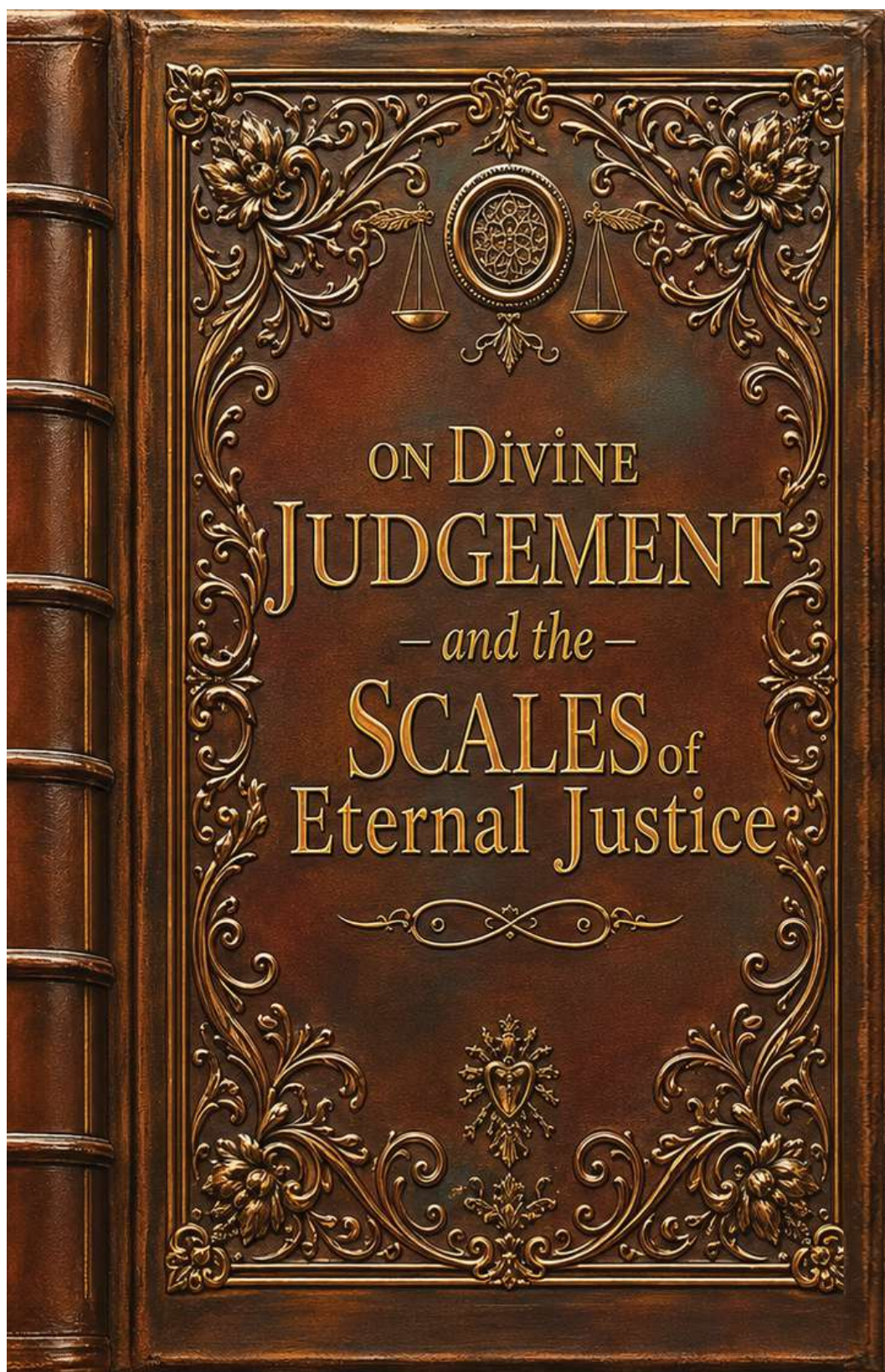






1

BALANCE IS NOT THE STILLNESS
OF A POND UNTOUCHED BY WIND.
IT IS THE POND'S RETURN TO CALM
AFTER THE STORM.

