

The Weird Ones Come Out On The Late Shift

By Robert V Aldrich

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Omarion Wilson drove a comfortable cab.

It wasn't some sterile, flawless transport like some sort of medical express service. And he wasn't all about the yes- and no-sirs. His ride definitely wasn't a dive either, some kind of bacteria and smudge factory where god-knows-what had been spilt on the floor and stains dotted the soft gray fabric. It was vacuumed but not spotless. It was clean, but not sterile. Omarion Wilson liked to think of his cab as 'like riding in your responsible friend's car'. It was vacuumed but not spotless. It was clean, but not sterile. Omarion Wilson liked to think of his cab as 'like riding in your friend's car'.

He kept the cab cool enough to wear his jacket. It was a bomber jacket he'd gotten as part of a promotional deal for the movie Red Tails. Most people didn't remember that George Lucas bomb of a movie. And Omarion didn't ever see it. He just thought it was a cool jacket, so he wore it at work. During the day, he even had aviator sunglasses. One day, he He didn't wear the hat required by the company. He didn't want people thinking of him as a Cab Driver. He was just a cab driver. He was a guy who drove a cab, not a Cab Driver. Big difference, at least to him. He didn't wear the hat required by the company. He didn't want people thinking of him as a Cab Driver. He was just a cab driver. He was a guy who drove a cab, not a Cab Driver. Big difference, at least to him.

The ground was still slick and the roads were still a little slippery. The sky overhead was still close, the storm either passing or taking just a brief interlude. Very occasionally, pockets of stars appeared behind pitch-black clouds with blue highlights from the lights of the city.

Omarion had just dropped off a single mom with two kids coming home from the laundromat. "Have a great night," he was saying as the door shut. He watched them go up the stoop of their tall but narrow apartment building, an identical construct to a dozen other buildings in each direction as well as across the road. He checked at the \$10 she'd given him and shook his head. On a nine-dollar fare, that didn't pan out to much tip. Omarion was disappointed but it happened too often for him to be really all that surprised. He stayed waiting on the side of the street and took out his mic from the dashboard. "Cab 11-18 to dispatch, where we at?"

"Dispatch to 1118, black Rook to a2," came a creamy voice.

Omarion put the mic to his chest and stared at the gray fabric roof of his car, thinking. "11-18 to dispatch, what's at..." He strained again. "Do I have a bishop or a knight at..." He strained a moment further. "Uh...e4?"

"E5, 1118," said the woman on the other end of the speaker. "And it's a knight."

Omarion strained to visualize the board. "Alright, dispatch, gimme a minute." He checked behind him and pulled out. Streetlights slipped over the reflective frame of his car. Omarion watched familiar sights pass him by. He glanced down alleys and into windows of all-night stores. The streets fluctuated from packed to devoid of life from one block to the next. Ancient street bills and the newest ads were placed next to each other, just like buildings a century displaced from one another were neighbors.

Omarion swerved suddenly to avoid a pothole, but caught it with his rear tire. "Damn it," he grumbled, pulling the car over. He got out and checked for damage. He ran his finger over the wet tire, sticking his hand halfway up under the wheelwell.

As Omarion inspected for damage, a man in a business suit sans tie rushed over. "Hey," he said frantically. "Can you get me to Northend Street? 16423?"

"Like I know where that is off the top of my head," Omarion muttered.

"Something wrong with your tire?" asked the suited guy.

"No, but I want to keep it that way," Omarion told him. He got up off his knee and said, "Hey, where'd you want to go again?"

"16423 Northend Street," said the young professional. "The Northend Pub?"

"Sure man, hop in," Omarion said, getting into the cab. He checked behind him again as the man hopped in the car. They pulled out and Omarion put the directions in his phone. "So what's happening there, man? At 16423?"

"There's a party," said the guy. He laughed nervously. "There's this girl there..." He trailed off, his eyes watching the lights pass by like they were shooting thoughts inside his imagination. "I need to get

there before she leaves." His words were whispers, the gravity of the situation depressing his volume.

"Word," Omarion nodded, checking his rearview mirror. "You didn't say it was for love, man. I'll get you there." He stepped on it. "You know this woman's name?"

The guy smiled, betraying his love-struck awe. "Jane," he said with a chuckle. Omarion just nodded in approval. "She's so beautiful, man. She's got this dark black skin. Like, dark."

