

The Blue Mantis #11 - "The Gordian Knot"

Written by Steven Bland

A battered sedan rumbled through the quiet streets of the Upper East Side, carrying five men whose intentions were anything but peaceful. They circled their target – a high-end jewelry store – a second time before killing the engine a block away. The leader, a man named Sal, checked his watch.

"Lights are out. No alarms from here. Time to make ourselves a little richer, boys," he said, handing out ski masks.

They fanned out, crowbars and a large duffel bag in hand, moving with practiced stealth toward the store's rear entrance. One of them began jimmying the lock when a sudden whoosh of displaced air had them all freezing.

"Show's over, fellas," a voice, clear and unexpectedly young, rang out from the darkness above.

The men looked up. Perched on a fire escape railing, illuminated by the amber glow of a distant street lamp, was an impossibly proportioned figure. Its costume was a striking mosaic of blue and yellow, with a full-head mask with yellow around the eyes. The figure's slight build belied an air of potent stillness, arms bent in a peculiar, natural way that mimicked the very insect it was named after.

Sal recovered first, a sneer twisting his lips beneath his mask.

"Well, what do we have here?" He asked. "Some kinda bug-boy lookin' for trouble?"

"I'm the Blue Mantis," the figure replied, leaping silently from the fire escape, landing with the lightness of a leaf on the pavement, yet the impact of a stone. "And the only trouble here is you trying to steal from honest people."

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Another thug, a barrel-chested bruiser, stepped forward, swinging his crowbar in a wide arc.

"Why don't you fly away, little bird?" He asked. "This ain't your game."

The Blue Mantis moved faster than humanly possible. He evaded the blow with an agility that seemed to defy physics, spinning under the arm and applying a pincer-like grip to the man's wrist.

There was a sharp non-damaging *pop* as the man yelped and dropped the weapon, his hand instantly numbed. The superhero then applied a second, precise pressure hold to the brawler's shoulder, leaving him momentarily paralyzed and gasping.

The remaining three hesitated, momentarily stunned by the speed and efficiency. Sal, seeing his advantage, drew a switchblade.

"Get him," he shouted. "Don't let the little freak make us look bad!"

They swarmed him. The Blue Mantis blurred into a streak of blue and yellow. He absorbed a punch to the stomach with surprising durability that made the attacker wince in pain, spun to redirect another man's momentum into a brick wall, and used his 360-degree vision to anticipate a strike from behind before it even began. He deftly maneuvered, using minimal force to subdue each man, focusing on joint locks and pressure points rather than broken bones or massive internal damage.

"Stay down," the Blue Mantis ordered as the last man slumped against a garbage can, groaning. He moved with a quiet, efficient grace, his focus absolute. He was operating on a different wavelength, a world of pattern recognition and physical precision that left no room for error or excessive force.

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Sal, the only one left standing, stared at the tableau of his defeated crew and the serene, imposing figure before him. The hero didn't seem to be breathing hard.

"We ain't got no guns, kid," Sal spat, a hint of genuine fear now in his voice. "We were just gonna grab some rocks. No one was gonna get hurt."

"People always get hurt when you steal," the Blue Mantis stated, his gaze unreadable behind the mask. He reached into a secret compartment in his costume, pulled out a phone, and quickly dialed 9-1-1.

"Five suspects, all subdued," he told them. "Location is the alley behind the jewelry store on East 64th Street."

He ended the call as sirens began to wail in the distance, a sound that grew rapidly louder.

"The police are coming," the hero said simply, turning away from the incapacitated men.

"Wait! Who *are* you?" Sal shouted after him.

The Blue Mantis paused at the edge of the alley, looking up at the night sky. In a fluid motion, large iridescent insectoid wings sprouted from his shoulder blades with a sound like rustling stiff paper. He looked back over his shoulder one last time.

"I told you," he said, the sirens now a block away. "I'm the Blue Mantis."

With a powerful beat of his new wings, he launched himself vertically into the air, vanishing into the maze of New York's skyscrapers, leaving the subdued robbers to their fate.

