

## The Blue Mantis #10 - "Vrax Attacks"

Written by Steven Bland

A tiny rocket ship was streaking through space and entering our solar system. A magnetic field formed around the miniscule ship, thereby attracting particles of space debris, turning it into a meteor, which soon entered our atmosphere. It was soon heading for a disused parking lot on Seventh Avenue.

On Earth, on a Tuesday night, the Blue Mantis was nearby, flying through the city and wrapping up his nightly patrol.

Everything looks quiet. So far, I haven't seen a single supervillain, or even an ordinary criminal, the insectoid superhero thought. I'd better head for home. It *is* a school night, after all.

Suddenly, he heard the tiny disguised rocket ship crash-landing in the disused parking lot on Seventh Avenue. The loud sound of the crash startled the Blue Mantis.

A loud crash, he wondered. And it came from Seventh Avenue, not far from here.

Home will have to wait a while. I'd better check out that crash, he thought as he flew off to the disused parking lot on Seventh Avenue to investigate.

Soon, the Blue Mantis arrived at his destination and descended to get a better look. Upon landing, he saw the tiny rocket ship half-buried inside the lot and surrounded by the small scattered space debris that had camouflaged it.

The insectoid superhero picked up the tiny ship to examine it. Out came its only occupant, a living artificially intelligent robot mantis that was black and green.

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Well, I'll be, the Blue Mantis thought as he looked at the small metallic alien creature in his hands. It's a tiny alien robot mantis.

The tiny alien robot insect quickly camouflaged itself.

Where'd it go? The superhero wondered.

The robot mantis quickly and stealthily crawled up to the nape of the Blue Mantis's neck and attached itself to him.

Oh, well. I'd better get going or I'm gonna be in big trouble with Mom, the Blue Mantis thought as he flew off.

Soon, the Blue Mantis arrived at his two-story house in a Brooklyn neighborhood and entered through his bedroom window, folding his insectoid wings back into his shoulder blades.

So far, so good, he thought. Mom didn't hear me come in.

After changing out of his costume and into his pajamas, Wesley quickly got into bed and went to sleep, unaware of the tiny camouflaged alien robot mantis that had attached itself to him

The next morning, Wesley woke up, feeling great.

I feel like my body has just been supercharged with a fantastic energy I've never had before, he thought as he did an impressive somersault. After getting dressed, Wesley left his room and quickly headed downstairs.

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"Hi, Mom," Wesley said enthusiastically.

"My. You're certainly chipper today," a happy Helen Walker told her son. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"No time, now," Wesley said as he headed for the door. "Gotta get to the bus on time."

"What about your lunch?" Helen asked.

"I'll buy it at the cafeteria," Wesley answered as he quickly went out the door.

Later, Wesley's bus arrived at the grounds of Ditko High. Upon getting off the bus, Wesley saw a few of his friends and prepared to walk toward them. Suddenly, Mike Griffin showed up and blocked his path.

"Hey, freak," Mike said. "Let's *rumble!* Right *here* and *now!*"

"I *don't* want to fight you, Mike," Wesley warned.

"Too bad, freak! 'Cause I wanna fight you," Mike said as he threw the first punch.

With a flash of anger in his eyes, Wesley quickly stopped the punch by simply grabbing Mike's fist with one hand.

"Wha - - ?" A surprised Mike asked.

Then, Wesley started squeezing the fist, slightly crushing Mike's knuckles.

"GYAAHHH," Mike screamed in agony.

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With his other hand, Wesley delivered a punch that was powerful enough to send Mike flying thirty feet away and into a nearby brick wall.

Running toward Mike, Wesley approached him in a matter of seconds, grabbed his throat with both hands, and started to squeeze.

"You're dead meat," Wesley told Mike.

Suddenly, Carly Connors arrived.

"WESLEY, STOP," she commanded.

Upon hearing Carly's plea, Wesley stopped himself and regained his senses.

What am I doing? He wondered. With my mantis-strength, I could've *killed* Mike!

A remorseful Wesley proffered his hand to Mike.

"I'm sorry, Mike," Wesley said. "Let me help you up."

"Forget it, freak," Mike said, refusing Wesley's aid. "I don't want - - or need - - any help from you! *Got it?!*"

Mike picked himself back up and stormed off.

"Don't mind, Mike, Wesley, He's being a jerk - - as *usual*," Carly said as she put her hand on his shoulder. "C'mon. Let's get to class."

Carly and Wesley walked off together and headed toward the entrance to Ditko High.

Ever since I first got my mantis powers, I've always tried to use them responsibly, a concerned Wesley thought. Am I becoming corrupted by my own power?

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Elsewhere, at Swan Labs, the Deliverer was inside with Dean Cavill and Amy Hatcher who were conducting tests on the hero's strength with their hydraulic press.

"That's seventy-five tons of hydraulic pressure and you're handling it with no problem," an impressed Dr. Hatcher said.

"Now, we're going to raise the pressure another twenty-five percent," Dr. Cavill said, before doing exactly that.

Soon, the Deliverer was withstanding one hundred tons of hydraulic pressure with no difficulty.

