drax Henton. It was a stock tip! His first instinct was to immediately send another text and clear up the misunderstanding, but as long as he was sitting at his computer it wouldn't hurt to check the stock price of Cortech Cybernetics. It was at its all-time low. It couldn't stay there for long. Either it would make a dramatic recovery or it would go under. If the company went bankrupt he doubted anyone in the future would even know about it. Still, even at the all-time low Drax couldn't afford to buy much stock. Unless . . . there was the money he had been saving to go to Sci-Fi-Con. He didn't yet have enough saved to make the trip, and he wasn't certain he would be able to save enough. But if he invested it in Cortech Cybernetics . . .

Drax made up his mind. It was amazing how easy it was to buy stock with online trading. In what only seemed like a few minutes he had invested his life savings in 117 shares of Cortech Cybernetics. Now it was time to turn to things that really mattered.

I meant advice to
improve the future
of all mankind.

To his great disappointment, he didn't get a reply the next day. Nor the day after that, nor any day at all. Drax never heard from his future correspondent again. He worried that maybe he had gotten caught sending these illegal time texts. Or maybe something had gone wrong with his apparatus. Of course, it could just be that he had proven his theory and had no reason to continue taking the risk. More disturbing still, all the texts Drax had received from this mysterious agent disappeared from his phone. Were the time police trying to erase all evidence of this breach? Or was a savvy time-texter just covering his tracks? Drax would never know.

On the positive side, his shares of Cortech Cybernetics took off like a rocket! The company prepared animated creatures for a science fiction blockbuster, and soon every major studio in Hollywood was beating a path to its door. The company used its profits from the movie business to open a consumer electronics line. Originally it sold "cyberpets," clever replicas of the creatures it created for movies, but it soon branched into electronic games and video communicators. Drax found himself, if not rich beyond his wildest dreams, at least comfortable beyond all reasonable expectations.

One of the first things Drax did with his newfound wealth was to enroll in some physics courses at a nearby college. After all, if he was going to influence future researchers, he had better know what he was talking about. He soon realized why he had been having such problems writing about the creation of a time machine. He was trying to describe the impossible. You couldn't send people through time because their mass would become infinite, but you could send electromagnetic waves through time. They had no mass. Einstein said these waves could never go faster than the speed of light, but some physicists were challenging that. It only took a slight imagination to see that if they could go faster than the speed of light, perhaps they could also go faster than time. . .

It took almost three years for Drax to finally finish his book, and he had to self-publish to make certain it was in print by the predicted date of 2017. During those years he also changed his name to Paul Birnham. He renamed his book to "The Time Message." It was no longer about a handsome college student and a stunningly beautiful physicist who traveled through time to save the universe. It was now about a learned college professor who sent messages back through time to prevent an environmental disaster. It was not exactly a bestseller, but it did garner a few words of praise in academic circles. Drax (or Paul) spent the rest of his life enjoying the fruits of his stock purchase and working on his autobiography, blissfully unaware that the insipid theme of his revised book utterly failed to inspire any future researchers and set the science of time travel back over 200 years.