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Elsewhere, inside a makeshift laboratory deep underground in the old medical wings of the old Renwick Ruins Smallpox Hospital at Roosevelt Island, an experiment was taking place. The containment vat hummed with a low, thrumming frequency that Silas Gordis felt in his very marrow. Inside, thousands of bio-engineered hairworms – the "Gordian Larvae" - swirled in a thick, amber nutrient broth.

"Magnificent, are they?" Silas murmured, adjusting a dial on the console. Beside him, his lab assistant, Marcus, paced nervously.

"They're terrifying, Silas," Marcus replied, wiping sweat from his brow. "The protein levels are spiking. The Neural Bridge was meant to observe mimicry, not amplify it. If those things detect a host signal while the EM-field is this high –"

"Then we witness the leap," Silas snapped, his eyes wide behind his goggles. "For centuries, the hairworm has manipulated the cricket through chemical suggestion. With the bridge, we can bridge the gap between species. We aren't just observing parasites, Marcus, we are learning the language of the nervous system itself!"

Suddenly, the lab lights flickered. A sharp rhythmic crack-crack-crack echoed from the glass vat. The electromagnetic surge Silas had been chasing had reached a critical resonance.

"Silas, the containment field is collapsing! Shut it down!" Marcus lunged for the emergency kill-switch, but a localized EM-burst threw him across the room.

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Silas didn't move. He was mesmerized. The larvae inside the vat weren't just swimming anymore; they were vibrating in perfect unison with the Bridge's frequency. The glass spider-webbed, then shattered.

Instead of a flood of water, the "primordial soup" lunged. Driven by the EM-pulse, the larvae sought the strongest electrical signal in the room: Silas Gordis's brain.

"No... wait..." Silas gasped as the copper-colored mass surged over his boots.

It wasn't a bite; it was a fusion. As the bio-engineered worms touched his skin, the Neural Bridge acted as a hot-wire, forcing his pores open. Silas let out a ragged, choked scream as he felt the larvae's genetic code "jump." They didn't want his blood; they wanted his spine.

"I can... I can see it," Silas wheezed, his body arching violently as four thick, rope-like shapes began to erupt from the base of his neck, fueled by the synthetic proteins in the broth.

Marcus scrambled backward, horrified.

"Silas! Your back..." the assistant said. "They're inside you!"

Silas fell to his knees, his hands clawing at the floor tiles. But as the agony peaked, a strange terrifying calm washed over his face. His clouded eyes fixed on Marcus. The four massive tendrils behind him unfurled like the petals of a nightmare flower, swaying in the ozone-heavy air.

"Not 'inside me' Marcus," Silas whispered, his voice already beginning to take on that wet, hollow resonance. He stood up slowly, the new appendages balancing him with predatory grace.

"The host is gone," Silas said. "There is only... the connection."

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Silas looked down at his trembling hands, then at the pulsating, translucent limbs growing from his back. A thin, cold smile touched his lips.

"The Bridge is complete," he said. "And I think... I'm finally thirsty."

In terror, Marcus ran away to hide. Once he found a hiding place, the lab assistant took out his phone and dialed a number.

In a secret underground lair underneath a garage, Stanley Stevens received a phone call on his smartphone and answered it.

"Hello?" Stanley asked.

"Stanley, this is Marcus Talbot! I'm calling from a laboratory that's deep underground in the old medical wings of the old Renwick Ruin Smallpox Hospital," said the voice on the Stanley's smartphone. "My boss, Silas Gordis, was conducting a Neural Bridge experiment with bio-engineered hairworms, but the experiment went haywire and mutated him into a weird abomination that's out, on the move, and wants to manipulate people's nervous systems! You must get the word out! Dr. Gordis must be stopped!"

"Okay, Marcus," Stanley said. "I'll see what I can do."

After hanging up with Marcus, Stanley opened a specialized entomology database and started tracking chemical signatures Gordis was leaving behind.