~ ARGETHAL ~

Of all the misunderstandings surrounding the teachings of Argethal, none is more common than the belief that balance is a state of perfect equality.

Many imagine balance as two identical weights upon a scale. Equal measure. Equal force. Equal outcome. Such an image is convenient, yet it is incomplete. The world itself offers countless examples of why such a view cannot endure.

A forest is not balanced because every creature possesses equal strength. The wolf consumes the deer. The deer consumes the grass. The grass flourishes from the soil enriched by those that came before it. Remove any one of these and the forest suffers. Yet no reasonable observer would conclude that the wolf and the blade of grass are equals. Their value lies not in sameness, but in their place within a greater whole.

So too it is with all things.

The changing of seasons is balance. The rise and fall of kingdoms is balance. Birth and death are balance. Even suffering, though none would willingly seek it, serves to remind us of the value of joy. Without darkness, light becomes invisible. Without hardship, prosperity loses meaning. Balance is therefore not the absence of opposition.

Balance is the reconciliation of opposing truths.

Many faiths teach the triumph of one virtue above all others. Some exalt mercy. Others elevate law. Others still pursue freedom without restraint or order without compassion. Argethal taught that virtue itself becomes dangerous when separated from its counterpart.

Mercy without accountability breeds corruption.
Law without mercy breeds tyranny.
Freedom without responsibility breeds chaos.
Order without flexibility breeds stagnation.

A society that pursues only one of these ideals inevitably creates the conditions for its opposite to emerge. Thus balance is not achieved by choosing one side, but by continually correcting excess wherever it appears.

This principle applies not only to nations and institutions but to every individual soul.

Most people wish to view themselves as either good or wicked, righteous or sinful, hero or villain. Such labels provide comfort because they simplify the complexities of existence. Yet a balanced understanding of oneself requires the courage to acknowledge contradiction.

The generous merchant who cheats a competitor.
The honorable soldier who harbors resentment.
The criminal who performs acts of genuine kindness.
The priest who doubts.
The king who fears.
The beggar who envies.

None are wholly defined by a single act or a single trait. A balanced soul is not one without flaws. A balanced soul is one that recognizes its flaws and strives to account for them honestly. This, according to Argethal, was the foundation of all meaningful judgment.

For how can one judge another fairly without first understanding oneself? How can a ruler dispense justice while blind to their own failings? How can a priest condemn pride while secretly nurturing it? How can a soul seek redemption without first admitting the need for it?

The pursuit of balance therefore begins not in the heavens but within the heart.

Many critics of Argethal accused him of promoting indecision. They claimed that those who constantly seek balance become incapable of taking action. Such criticism misunderstands the teaching entirely.

Balance is not neutrality.

Balance does not require one to stand idle while injustice flourishes. A healer who refuses to treat the wounded is not balanced. A magistrate who ignores a crime is not balanced. A citizen who remains silent in the face of cruelty is not balanced. Balance often demands action. The difference lies in purpose. The balanced individual acts not from hatred, fear, ambition, or self-righteousness, but from a desire to restore harmony where it has been lost.

To strike down a murderer may be an act of balance.
To forgive a repentant criminal may be an act of balance.

Wisdom lies in discerning which restores harmony and which merely satisfies emotion. For this reason, Argethal taught that balance is not a destination one arrives at and remains forever. It is a continual process of observation, reflection, correction, and growth.

The sailor does not set his course once and abandon the wheel. The gardener does not remove weeds a single time and declare the harvest secure. The musician does not tune an instrument once and expect perfect harmony forever.

Likewise, a balanced life requires constant attention. The world changes. Circumstances change. People change. Therefore balance must also be maintained.

This understanding extends beyond mortal life.

The natural world teaches us that death is not the enemy of life but its companion. The fallen tree nourishes the soil. The passing generation makes room for the next. The ending of one story permits another to begin.

Those who seek immortality at any cost often misunderstand this truth. They attempt to preserve themselves by resisting the cycle to which all things belong. In doing so they create imbalance. The fear of death becomes greater than the value of life itself.

