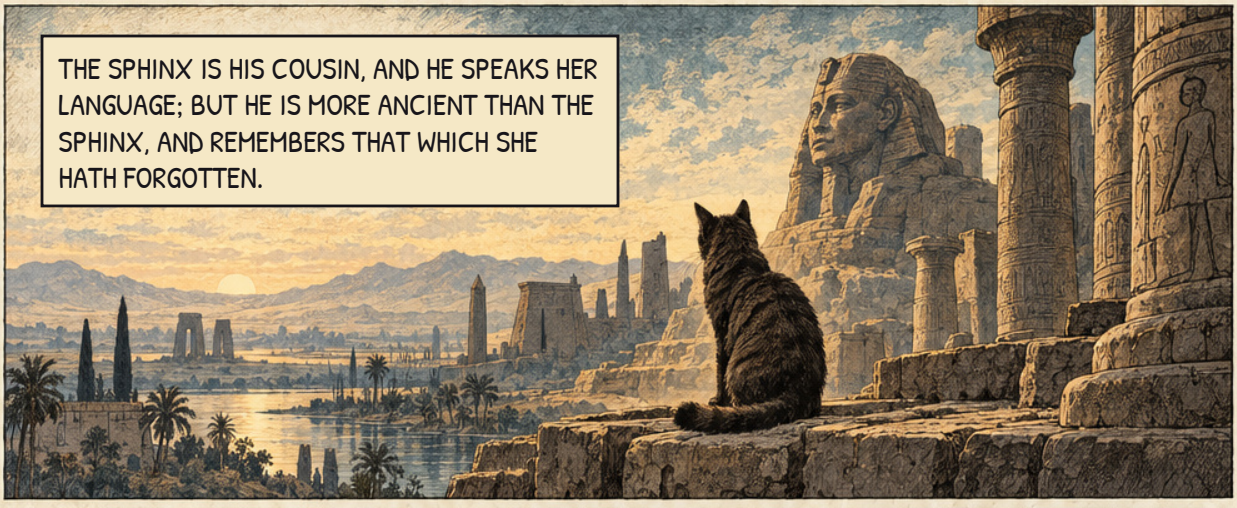
H. P. LOVECRAFT

THE CATS OF ULTHAR








IN ULTHAR, BEFORE EVER THE BURGESSES FORBADE THE KILLING OF CATS, THERE DWELT AN OLD COTTER AND HIS WIFE WHO DELIGHTED TO TRAP AND SLAY THE CATS OF THEIR NEIGHBOURS.
...MUCH AS THE OWNERS OF CATS HATED THESE ODD FOLK, THEY FEARED THEM MORE.
KEEP HIM AWAY FROM THOSE TREES.
...A CAT WAS MISSED, AND SOUNDS HEARD AFTER DARK, THE LOSER WOULD LAMENT IMPOTENTLY...


ONE DAY A CARAVAN OF STRANGE WANDERERS FROM THE SOUTH ENTERED THE NARROW COBBLED STREETS OF ULTHAR.
...STRANGE FIGURES WITH HUMAN BODIES AND THE HEADS OF CATS, HAWKS, RAMS, AND LIONS.
THERE WAS IN THIS SINGULAR CARAVAN A LITTLE BOY WITH NO FATHER OR MOTHER, BUT ONLY A TINY BLACK KITTEN TO CHERISH.
CAUGHT ME AGAIN!


ON THE THIRD MORNING OF THE WANDERERS' STAY IN ULTHAR, MENES COULD NOT FIND HIS KITTEN.
WHERE ARE YOU?
HAS ANYONE SEEN MY BLACK KITTEN?
THERE IS A COTTAGE UNDER THE OAKS... WE HEARD SOUNDS THERE LAST NIGHT.
...HIS SOBBING GAVE PLACE TO MEDITATION, AND FINALLY TO PRAYER.


HE STRETCHED OUT HIS ARMS TOWARD THE SUN AND PRAYED IN A TONGUE NO VILLAGER COULD UNDERSTAND...


...THERE SEEMED TO FORM OVERHEAD THE SHADOWY, NEBULOUS FIGURES OF EXOTIC THINGS; OF HYBRID CREATURES CROWNED WITH HORN-FLANKED DISCS.
NATURE IS FULL OF SUCH ILLUSIONS TO IMPRESS THE IMAGINATIVE.