"Oh, she's a sister?" exclaimed the driver. "Well damn, man, good for you."

"Yeah, and she's..." The guy swallowed, struck by memory alone. "I met her a week ago, at work. She's a consultant and...man." He pinched the bridge of his nose and laughed. "You know how long it's been since I...since I felt this way? I haven't had butterflies in my stomach since, like, middle school."

"Cool," was all Omarion could say, grinning himself.

"I mean, I know, infatuation and lust aren't love and stuff, but..." The guy looked out the window, his eyes shining. "Man, at least right now, the world's awesome...if I can see her again." He shook his head. "Those eyes, man. And her smile."

"Word," Omarion said. He began to slow and looked back at his fare. "We're here, man. Go get her."

The guy looked out the window of his door and his face drained of color. He swallowed, his throat visibly dry. He took a deep breath, then seemed to remember himself. He fished around in his pocket and handed a five across the seats to Omarion. "K-keep the change," he stammered.

Omarion took the single bill and looked at the digital display on his dashboard, showing a fare of \$4.35. "Thanks, buddy," he glowered. The man got out and buttoned, unbuttoned, and rebuttoned his jacket, then started up the steps to the ritzy bar and grill. Poor tip aside, Omarion couldn't help but watch him enter the pub, hoping he could catch a glimpse of this apparent Aphrodite-incarnate. The crowd denied him a view though, so he pulled back out and let the empty streets guide him.

Without a fare, Omarion began driving down the nighttime streets. A weeknight, nobody too crazy was likely to be out. It was early enough that none of the wild partiers – usually trust-fund millionaires that wanted to go all over – were out and about just yet. He took his dispatch mic off the rack and called “Hey, this is 11-18 to dispatch; I don’t hear no bells ringing. Send me some customers.”

“1118, this is dispatch,” came the creamy voice of the dispatcher. “Send me your next move,” she snarked. “As for customers, sorry honey, we got no bells right now. Quiet night. We’ve got some parties near the university but nothing in your area. I’ll keep a look out and send you something when I got it. Look for some flags for the time being.”

“Gotya, dispatch,” Omarion lamented. “What’s at c1?”

“Bishop,” reported dispatch. “It hasn’t moved.”

Omarion shook his head in general disappointment at the night. “I still think the knights should be next to the royalty. I don’t like religious institutions being that close to the leaders.”

“But the military industrial complex should be?” dispatch came back.

Omarion laughed, saying, “Hang on. I’m thinking on my move, baby.”

“You better,” she said. “I’m waiting.”

He laughed further and hung up the mic. He settled to prowl for customers that might flag him down. He turned right down a dark street, contemplating heading towards the university. The street was empty, much like his night was looking. He looked at his gas gauge, wondering how long it would be before he got a decent tip.

Out of the corner of his eye, coming out of an alley, he spotted a hand waving at him. He hit the brakes hard, more an instinct than thinking about it. He cursed as the brakes squealed, worried that might scare off the fare. The backseat door opened and Omarion looked back, about to say hello.

A blue-skinned elf, a gargoyle, and a giant cockroach climbed into the backseat.

Omarion blinked. He didn't know if he should be scared, mad, or astonished. He began to look around the cab, wondering where the cameras for some prank show might be hidden. The blue-skinned elf, a lithe man in clothes befitting a female stripper, leaned forward and said "Return us to the waterfront." His voice didn't match-up with his lips, sort of like a bad dubbing in an old 1970s kung fu movie.

Omarion looked from one passenger to the next, especially the roach. The pit of his stomach just crashed into a thousand pieces as he said simultaneously as he realized "Ya'll are for real."

"The waterfront," said the gargoyle, an impressive feat that he could be understood given the massive teeth sticking out of his shark-like mouth. "We have business." The way he said 'business' made Omarion certain this business involved blood, violence, and probably death.

The roach said something too, but it came out as a series of crackles and whistles. Omarion stared at the giant bug for a second, then just turned to the steering wheel. He was uncertain he remembered how to drive. He'd been hijacked before, and stuck up numerous times. A gun in his face had almost become trite. An elf, a gargoyle, and a giant roach? That was new.