Thus the weighing of a soul after death serves a purpose far greater than reward or punishment. It is one of the means by which the cosmos maintains its equilibrium.

The actions of a single individual may seem insignificant, yet every choice contributes to the larger pattern. Just as a stone cast into a pond creates ripples beyond its point of impact, so too do the decisions of mortals influence forces far beyond their immediate understanding.

To judge a soul fairly is therefore among the greatest responsibilities imaginable. For an unjust judgment does not merely harm the individual. It introduces imbalance into the greater whole. A single misplaced stone may not collapse a bridge. A thousand misplaced stones eventually will.

For this reason, all instruments of judgment must be approached with humility. No ruler, priest, scholar, or god should assume themselves beyond examination. The greater the authority, the greater the obligation to ensure that authority is exercised correctly.

This principle, more than any other, formed the heart of Argethal's teachings.

Not that balance exists.
Not that justice matters.

But that every system claiming to uphold either must be willing to examine itself. For that which fears scrutiny has already begun to drift from truth. And truth, whether sought by mortals or gods, remains the surest path back to balance.

2

A WISE JUDGE MAY REACH A FOOLISH
VERDICT IF GIVEN FALSE TESTIMONY.
A FOOLISH JUDGE MAY OCCASIONALLY
REACH A WISE VERDICT BY CHANCE.
THEREFORE WISDOM ALONE
CANNOT BE TRUSTED.
NEITHER CAN THE TESTIMONY.
BOTH MUST BE EXAMINED.

~ ARGETHAL ~

If the reader has accepted the arguments of the previous chapter, then we may proceed to a more difficult question.

How is a soul judged?

Many faiths answer confidently. Some claim virtue is weighed against sin. Others claim obedience is measured against defiance. Still others teach that intention alone determines worth.

Each explanation possesses merit. Yet each eventually encounters examples it cannot adequately explain. This is not a criticism of the Judge. It is a criticism of certainty. For certainty is often the enemy of inquiry.

When a bridge collapses beneath a traveler, the engineer does not declare the bridge flawless and blame the earth for shifting beneath it. He investigates. He examines. He tests his assumptions.

Why should soul matters be afforded less scrutiny than stone or timber? It is my contention they should not.

Thus I present the following observations not as accusations, but as evidence. Not against Kelemvor. Against complacency. For I hold Kelemvor to be among the most just custodians of death ever known to the mortal races.

It is precisely because of this belief that I find the following cases troubling. If the Judge is just, then perhaps the fault lies elsewhere.

The Case of Sir Alric Voss

Among the archives of Elturel may still be found records concerning Sir Alric Voss, paladin of unimpeachable reputation.

He defended villages during plague. He refused bribes. He sacrificed wealth and station repeatedly in service to others. Yet the final years of his life were consumed by bitterness. His son died during a campaign that Alric himself had ordered.

Though he never abandoned his duties, he definitely carried resentment toward both the gods and himself until the day of his death. According to every surviving account, Alric died believing himself a failure.

Yet multiple independent clerical records describe signs indicating his soul found a favorable destination. The common explanation is simply that his deeds outweighed his despair.

Perhaps. Yet this raises a troubling question. If actions alone determine judgment, why does doctrine place such emphasis upon repentance, intent, and spiritual condition?

A soul consumed by self-condemnation should not have reached the outcome described. And yet it did.

Many scholars have cited Sir Alric as evidence that noble action carries greater weight than private suffering. Such an interpretation is understandable, yet it fails to explain why numerous doctrines place such importance upon the final disposition of the soul. If despair truly possesses little influence upon judgment, then countless teachings regarding repentance, acceptance, and reconciliation become difficult to justify.

What troubles me most is not that Sir Alric received mercy, but that the records surrounding his passing suggest a peace he himself believed he did not deserve. Whether this reflects hidden wisdom within the process of judgment or an unseen deficiency within our understanding of it remains unclear. Yet the contradiction persists. A man convinced of his own failure was, by all indications, received as though he had succeeded.

