Adventure # 11: Mad Warren Bessart

[GM Note - For different reasons, the campaign stalled for nearly a year between the last episode and this one, and when it restarted, we had permanently lost one player and gained another. All characters are 3rd level now].

Leo: playing his new spellcaster Neville Thornbottom
Jake (new): playing greasy Oscar “Ocho” Ochenta, a drug dealer down on his luck
David: playing Chang still, a true survivor (but oddly incapacitated by liquor or intestinal viruses for much of the remaining campaign)
Jeff: still playing his investigator Morty Jones from New York City
Kent (sadly absent): as Arnold Silvermine, wealthy rumrunner and bad apple.

IMMEDIATE GOALS:

1) Pick Janwillen’s brain about the Clive Expedition. This Penhew-funded expedition has knowledge about the mummy, and the stolen mummy probably has something to do with the Black Pharaoh, who is probably an aspect of Nyarlathotep, which is actually a true god that the investigators can barely comprehend.
2) Either let Janwillen finish translating the Black Rites of Bast, or steal the Rites and translate it themselves. Why? They don’t even know. Why not?
3) Meet with Faraz Najir at 5 o’clock this evening at the El Hussein mosque, under the holy eye of Allah. There, he will speak to the investigators about Jackson Elias and Roger Carlyle. For a price, of course.
4) Don’t die.

It is nearly dark.
Neville, Arnold, Chang, Morty and Ma’Moud sit at a local Cairo cafe with the drunken Dutchman, Janwillen Vanheuven. He is nearly incoherent by this point, but happy to accept their food and liquor. Arnold Silvermine leaves to go find them some more booze. The small café has closed for the evening as they talk on the veranda, and stark evening shadows are already crawling across the streets.

However…

…two tables away sits a thin, oily man from Paraguay, watching them with beady eyes:

Oscar “Ocho” Ochenta (our new player, Jake).
Ochenta is a drug dealer who has been screwed by the scummy people he associates with. They’re lying degenerates, like himself. In fact, he has almost no money left at all, with holes in his pockets and skeletons in his closets. But these American gangsters seem loaded, throwing money around left and right. He listens to their entire conversation, convinced that these jokers can somehow earn him a quick buck. Especially if he steals whatever it is they’re talking about!

“Eh, yooze there,” says Oscar to the group, interrupting them. “My name ez O-scar Ochenta. And I would like to offer you my…services.”

He passes himself off as a mercenary and guide for hire, and if they need extra muscle, he’s their man. Actually, they DO need help, so after settling on a generous price, Oscar Ochenta is accepted at their table. Such is the trust required in a roleplaying group!

They continue with Janwillen’s alcohol-fueled interrogation.
Vanheuven spills as much as he can remember about the Clive Expedition, repeating himself quite a lot, and the reasons for his being “fired.” “I cannot blame ‘dem,” he slurs. “‘Ook at me, I’m a ‘retch!”

Janwillen honestly admired the Clive Expedition: Dr. Clive, Johan Sprech, Agatha Broadmoor, Martin Winfield, and James Gardner. His tongue is loose and he holds nothing back. In truth, he finds himself inferior to every one of them!

They’re so good at what they do, he cries, and he is a poor archaeologist, but wait until they see his discovery! Gardner should never have told him to dig around in that secret holy place beneath the city. His eyes are alight as he talks about the Rites of Bast, but little does he know that the investigators have already swiped it from under his bed.

And little do they know the trouble they’ve attracted by doing so.

Even as Janwillen talks about the manuscript, a cat streaks up and rakes Janwillen’s foot! He screams and kicks at the beast. It retreats, growling, hissing and spitting.

“Monster!” he shrieks. “Leave m’lone!”

The cat finally leaves, and soon afterward, Janwillen falls unconscious, his forehead striking the table with a meaty “thunk.” The party is left debating what to do, wondering why these cats are
stalking Janwillen, and more importantly, why has Arnold Silvermine been gone so long? But moments later agonized screams erupt from around the corner.

“Oh God! God no! HELP! AGGGHH! Agh!! Morty! Chang! HELLLLPP!”

Everyone launches up except for Janwillen, whom Oscar and Ma’Moud stay behind to protect. Morty follows the screams, reaches the dark alley first, pistol out, but he skids to halt. The sight beyond paralyzes him.

A fiery blue Eye of Horus blazes on a brick wall, dripping molten motes to the ground, and crawling from the earth are two rotting ghouls! Their eyes shine with unholy light, and they move with speed and strength belying their rotting frames. They seem to have sprouted from the street itself, and both abominations grapple Arnold Silvermine.

“MORTY! Good Christ! SAVE ME!!!!!” shrieks Arnold, trying to push the hands away.