"Obviously, being frozen in suspended animation hasn't diminished your superhuman strength in any way," Dr. Cavill said.

Soon, a newscast is on the overhead television.

"I am here at Hightower Tech with its chairman Aron Hightower," the newscaster said. "I understand you have a special announcement?"

"Yes. With the arrival of superheroes like the Techni-Crusader, the Sprintress, the Blue Mantis, and Gale-Force, we started seeing more and more superheroes and superheroines coming every day, most recently, the return of the Deliverer and the debut of the new superhero team, Freedom's Foursome," Hightower said. "The latter superheroes have inspired me to create my own superhero team. I want to assure everyone that my new superhero team will not compete with Freedom's Foursome. Instead, my new superhero team will aid them."

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"I will hold a membership drive for the superhero team I will create," Hightower announced. "All superheroes and superheroines will be encouraged to participate. I will provide the headquarters, which will have state-of-the-art equipment, which I will also provide.. I will even personally finance the team myself."

"What do you think?" Dr. Cavill asked. "Do you plan to join Mr. Hightower's new team of superheroes?"

"Aron Hightower is leading us into a very promising future. His many technological innovations are already making the world a better place. He is a good man," the caped superhero said. "It would be an honor for me to join his superhero team."

Meanwhile, at Ditko High, Wesley was in his science class. As he was working on his assignment, the tiny artificially intelligent robot mantis that grafted itself to Wesley's neck was affecting his mind. His head was pounding.

"AARRGGHH," Wesley cried out in pain.

"Wesley, are you all right?" The concerned teacher asked.

I've got to get out of here, he thought. I've got to get away.

Wesley didn't answer. Quickly rising up from and leaving his desk, he ran outside.

"WESLEY," the teacher called out. Wesley still didn't answer.

Once he was outside the building,

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I need some air. Maybe flying around the city for a few minutes will help me clear my head, Wesley thought as he headed for a nearby alley. Entering it, Wesley quickly changed into his Blue Mantis costume.

Before Wesley could don his mask, the tiny robot mantis generated an armored black and green exo-skeleton that completely covered his body from head to toe.

Under the control of the robot mantis and the armored exo-skeleton, the Blue Mantis flew off and headed toward the United Nations Building.

Upon arriving at his destination, the armored and possessed Blue Mantis burst through the wall and entered, leaving a large hole behind him. Once inside, he threatened the delegates.

"Who are you?" One of the delegates asked.

"I AM VRAX, YOUR KING," the possessed Blue Mantis exclaimed. "BOW BEFORE ME!"

Guards quickly arrived on the scene and aimed their weapons at the possessed superhero.

"We don't think so! And we don't take kindly to people who barge in and make demands," one of the guards said. "*Leave now! Before we make you!*"

"Fools! I am Vrax the First," Vrax said. "I don't *take* orders! I *give* them!"

The guards fired their guns at Vrax but the bullets bounce off him.

"You cannot destroy me," Vrax said.

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"But I can destroy you," the possessed Blue Mantis said as he quickly seized and crushed the guards' weapons and then overpowered the guards themselves. All of the action was captured on video by bystanders inside the building with smartphones. The videos were quickly shared with the twenty-four hour news channels.

Soon, the videos reached the televisions inside Swan Labs, where they were watched by the Deliverer, and Doctors Cavill and Hatcher.

"Incredible. The Blue Mantis toppled the UN guards like they were nothing more than toy soldiers," Dr. Cavill said.

Dr. Hatcher turned toward the Deliverer.

"You've just worked with him, haven't you?" Dr. Hatcher asked. "How could he have changed so much, so fast? And, why did he call himself 'Vrax'?"

"I don't know," the Deliverer answered.

"But I intend to find out," he added as he left the Swan Labs building.

Once he was outside, the Deliverer flew off.

Arriving at the United Nations building in minutes, the Deliverer approached and hovered outside before the hole made by the possessed Blue Mantis and saw him continuing to attack more of the guards.

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"VRAX," the Deliverer called out, attracting the possessed hero's attention.

"Would you care to step outside?" The Deliverer asked.

"Have you come to kneel before me?" Vrax asked.

"No," said the Deliverer. "I've come to stop you, and to save my friend."

"I'll grind you into dust, interloper," said the possessed Blue Mantis as he leaped out through the hole and toward the Deliverer. Both plummeted toward the ground, leaving a crater. All of the innocent bystanders who were on the ground below them quickly fled.

The superpowered combatants both recovered from the impact and got back on their feet.

"Let him go, Vrax," the Deliverer demanded

"NEVER," Vrax said as he stomped the ground, creating a massive shockwave which shook the caped superhero.

"Unnhh," the Deliverer moaned.

The caped superhero looked at his erstwhile ally and noticed something strange.

That black and green armored exoskeleton he's wearing in place of his blue and yellow costume, he thought. It appears to be alien.

The Deliverer then used his vision powers to scan the Blue Mantis's new costume and found something startling.

In fact, it's a robotic alien symbiote, the caped hero thought. And it's controlling him.

"Blue Mantis, please," the Deliverer pleaded. "I don't want to hurt you."

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"But *I* want to hurt *you*," the possessed Blue Mantis said.