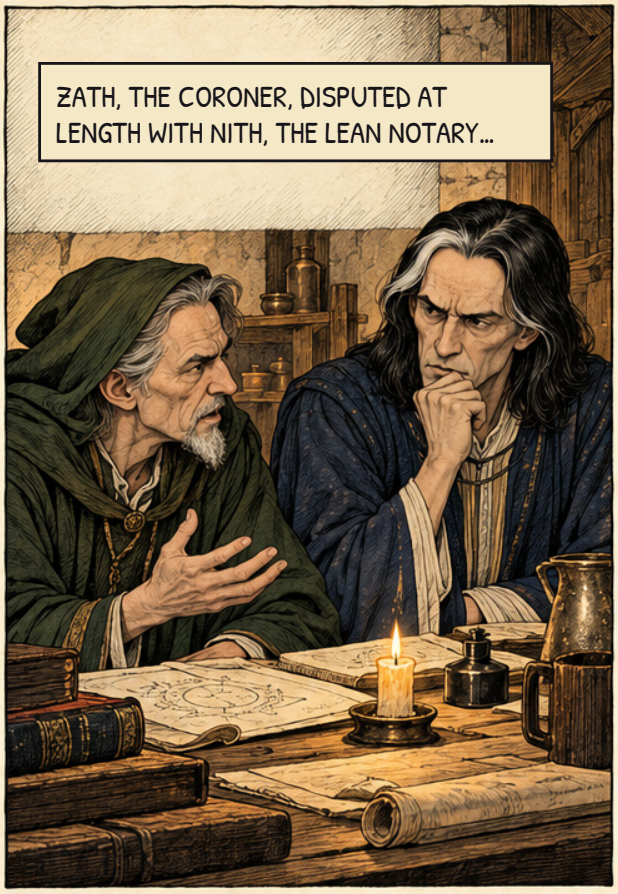

THAT NIGHT THE WANDERERS LEFT ULTHAR, AND WERE NEVER SEEN AGAIN.
FROM EACH HEARTH THE FAMILIAR CAT HAD VANISHED...
THE TRAVELLERS TOOK THEM! REVENGE FOR THE BOY'S KITTEN!
OR PERHAPS THE OLD COUPLE DID. THEIR HATRED IS NO SECRET.

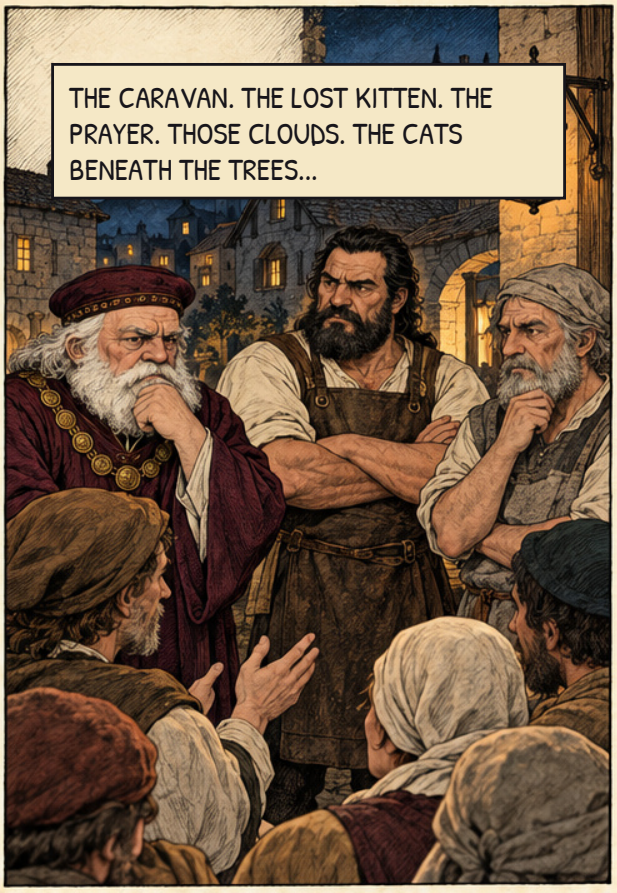

ATAL, THE INNKEEPER'S SON, HAD SEEN SOMETHING AT TWILIGHT.
THEY CIRCLED THE COTTAGE. ALL THE CATS. TWO BY TWO.
...PACING VERY SLOWLY AND SOLEMNLY IN A CIRCLE AROUND THE COTTAGE, TWO ABREAST, AS IF IN PERFORMANCE OF SOME UNHEARD-OF RITE OF BEASTS.
THE VILLAGERS DID NOT KNOW HOW MUCH TO BELIEVE FROM SO SMALL A BOY...


...WHEN THE PEOPLE AWAKED AT DAWN—BEHOLD! EVERY CAT WAS BACK AT HIS ACCUSTOMED HEARTH!
NO CAT EVER CAME BACK FROM THAT COTTAGE. IT MUST HAVE BEEN THE TRAVELLERS!
AND FOR TWO WHOLE DAYS THE SLEEK, LAZY CATS OF ULTHAR WOULD TOUCH NO FOOD, BUT ONLY DOZE BY THE FIRE OR IN THE SUN.