The Case of Mother Ilvara

Mother Ilvara devoted six decades to healing the poor. Thousands owed their lives to her work. Her writings remain studied even now. Yet in private correspondence recovered from her monastery, she repeatedly expressed certainty that she alone knew the correct path. She dismissed opposing views. She belittled peers. She viewed disagreement not as error but as moral failure. The arrogance displayed within these letters is difficult to reconcile with her public reputation.

Despite a lifetime of charity, several accounts suggest her passing was marked by omens traditionally associated with an unfavorable judgment. Again, the outcome appears inconsistent. If deeds alone determine worth, such a result seems impossible. If belief alone determines worth, countless contradictions emerge elsewhere.

Something remains unaccounted for.

Several contemporary accounts describe Mother Ilvara as a woman of extraordinary discipline. Her routines were meticulous, her charity unwavering, and her devotion beyond question. Had I encountered only these records, I would have considered her among the strongest examples of virtue preserved within the archives.

Yet the private letters reveal another person entirely. Not a monster, nor even a hypocrite, but an individual increasingly convinced that righteousness granted authority over others. Her certainty became so complete that she no longer questioned her own conclusions. In this regard, her failing was not cruelty but inflexibility.

This raises a difficult question. Is arrogance diminished by good deeds, or are good deeds diminished by arrogance? The accepted doctrines offer conflicting answers. Some would argue that a lifetime of service eclipses personal flaws. Others contend that pride corrodes even the noblest actions. The records surrounding Mother Ilvara suggest neither explanation fully accounts for the outcome described.

The Case of Joren Ashfall

The final case is perhaps the most troubling. Joren Ashfall was neither hero nor villain. He was a miller. He paid taxes. Raised a family. Attended temple. Committed no remarkable deeds. Nor, so far as any record suggests, remarkable sins.

Yet after his death, divinations conducted independently by unrelated temples produced contradictory conclusions. One described peace. The other unrest. The discrepancy was dismissed as clerical error. Perhaps it was.

Yet I ask the reader - How many such errors may exist before they cease being errors and become evidence?

Such a dismissal would normally satisfy me. Scribes make mistakes. Priests disagree. Records become corrupted. Any one account may be questioned. What elevates this case beyond simple error is the remarkable ordinariness of the subject. Joren Ashfall was not a king, prophet, or celebrated hero whose fate might attract myth and exaggeration. He was a man whose life left few marks upon history.

For that very reason, the contradictions surrounding his judgment become more significant rather than less. Extraordinary souls invite extraordinary explanations. Ordinary souls do not. If the process of judgment cannot be understood in the case of an average citizen, then how can we claim confidence in our understanding of the process at all?

One temple interpreted Joren's life as modest but honorable. The other described lingering unrest associated with unresolved obligations. Both conclusions can be defended from the surviving records. Both appear reasonable. Yet the existence of two plausible outcomes suggests a variable not accounted for by either interpretation.

I have often returned to Joren's case while reviewing the others. Sir Alric was exceptional. Mother Ilvara was influential. Joren was neither. Yet it is his story that troubles me most. For if uncertainty exists even in the weighing of an ordinary soul, then the question before us is not whether anomalies occur. The question is how many have gone unnoticed simply because no one thought the individual important enough to investigate.

Many have proposed answers. Some blame the gods. Some blame mortal misunderstanding. Some claim divine judgment is simply too complex for mortal minds to comprehend. This final argument, while convenient, possesses a fatal flaw.

If every contradiction can be explained by mystery, then no doctrine can ever be tested. No belief can ever be challenged. No error can ever be corrected. Such a position may preserve faith. It does not preserve truth.

Argethal taught that truth need not fear examination.

Indeed, examination is often the means by which truth reveals itself.

A blacksmith tests his hammer.
A navigator checks his charts.
A scholar verifies his sources.

Why then should a sacred instrument remain beyond scrutiny? The answer, I suspect, is that many fear what such scrutiny might reveal.

The reader may have noticed a recurring distinction throughout this work. I have spoken often of the Judge. I have spoken often of judgment. Yet I have not spoken extensively of the Scales themselves.