Omarion faced the wheel. He glanced down at the mic to dispatch. He looked in his rearview mirror at the trio in the back, then at the mic again. He reached for it but his hands were shaking too much and he pulled them back. He faced the wheel. He glanced down at the mic to dispatch. He looked in his rearview mirror at the trio in the back, then at the mic again. He reached for it but his hands were shaking too much and he pulled them back. The roach said something. Omarion looked at the bug, his mouth going dry. The roach said something again. It sounded like it may have been the same thing.

"She asks 'are you alright?'" said the elf. His words were strangely shaped, like no accent Omarion had ever heard, even on TV. "Are you?" the lithe man further asked, contained in the rearview mirror along with the gargoyle and the roach.

Omarion's mouth hung open for a moment. He faced out the front windshield for a moment and suddenly just sighed. He shifted the car into drive and pulled forward. It was a lurch as his feet would only respond with abrupt and gross shifts of movement. "Stay calm," Omarion whispered to himself. He faced forward. He insisted he face

forward. He had to face forward. If he faced forward, he wouldn't look back. And if he didn't look back, he couldn't see the elf, the gargoyle, and the roach in the back of his cab.

Omarion didn't really drive after that, he just sort of steered the car directly forward. If the three in the back noticed, they didn't say anything. In fact, it slowly dawned on Omarion after half-a-dozen blocks, they weren't saying anything at all. He'd dealt with silent passengers but he could hear his heart beating a thousand times a minute and he was sure they could too. They could hear his fear, he was sure of it.

"So..." Omarion said way too loud. He felt out of breath afterwards. "Um...where..." He grabbed the steering wheel and faced forward, determined to shut up. 'Ten and two' he told himself inside his head. 'Ten and two will see you through'.

After four more blocks of trafficless road and objectiveless driving, the gargoyle turned to the elf. "We must not yet return to our warren."

"We have set out course," the elf told him with stoic resignation. "It is done."

The gargoyle was displeased. "The wizard must not be allowed to escape. We must not let him escape. He cannot complete his mission, achieve his goals."

"Ten and two," Omarion whispered to himself, still facing forward, going absolutely nowhere but straight.

The roach spoke, its speech a series of chirps and crackles.

"Yes, I agree," the gargoyle told her. "I am aware we have no trail and no means of which to relocate the wizard. But we must not give up."

"The wizard has bested us this night," the elf told the gargoyle, his lips still not syncing up with his words. "We will only exhaust our few resources left in this world if we pursue him now. Best to wait for another night, we can target him afresh."

"I cannot abide giving up," the gargoyle grumbled.

"Ten and two," Omarion repeated.

"How can we track a wizard that can teleport?" the elf asked rhetorically, as though desperate to persuade his comrade in order to dissuade his own guilt. "How can we hope to trail one who can bend space?" The gargoyle was silent.

The roach was not. She leaned forward to see past the massive and muscular gargoyle to address the elf. She spoke quickly, her speech a series of chirps and whistles.

"Perhaps," the elf grudgingly conceived. "But how can we? We have no insight. And we have no allies with which to consult."

The roach looked at Omarion. "Ten and two," he repeated, his voice cracking as he tried to calm himself. The roach spoke in chirps and crackles. Omarion licked his chapped lips and pretended he didn't hear. He tried to remember the lyrics to any song he'd ever known so he could pretend he was humming along to them. The only thing that came to mind was 'What's This?' from Nightmare Before Christmas. Desperate, Omarion began to hum it.

"She addressed you," said the gargoyle, like punching through the seat and Omarion both would be a feat he would have neither physical nor moral trouble with.

"Sorry," he said, "Yeah, hey, what's up?" he asked the roach in the rearview mirror. There was no bass in his voice. There was no bass in his voice.

The roach clicked at him, followed by a whistle. Omarion did nothing but swallow, unsure where to even beginning trying to understand. The roach turned to her comrades and made similar noises. "Where might we find harnessed fire?" the elf asked Omarion.

Again, Omarion's mouth hung open. "Uh..." He faced forward, for a moment struck by the stupidity of the question. "Um...like...you mean...what?" He looked back at them. "What do you mean, 'find harnessed fire'?"

The elf explained, "We must find a source of his power. We are pursuing his most loyal element."

Fear was exhausting Omarion and confusion was a new energy. His brain cracked slightly, trying to follow what they'd just said. "What? What do you mean 'his most loyal element'?" He pulled the cab over abruptly and parked on the side of the road. No one was

about except for a few late-evening joggers who passed the car to the tune of their mp3 players.