"AND THE NAME IS *V*RAX! I AM YOUR EXECUTIONER," he exclaimed as he swung the scythes on his arms with incredible speed and strength, creating a razor wind that was so powerful that it cut the Deliverer like a knife.

"YEEEEOOOWWWW," the Deliverer cried out in pain, but the wound quickly healed.

"I'm not talking to you, Vrax," the caped superhero told his possessed ally. "I'm talking to the Blue Mantis. He is still somewhere inside of you!"

"Mantis, listen to me. We're friends - - allies," the Deliverer said. "We've worked well together a while ago. You've helped me defeat my old enemy Lou Cypher and thwarted his plans to take over the world."

"SILENCE," Vrax shouted. The Deliverer ignored him.

"You're being possessed by an alien symbiote! It's controlling you, forcing you to do terrible things," said the caped superhero. "You must fight it!"

From within the black and green armored exoskeleton that Vrax had formed around him, the possessed Blue Mantis started to fight back, but the symbiote's influence was too great.

"I - I can't," the struggling Blue Mantis said.

"You *can*," the Deliverer told his possessed ally. "You *must*."

"I - I'm not strong enough," the Blue Mantis said.

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"Yes, you *are*," the Deliverer said. "You're *stronger* than you think. Trust me."

"Don't give up," he added. "*Fight!*"

Spurred on by the Deliverer's words, the Blue Mantis renewed his inner struggle with the robotic symbiote that had possessed him.

"YEEAAARRGGHH," the Blue Mantis cried out as he knelt on the ground. The struggle was agonizing, but, through sheer force of will, the insectoid hero managed to prevail and unsheathe himself of the green and black armor which shifted back into the tiny black and green artificially intelligent robot mantis that had attached itself to him the night before.

Vrax came off the back of the Blue Mantis's neck and fell to the ground beside him. Before the tiny robotic creature could camouflage itself and escape, the Deliverer, with his enhanced vision and lightning-fast reflexes, plucked him.

"Whew," a relieved Blue Mantis sighed, before he realized something.

"Uh oh. I'm not wearing my mask," he said.

"Did anyone see my face?" He asked as he put his mask back on. "Did I hurt anyone?"

"No, my friend. No one saw your face," the Deliverer assured him. "And everyone cleared out before our battle."

"When this tiny robotic creature influenced you, it had you calling yourself 'Vrax', which must be its name," the Deliverer said before the tiny robotic alien mantis to his ally. "Vrax also acted as a symbiote, enhancing your powers and granting you new ones."

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"I found that creature in a tiny rocket ship that crash-landed in a disused parking lot on Seventh Avenue," the Blue Mantis said. "I picked up the ship to get a closer look at it. When I did, Vrax came out, but he camouflaged himself. He crawled up to the back of my neck and attached himself, without me knowing it."

"It's alright. You have your life back now," the Deliverer told the insectoid hero.

"Thank you," the insectoid superhero said. "What will you do with Vrax?"

"I'll take him somewhere where he can't control or endanger you or anyone else again," the Deliverer answered.

"Take care of yourself, my friend," he added as he flew off with Vrax.

"Sure thing, Deliverer," the Blue Mantis said as he waved goodbye. "You, too."

Soon, the Deliverer returned to Swan Labs with the tiny black and green artificially intelligent robot mantis as his prisoner.

"Dr. Cavill, Dr. Hatcher", the caped superhero said, attracting their attention. "I need a special containment pod for our little prisoner here."

"Incredible," Dr. Hatcher said. "It's a tiny black and green robot mantis."

"And it's artificially intelligent, as well," Dr. Cavill added.

"This was the creature who recently possessed the Blue Mantis," the Deliverer said. "It called itself, 'Vrax!'"

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"You mean, this - - 'Vrax' made him try to take over the United Nations Building?" Dr. Hatcher asked.

"Yes," the Deliverer answered. "So, if you have a special containment pod for our tiny alien prisoner here, please bring it immediately."

"He may be small," he added. "But he's very dangerous."

"Be right back," Dr. Cavill said as he rushed out of the lab.

Minutes later, Dr. Cavill came back with a special containment pod, opened it, and held it for the Deliverer.

"Put him in here," Dr. Cavill told him.

Once the Deliverer placed Vrax inside the pod, Dr. Cavill closed it tightly.

"I'll put the pod containing our strange visitor into a more secure space in the lab, where he won't get out," Dr. Cavill said before leaving with the container and its tiny alien prisoner.

"Thank you," the Deliverer said.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he added. "There's a man I have to see."

"So, I take it you're going to join Aron Hightower's new superhero team.

"Yes," the Deliverer said with a smile before leaving the lab.

Once he was outside, the caped superhero flew off.

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Later, the Deliverer arrived, along with Patriot Prime, Beehive, and Njord, to see Aron Hightower, who had been expecting them.

"Mr. Hightower, sir," Patriot Prime said. "I would like to join your superhero team."

"Me, too," Beehive added.

"You can count me in," the Deliverer added.

"And me, as well," Njord added.

"Lady and gentlemen," Hightower said with a warm smile. "Welcome to the Justifiers."

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