IT WAS FULLY A WEEK BEFORE THE VILLAGERS NOTICED THAT NO LIGHTS WERE APPEARING AT DUSK IN THE WINDOWS OF THE COTTAGE UNDER THE TREES.
NO ONE HAS SEEN EITHER OF THEM SINCE THE CATS WENT AWAY.
AFTER ANOTHER WEEK, KRANON WENT TO INVESTIGATE. HE TOOK SHANG THE BLACKSMITH AND THUL THE STONECUTTER.
AS WITNESSES. NATURALLY.

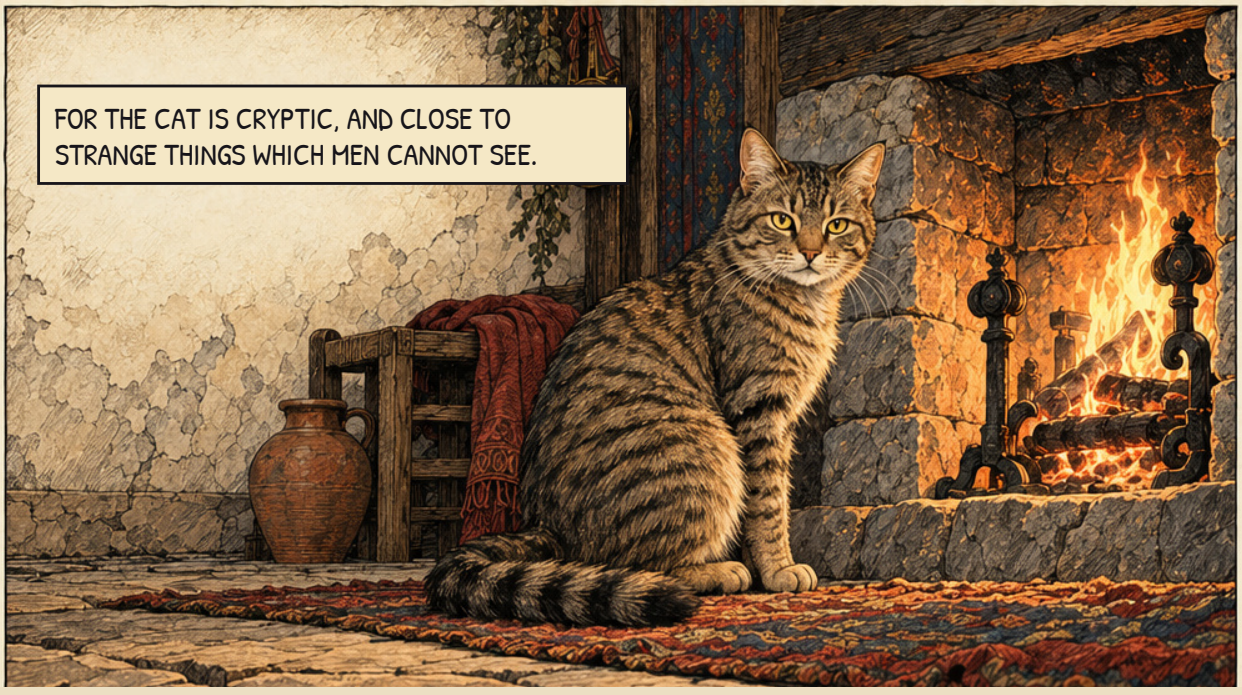

AND WHEN THEY HAD BROKEN DOWN THE FRAIL DOOR THEY FOUND ONLY THIS:
TWO CLEANLY PICKED HUMAN SKELETONS ON THE EARTHEN FLOOR, AND A NUMBER OF SINGULAR BEETLES CRAWLING IN THE SHADOWY CORNERS.


ZATH, THE CORONER, DISPUTED AT LENGTH WITH NITH, THE LEAN NOTARY...


THE CARAVAN. THE LOST KITTEN. THE PRAYER. THOSE CLOUDS. THE CATS BENEATH THE TREES...


TWO BY TWO. I SAW THEM MYSELF.
EVEN LITTLE ATAL, THE INNKEEPER'S SON, WAS CLOSELY QUESTIONED AND GIVEN A SWEETMEAT AS REWARD.


AND IN THE END THE BURGESSES PASSED THAT REMARKABLE LAW WHICH IS TOLD OF BY TRADERS IN HATHEG AND DISCUSSED BY TRAVELLERS IN NIR...
...IN ULTHAR NO MAN MAY KILL A CAT.


FOR THE CAT IS CRYPTIC, AND CLOSE TO STRANGE THINGS WHICH MEN CANNOT SEE.