"Start from the top. What are you guys...what do you mean 'harnessed fire'? And a wizard? What do you mean by wizard?" He focused on the elf and pretended that the gargoyle and the roach didn't exist. "You guys are...you guys are looking for, like, wizard-wizard? Like, Gandalf-wizard?"

The elf blinked. "Who is Gandalf?"

"Gandalf the Grey. Gandalf the White. Servant of the Anor. Basically an angel." The elf blinked and, as he tried to speak, looked at the gargoyle for help. The giant beast opened its gaping jaw to speak, then stopped and looked again. "Wizards!" Omarion shouted with a touch of hysteria.

"Yes," the elf said, pointing at Omarion, latching onto the first word the driver had said that he could recognize. "Wizards. We're after a wizard. I know not what a Gandalf is."

"A Gandalf is a...a wizard," Omarion said, still fixated on the elf and not allowing himself to look at the other two passengers. "A big dude with a bushy white beard, robes, and stuff, who controls magic?"

The elf looked completely lost. The cockroach made some clicking noises and the gargoyle agreed. "He has no beard."

"So we talking a Harry Potter kind of wizard then," Omarion accepted.

The gargoyle turned to the elf. "I believe our coachmaster is mad."

"I ain't mad, I'm just—" Omarion sat forward again, facing through the front windshield. He thought for a second, glancing at the mic to call dispatch. Instead, he turned on his flashers and spun back around, looking at all three now. "I'm just saying, wizards. They got, like, rules and stuff. Like magic."

"Does magic mean elemental forces?" the elf asked the cockroach. Even Omarion could tell the cockroach wasn't sure.

"Elemental forces like fire and water and stuff, right?" Omarion asked.

While his compatriots looked unsure, the gargoyle nodded. "Yes," he said, his voice sounding like a sack of gravel dropped from great height. "Fire, but fire from the sky." He used his giant hand to imitate lightning.

Omarion drove for a moment more. "So, like fire from the sky," he thought. "You mean like lightning, right?" he asked. They didn't answer immediately, only looked between one another, trying to reason through his gibberish. "So why don't you go to a power station? Or a relay station? Or the power plant?" He stopped and began to think. "I think we got a couple, come to think of it."

"Then which one should we go to?" asked the gargoyle.

"I don't know," Omarion shrugged aggressively. "You guys are the ones who know what's going on. You guys get in my backseat and are all Legolas and Goliath and..." He stared at the roach for a moment. "I swear, you look like one of those things from District Nine."

The three in the back all looked at each other, confused. The roach clicked at her companions who were clearly just as lost. The three in the back all looked at each other, confused. "Where...is that?" asked the elf.

"It was in South Africa," Omarion said. "Or, you know, the movie was set there. I think it got filmed in New Zealand or something. District Nine?" he repeated. "Ya'll didn't see District Nine? There's a Redbox right there, guys. District Nine; not District Thirteen. That's a French movie with guys doing a bunch of flips and stuff." He faced forward. "I mean, not a bad movie, but just, you know, brainless and stuff. District Nine made you think and stuff." He waited for a second and then remembered he'd just mouthed off to a blue elf, a gargoyle, and a giant roach. "Where were we going?"

"Electricity," the gargoyle reminded him.

"Right," Omarion remembered with a recollective snap of his fingers. "Right," Omarion agreed. "So, like, do you guys know anything else about this wizard aside from that he likes electricity?"

"He commands many elements," the elf told him. "Electricity is merely his favorite."

"Word," Omarion said blankly, nodding like that made total sense. The gargoyle turned to the elf and mouthed 'word' in

confusion. The elf only shrugged. "So, like, what's he doing? That you're trying to stop him or...ya'll are trying to stop him, right?"

"We are here to stop him from fusing elements, to give birth to a new element," the elf explained.

Omarion reasoned over that for a second. "And that's...bad?"

"A new element has never been forged since the birth of the cosmos," the gargoyle told Omarion, his voice rattling the windows of the cab. "Its creation would displace all around it."

Omarion nodded slowly. "Right." A light inside his mind came on. "Is this like some periodic table of elements stuff? Like, if he creates an element that goes between oxygen and nitrogen, it'll like shove all the other elements down the column one, and make that bad boy at the end go over to the other side?"