Morty screams too and shoots, but it is too late.

One ghoul grips Arnold under the chin and peels off HALF his face like a grisly wet sheet. The other plunges its claws beneath his ribcage and rips his lungs out. Arnold gasps, shudders, but is
dead within seconds, his intestines spilling out in ropy hot coils, and then the monsters surge
toward Morty!

[GM Note: Kent graciously allowed me to kill his character after he had moved away. We
discussed some options and settled on this one. That is actually (half of) Kent’s face in the
picture above].

Chang spins into the alley and starts shooting. Neville backs off, debating if magic is appropriate
here, but reluctant to cast anything. Magic demands a grueling toll, corrupting both your body
and spirit. Back at the café, Oscar Ochenta has casually packed a pipe full of his last hashish
crumbs, even as gunshots echo from the darkness. Ma’Moud looks up at him, obviously

After a brutal barrage of ammunition, the ghouls are soon destroyed, their bodies quickly
decomposing, crawling with sickly white maggots that also slide into goopy residue. The
glowing Eye of Horus fades and disappears. There is no time to drag Arnold’s mangled corpse
through the streets, so they strip him of anything valuable, Chang murmurs a prayer, Janwillen is hauled up by his armpits and they shuffle back to his dirty hovel.

They don’t know where the zombie-things came from, or how or why they appeared. Someone must have set traps around the city to target them, and it looks like a potent spell. Chang and Morty cannot help but recall Arnold’s nightmare before leaving London. His death this evening seems eerily familiar…

They spend the night crowded in the tailor shop, too scared to leave, barricading entrances with furniture and ready for anything. Even Oscar Ochenta joins them, and he only met these bastards a few hours ago! He doesn’t question their odd actions, or the cats, or why Morty has blood all over him, or why they insist on staying awake with their guns loaded. Hell, he’s seen this behavior before. It is common in the drug trade.

The night passes without incident, but in the morning, Janwillen Vanheuven has actually forgotten who they are.

“Eh? What ya want wid me?”

But promises of liquor, money, a place to continue his translations, and haven from the cats are easy incentive for the Dutchman. The investigators offer to take him to the Cairo Museum, sure that Dr. Ali Kafour can find the man an empty room to continue his work. All they want in return is more information about the Clive Expedition, and possibly an interview. No, definitely an interview. They want Janwillen to lead them to Memphis. That is the payment for giving him a safe place to complete his translations.
And to acquire the book for themselves, which becomes their new goal.

Janwillen agrees, so they hand the original Rites back to him and they all leave, tromping across town to the Cairo Museum. Hopefully, Ali Kafour won’t mind what they’re proposing to do.

On the way to the museum, Oscar "Ocho" Ochenta notices the withering stare of a beautiful Egyptian woman. His heart flutters from her beauty, her sensuality, but she vanishes into the crowd, and no one else seemed to notice her.

Odd, considering her attire. Ah, how fleeting love is, he thinks. She’ll be back for ol’ Oscar. Ocho mentions that a fine woman was watching him, but they don’t make much out of it. Oscar hasn’t proven himself a reliable companion yet. In fact, he’s sort of creepy.

At the museum, Dr. Ali Kafour is mildly surprised (and annoyed) that the investigators have brought this drunken, slovenly man as a GUEST into the museum. “This is not a boarding house!” he snaps later when Janwillen is out of earshot.

“No,” says Neville Thornbottom, “but these are dire times, sir. In fact, doctor, I would like to suggest that we all stay here. There are several storage rooms in the basement that can be converted. After two attacks so far on these gentlemen I fear that it could happen again. And this…Vanheuven fellow…he needs time to decipher the script.  Plus,” he adds slyly, “Someone else can help decipher the scrolls while Janwillen is passed out. Good Lord, the man is in a stupor sixteen hours a day!”
Ali Kafour is finally convinced to agree with Neville. The Rites are a major archaeological find, and it IS dangerous running around the city, especially at night. The Museum offers a small amount of magical and material protection. He has the staff rearrange the basement; long enough for the investigators to complete their search in Cairo. Ali also hires someone to translate the Rites of Bast while Janwillen is “sleeping.”

The investigators help Janwillen set up a new room complete with writing utensils and a bottle of bourbon. He thanks them profusely, saying that with their assistance he’ll soon wield the most fabulous discovery of the century-- The Black Rites of BAST!

“Yeah, wonderful,” mumbles Morty. He’s heard about enough of this crazy shit. Boring detective work in New York City never sounded better, but he’s needed here. Something big is happening, and they’re the only ones who know about it.