Then, Stanley dialed Wesley's number.

"Wesley," Stanley said. "I need you to come to my lab – in costume – right away."

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Minutes later, the Blue Mantis arrived at Stanley's lab.

"What's going on?" The superhero asked.

"I received a distress call from a lab assistant named Marcus Talbot," Stanley answered. "He told me his boss, Silas Gordis, was conducting a Neural Bridge experiment with bio-engineered hairworms but it mutated him into a creature that thirsts for human nervous systems that he can manipulate."

Stanley, with the Blue Mantis looking over his shoulder, looked at a monitor which showed a community-sourced environmental map – EcoWatch 2026 – that pulsed with red warnings.

"Water pressure drop in the Fourth District," Stanley murmured.

"And a spike in 'organic bio-load' at the Acheron plant," the Blue Mantis said. "That's not a leak. That's a migration."

The superhero was about to leave, but Stanley stopped him.

"Hold on there, fella," Stanley said. "We need to *find* Gordis first."

Stanley, then, cross-referenced Gordis's chemical signatures with migratory patterns of real *Gordius aquaticus*.

Soon, both found a specific infrared shimmer on the plant's outflow pipes that matched the polarized light hairworms use to lure their hosts.

"Aha! That's what we've been looking for," Stanley said. "Gordis's 'fingerprint!'"

"Then Gordis isn't just hiding," the Blue Mantis said. "He's nesting!"

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"Now you may go," Stanley said.

The superhero took off. Once he was outside the lab, he sprouted his large insectoid wings from his shoulder blades and took to the air.

Soon, the Blue Mantis arrived at the Acheron Bio-Sanitation Plant. He crouched on a rusted girder overlooking the Acheron Bio-Sanitation Plant.

The facility was a cathedral of industrial decay, filled with the roar of artificial waterfalls.

The superhero's eyes adjusted, filtering out the chaotic spray of the flooded floor to highlight a single mauve-colored heat signature on the central platform. Silas Gordis was there, his four massive copper-wire limbs weaving a complex, wet knot around the primary control console.

"I know you're there, little insect," Gordis's voice echoed through the damp chamber, hollow and wet. "I can feel the vibrations of your wings in the moisture. You're late for the integration."

The Blue Mantis didn't respond immediately as he leaped from the girder and glided to the plant's catwalk, where he hid in the shadows, processing the room's geometry, the 360-degree view allowing him to see the backup generators behind him and the drowning valve below Gordis simultaneously.

The superhero dropped from the shadows of the catwalk, a blur of blue and yellow camouflage. His insect wings retracted with a sharp snap as he landed in the ankle-deep water.

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"Integration is just another word for dying, Gordis," the Blue Mantis said, his voice level and precise through his mask. He flicked his wrists, and his argon sickles ignited into existence with a sharp hiss. "And I'm not a very good host. I don't like people in my space."

"A common trait of the mantis, a fascinating creature," Gordis mused, his voice wet and calm. "Such elegant, brutal efficiency. The ultimate predator."

"You're just the bottom feeder," the insectoid superhero countered, flicking his wrist and pointing a glowing sickle. His eyes, hidden behind his mask, processed the room's entire layout simultaneously – every exit, every pipe, every weak point. "A parasite."

"A parasite is merely an efficient steward of resources," Gordis corrected, his appendages thickening as they drew more water from the floor, their tips glowing faintly. "The mantis, however, is a fragile thing. All instinct, no foresight. Easily led to the water."

"The world is a messy place, Blue Mantis. It needs a parasite to keep it from falling apart," Gordis said as he commanded his appendages to attack.

"IT NEEDS A KNOT THAT WON'T BREAK," he added as two of his appendages whipped forward with surprising speed, but the Blue Mantis was faster.

"Oh, I won't break the knot! When I get through with you, I'll cut it," he said as his mantis speed kicked in, and he blurred into a blue streak, dodging the whips and using his strength to shatter a thick water pipe, spraying the villain with an extra cascade of water.