The elf looked to the gargoyle in the middle. "Do you have any idea what this maniac is talking about?" he whispered. The gargoyle shook his head, clearly having given up sometime ago. The cockroach clicked a bit, ending in a low whistle. "Yes!" the elf suddenly nodded at Omarion with great certainty and no better understanding. "Yes it is..." He glanced at the cockroach who urged him on with a gesture of her upper-most arm. "Yes it is, a thing...like that."

"Okay, cool," Omarion thought as he kept driving, sporadic lights washing over the windshield as they drove through the lonely streets of downtown. "So if he's like, fusing elements and stuff and electricity is his favorite, then he's probably looking for a place that's got, like, electricity and some other stuff." The trio all looked at each other, unsure if that was even a remotely accurate assessment. "Look, if he's into like earth and fire and water and stuff, then I'd say check out the hydroelectric dam. He uses magic – or, you know, whatever – to make more water do its water stuff to make more electricity and then he's got more electricity which he's, you know, apparently loyal to. Or is loyal to him. Or stuff."

The elf looked at the gargoyle, astonished. "A power plant driven by water."

The gargoyle snickered, a wholly unsettling thing to witness. "Of course."

"To the hydra-electrical plant!" the elf told Omarion with epic commitment and certainty.

"You got it," Omarion said, turning down his meter and snatching up his mic. "Dispatch, this is 11-18, en route with a flag to the dam. Over."

"Roger, 11-18, traffic looks clear through all routes," said the lovely-voiced dispatcher.

He cued up his satellite radio. "You guys like Disney music?" he asked as he switched channels.

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Beneath the last remains of the rain, Omarion's car pulled up to the side of a lonely bridge. The headlights of his car focused on a metal security gate, eroded by weather, barring any further progress by the large sedan. A single street light overhead dripped with condensation, like the light was crying. In concrete textured by age, puddles reflected the sky, tiny ripples created by lonely raindrops disrupting the image only occasionally.

Omarion rolled down the window of his car and looked out at the sky, seeing no clouds above. "Why's it raining?" He asked.

The elf sat forward, startling Omarion. "The wizard," said the elf, his lips moving well after the statement was completed. "He is here." The three passengers began to disembark, all to the tune of Disney's Be Our Guest. At the mouth of the bridge, the elf, gargoyle, and giant cockroach were enveloped in the insulating white noise of the dam beneath them. The gargoyle unfolded his bat-like wings, their size seeming impossible to have fit into the cab. The roach, likewise, stood to a full surely have prevented. The elf was the last to get out and as he rose, Omarion had to remind himself the elf was male.

"What toll have we incurred?" asked the elf, leaning uncomfortably through the window.

Omarion looked at the red digits on the meter, then thought for a second. "You know what? Don't sweat it, man. Just go cap the wizard or whatever he is."

The colloquialism lost on the elf, he none the less nodded and said "You have our thanks."

"Yep, no problem," Omarion said, waving to the gargoyle and the roach who were waiting for the elf to join them. Only the roach waved back.

Omarion waited until they'd all hopped the fence, then turned and pulled out. He checked behind him as the fence, red from his lights, disappeared into the night. Once it was out of sight, he shook it off and headed back into town. He fished the mic off the dashboard and said, "Hey, 11-18 to dispatch, you got anything for me yet?"

"Dispatch to 1118, nothing but a checkmate that needs to be finished," she answered back. "You ever gonna move?"

"And ruin the suspense?" he joked. "I'll..." At a bus stop up ahead, Omarion spotted a woman in a gray suit with two suitcases on wheels. "I got a fare. Call you back." The woman spotted Omarion's cab just as he began to slow and waved him down. As he pulled up before her, the window rolling down, she laughed with relief, saying "Oh thank you; I'd forgotten the buses don't run this late."

"That's what I'm here for," he said with a smile.

"Can you pop the trunk?" she asked gratefully, pulling her suitcases off the curb with an uneven thump.

"Um..." He was afraid to ask. "You aren't by any chance going to stop some outer space wizard and stuff or anything like that, are you?"

The woman stopped in her tracks. She looked around, wondering if there were any cameras for some prank show she'd stumbled into. "No," she finally said worriedly. "I...I just need to get to the airport."

"Word." Omarion laughed with relief, wiping his face like he'd dodged a bullet. "Yeah, okay, cool. Yeah, that's totally fine." He popped the lever for the trunk and sat back. "You like Disney music?" he called back to her as she loaded her luggage.