Neville Longbottom wields knowledge of both the Mythos and Egyptian lore, and coupled with Ali’s expertise, they tell the others that Bast is a benevolent deity, surely mythical under most standards, but from what they’ve experienced so far, gods are more real than previously imagined. For this reason, the Black Rites could offer a magical advantage if translated and used against the enemy.

But tonight the investigators have a date with Faraz Najir. They are supposed to meet him at the El Hussein mosque at 5pm where he has agreed to answer their questions. So, arming themselves as usual, the investigators follow Ma’Moud back to Old City where they wait for the antiquities dealer to finish his evening prayers.

Along the way, Ma’Moud tells them that it is extremely disrespectful to interrupt the processions, and unrepentant foreigners could find themselves stoned for doing so. It is sound advice. They pat Ma’Moud on the head and tell him what a good boy he is. He beams with pleasure while holding Morty’s hand.

They find the mosque without any trouble, and by 5:15 Faraz Najir looks annoyed to see them there. Perhaps he thought they would forget. Morty and Neville speak with him while Ma’Moud, Oscar, and Chang wait outside.

The horribly burned Arabic man answers only when cash is offered, but his lips are soon flapping:
“Under the holy grace of Allah, I will tell you people this:

A) He had previously sold artifacts to Roger Carlyle's agent, a man named Warren Bessart. This was some years ago, and he does not know where Bessart, a Frenchman, is now. Bessart might have more information. Or, he might be dead. Who knows?

B) With prodding, (verbal intimation) he reveals that the artifacts he "procured" were in fact STOLEN from Omar Shakti, a powerful businessman who lives on a cotton plantation outside of town. One of these artifacts was a bust of the Black Pharaoh, incidentally seen (and acquired) by Morty in Gavigan's workshop in London. This very bust is now locked in a steel vault at the museum, along with their other artifacts.
C) The Black Brotherhood, a gang of killers and madmen, wants something from the mosque of Ibn Tulun, but he does not know what. Even when pressed, Faraz insists he knows nothing.

Meanwhile, while Morty and Neville are interviewing Faraz, Oscar Ochenta is lighting a cigarette, wondering how he can eventually scam off these Americans. But his thoughts are interrupted when the same staggeringly gorgeous woman from before approaches him again.

“Return what was stolen!” she says in a husky voice. “For your own good!” Ocho assumes that she meant her heart, naturally, being the kind of man he is, but she vanishes without elaboration, almost as if the air blew her away. He mashes out his cigarette, wondering if he’ll ever have the chance to seduce this sexy, sexy woman!

Neville and Morty exit the mosque and tell the others what they found: Great, they think. Even more clues, and the trail through Cairo thickens. They have a feeling it will only get worse before it gets better (and they’re right). Nevertheless, they lay out their options:

1) This guy named Warren Bessart sold stuff for Roger Carlyle. Find him.
2) The stuff that he sold was actually stolen by Faraz Najir from a rich Cairo businessman named Omar Shakti. Check him out? Maybe.
3) The Black Brotherhood, the local branch of Nyarlathotep, wants something from the Ibn Tulun mosque. What exactly, Faraz has no idea, but that was the word on the street.
The group (sans Chang Chin who is sick) tries to find Warren Bessart first, and after inquiring at the French Embassy, find that the man is still registered in Cairo on the Street of Scorpions at a place called The Red Door. They go there together, but are very, very tentative about entering once they arrive. There IS a door painted red, but something smells like a trap. [oh, I had some great creepy music queued up here]

But once inside this small clothing shop, Oscar smells hash. His nose twitches. DRUGS! He forges ahead, leaving the others behind, and worms his way into a squalid room.

The owner tries to stop him, but Oscar is on a mission, brusquely pushing the man aside. Neville is able to calm the shopkeeper and tell him that they are dear old friends of…Warren. Right? Neville smiles, and the shopkeeper believes him.

So Oscar follows his nose to a small room. There is a man here all right, a Caucasian who might be Warren Bessart. He looks sickly and sallow, and offers Ocho a hit from his pipe, but the pipe is empty. That’s just no good, and the man becomes sullen, irate, and tries to leave. But Oscar is mad too! He feels cheated. The others enter moments later, and this is when Oscar devises the (selfish) plan of scoring more hash to supply Warren, and coax him into talking later. Supply his habit, Oscar informs his new naive companions, and Warren will tell you all they need to know. They promise Warren Bessart that they’ll bring him more hash, and the crazed man actually agrees to wait for their return.