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"You can't infect what you can't control," the insectoid superhero stated, his movements a symphony of rapid, deliberate motion. "My brain doesn't work the way yours expects."

"A variable," Gordis acknowledged, surprisingly calm as the water drenched him. The surrounding liquid seemed to energize him, the copper arms thickening and hardening. "All variables can be solved."

The Blue Mantis sprouted his large insect wings and took flight, hovering just above the villain, his chameleon camouflage making him flicker in and out of view. He brought both laser sickles down in a pincer-like strike.

Gordis, utilizing his heightened senses in the wet environment, parried the blow with two of his own limbs, the hard bio-protein scraping against the energized argon matrix of the sickles.

"You are so focused on the fight, you miss the purpose!" Gordis shouted over the roaring water. "You could be so much more than a street-level brawler. Join me, and we can perfect the host that is this city!"

"I'm not a host," the Blue Mantis said, his pincer grip locking one of Gordis's arms to the metal grating of the platform. "I'm the predator now. And this is my territory."

The superhero ignited the full power of his laser sickles, ready to sever the appendage at its root, bringing their biological warfare to a boiling point.

The Blue Mantis held fast to Gordis's appendage with his pincer grip, the argon sickles screaming as they ground against the incredibly dense bio-protein.

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"Your control is an illusion," the insectoid superhero shouted, pushing the sickles harder.

"You're a biological dead-end!"

Silas Gordis howled in a mixture of pain and absolute fury. He knew his biological makeup was optimized for water; the extreme friction and heat of the laser sickles were acting like a corrosive salt bath.

"You are nothing but noise," Gordis spat, pulling one of his remaining free appendages from the waist of the hero, the tip splitting into dozens of hair-fine needles ready for a last-ditch neural injection. "I am order! I am the cure!"

It was the moment of suspense. The needle-tipped arm lunged toward the hero's exposed neck, a move designed to bypass the insectoid superhero's physical strength and attack his neurodivergent brain.

But Gordis had made a crucial mistake: he assumed the hero's processing difference was a weakness.

The Blue Mantis, processing the high-intensity environment differently, didn't panic. His ability to see in all directions at once allowed him to track the incoming needle-arm without breaking his focus on severing the trapped limb. His autistic hyper-focus on the task at hand made him immune to the villain's psychological warfare.

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"I see everything," the Blue Mantis said, almost clinically. He released his left pincer grip for a fraction of a second, his speed a blur. He didn't block the attack; he countered. He spun his body, using his mantis agility to pivot and catch the needle-arm with his free hand, twisting it violently.

Gordis screamed as his appendage was wrenched backward, forcing a misfire of the neural probes into a heavy-duty electrical panel behind him. The panel sparked violently.

The Blue Mantis didn't hesitate.

"You need the water to survive, Gordis," the hero said. "I just need to make you dry."

With a final burst of strength, the Blue Mantis severed the first arm at the base of the spine with his right pincer sickle. The appendage thrashed and flailed on the metal grating.

Gordis's strength visibly waned. He stumbled backward as the insectoid superhero rapidly activated a sequence on a secondary control panel. A massive valve, marked "Primary Drainage," opened with a hydraulic groan. The ankle-deep water in the lab suddenly began to rush down a massive central drain.

"No," Gordis shrieked, his remaining limbs becoming brittle and weak almost immediately as the water level dropped. "My work! You've ruined the host!"

The Blue Mantis landed lightly on the now-dry grate, his wings furred. Gordis collapsed to his knees, his remaining appendages lying limply around him like discarded wires.

"You didn't perfect humanity," the superhero said, his voice quiet as he deactivated his laser sickles. "You just lost your humanity. And this isn't a host."

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"It's a corpse waiting to happen," he added as he nudged one of the villain's flaccid arms with his boot.

The Blue Mantis left as the police sirens finally wailed above ground. The villain, Silas Gordis, was defeated, left a dried-up husk of the parasite that had consumed him.

THE END



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