So, still being daylight, the group splits up three ways:
Neville investigates the mosque of Ibn Tulun, searching for clues that might explain why the cult is interested in it. Faraz gave them the sketchiest hint possible, and they’re not even sure it’s true, but Neville tries anyway. He asks to meet the nazir, a white-haired gentleman named Achmed.
Zehavi. The nazir is willing enough to talk, but Neville’s ultimate problem stems from his line of questioning: in his attempt to remain vague and inconspicuous, he fails to ask the right questions.

The Black Pharaoh, Nyarlathotep, and the Black Brotherhood are never mentioned.

Still, Neville learns that several recent robbery attempts have made the mosque nervous. “To steal what?” he asks, but Akhmed shrugs. “Many valuable holy artifacts here. My dear friend, are you searching for something particular?”

Neville can only say no, and leaves his line of questioning vague, especially since he is alone.

Neville walks around the mosque several times, admiring ancient paintings and architecture, but can’t shake the feeling that he missed something, somewhere, somehow…

[GM Note: I shudder to think what would have happened if they had stolen the Sword of Glory or the Girdle of Nitcrosis hidden at the mosque].

**Prong B**

Oscar tries to score cheap hash from the one contact he has left in Cairo: a seventy-three year old woman named Oolah with only five teeth, so Oscar offers his “services” and gets paid with a small bag of drugs. He immediately finds a scalding shower and hopes the degradation was
worth the payoff. Oolah KNOWS it was worth it.

Prong C)

Morty and Ma'Moud take a rattling bus 15 miles outside of town to the cotton plantation of Omar Shakti, but are reluctant to raise suspicions. All they see are workers in the hot white fields surrounding the house. Morty debates getting closer and seeing if he can spy anything suspicious, but without backup he knows it could be dangerous. Even if this is a legitimate business, trespassing might not be taken lightly. Besides, the sun is setting and he fears to be out after nightfall. From experience, this cult thrives in the dark hours…
They regroup later that evening, reach Warren Bessart again (miraculously still waiting for them), and with the help of Oscar’s sex-purchased narcotics, they are able to wean a horrifying story out of the Frenchman. Bessart is a physical and psychological mess, a train-wreck of a man who slips between reality and delusion as frequently as a sober man might blink. But Oscar Ochenta squats beside him to share the hash, and Bessart begins unveiling his tale in stops and starts, swapping from French to English to broken Arabic.

In fact, Bessart's addiction stemmed from what he saw in the desert that fateful night, so long, long ago...

“I acted as a purchasing agent, permit holder and equipment liaison for an American—a man named Roger Carlyle. At his instruction, I purchased items from Faraz Najir and shipped them illegally to Sir Aubrey Penhew in London. I only know that they were ancient artifacts, nothing more. I swear it!”

Warren recalls that their main dig was at Dhashur, also know as the Bent Pyramid. One day he saw them all enter the Bent Pyramid and disappear. All that is, except for a man named JACK BRADY. Brady, he says, was disturbed by the others vanishing, but having nothing else to do but wait, they drank. And drank, and drank some more....

When Carlyle and the others returned the next day they were somehow "different." They seemed very excited by what had happened to them inside, but would not elaborate.

That very evening, an old Egyptian woman named Nyiti visited Warren. She said that her son had been a digger and fled the Carlyle Expedition because they consorted with ancient evil: The Messenger of the Black Wind! But this old seer could see that Brady and Warren’s souls were not corrupt, but if they needed more proof, they could witness a ritual at Meidum that very night.

And foolishly, Warren went.
The whole Carlyle Expedition was there, in addition to an unknown robed man and hundreds of raving lunatics. The desert came alive under the moonlight with unspeakable horrors, and an orgy of death devoured nearly everyone! Horrible creatures slithered from the sand and ate nearly every human being present. But the worst thing Warren saw, the sight that drove him mad, was a great beast the size of an elephant with five shaggy heads…

…until Warren saw what it truly was.

Even recalling these memories brings him to the brink of hysteria and he begins puffing madly on the hash pipe. Oscar yanks it away before he finishes it all. The other investigators are crowded near, the ones who can understand his broken speech, trying to piece together what this madman is saying. And wondering how much is true, and how much is just crazy talk.

Warren finally says that after the monsters left, there were only a few people alive. Warren wandered deep into the desert, wanting to die after what he had seen. If the world were truly this mad, he did not want to live in it.

As he was about to slash his wrists with a chunk of sharp rock, he says that a young man named Unba found him and took him to his nearby village in El Wasta. Unba had been the digger that fled the Carlyle Expedition before the ritual. There, Unba and his mother Nyiti cared for Warren and nursed him back to sanity, but it took several long, difficult years.

After returning to Cairo, Warren has spent the days since trying to banish the memories from that night.
He has never quite succeeded.

Next chapter, the investigators brush with annihilation closer than ever before, with unexpected results.