This omission is deliberate. For most theologians treat the Judge and the Scales as one and the same. I do not.

A judge interprets.
A scale measures.

These are not identical functions. A wise judge may be misled by a flawed measurement. Likewise, a perfect measurement may be misinterpreted by an unwise judge.

Justice requires both.

The more I studied the documented inconsistencies of divine judgment, the more I found myself returning to a single uncomfortable conclusion. The anomalies do not resemble the mistakes of a biased judge.

They resemble the results of an inaccurate measurement.

Small deviations.
Subtle distortions.

A weight that should be present but is absent. A factor accounted for imperfectly. Not enough to invalidate every judgment. Merely enough to ensure that some are wrong. A rounding error within eternity.

I call this phenomenon **The Missing Weight**.

I do not know what it is. I cannot yet prove its existence. But I have become convinced that it exists. For every other explanation eventually collapses beneath the evidence. If I am correct, then the implications are profound.

Not because Kelemvor is unjust.
Not because the heavens are corrupt.
Not because judgment itself has failed.

But because even a just Judge may unknowingly rely upon a flawed instrument. And if the instrument is flawed, then our responsibility is not blind acceptance. Our responsibility is investigation.

For an error in a merchant's ledger costs gold.
An error in a king's decree costs lives. But an error in the weighing of a soul may endure for all eternity.

The next chapter concerns a question I long resisted asking.

Not because I feared the answer. But because I feared where the question itself might lead. If the Scales are flawed...

Then when did they become so?

And who first noticed?

3

A LIE NEED NOT BE SPOKEN TO DECEIVE.
SOMETIMES ONE NEED ONLY
REMOVE THE TRUTH
AND WAIT FOR MEMORY TO FADE.

~ ARGETHAL ~

There comes a point in every investigation when the evidence ceases to answer questions and instead begins asking them.

I confess that I did not begin this work seeking answers about Argethal. I sought only to understand the inconsistencies surrounding divine judgment. The cases presented in the previous chapter led me toward the Scales. The Scales led me toward ancient records. The records led me toward forgotten names. And among those names, one appeared with curious persistence.

Argethal.

At first, I believed him to be a regional saint. A philosopher. Perhaps a minor celestial advisor whose influence had grown through exaggeration.

Such figures are not uncommon in the histories of faith. Yet the deeper I searched, the stranger the matter became.

For Argethal appeared everywhere. And nowhere.

A fragment of commentary preserved in a temple archive. A prayer copied into the margin of an unrelated manuscript. A reference within a legal code whose primary text no longer survives. A weathered inscription on a gravestone whose name had long since eroded away.

The traces were numerous. The source was absent.

Imagine discovering a thousand leaves scattered across a forest floor while finding no evidence that a tree had ever stood there.

Such was my experience. The evidence suggested significance. History suggested obscurity. The two could not both be true.

As years passed, I expanded my search beyond libraries and temples. I spoke with judges. Priests. Druids. Historians. Travelers. Most had never heard the name. Those who had offered conflicting accounts. Some described Argethal as a saint. Others as a demigod. A handful believed him to be a myth invented by scholars seeking to explain inconsistencies in ancient doctrine.

No two descriptions agreed. Yet all shared one peculiar characteristic. Each account described Argethal as having been forgotten. Not defeated. Not disproven. Forgotten.

This distinction matters. Many gods have fallen. Many faiths have vanished. The ruins of their temples remain. Their scriptures survive. Their enemies record their defeats. History remembers them.

Yet Argethal seemed to occupy a different category entirely. Not dead. Erased.

The reader may accuse me of seeing patterns where none exist. It is a fair criticism. I have made the same accusation against myself countless times. Therefore I shall present only those observations I believe can be defended.

First:

Records concerning Argethal become increasingly scarce the closer one approaches the final years of his known activity.

Second:

References that do survive are often incomplete. Pages removed. Sections damaged. Names omitted.

Third:

Several surviving texts appear to have been altered by later scribes. Not destroyed. Adjusted. As though preserving the document while obscuring its meaning.

I offer no explanation. Only observation.

The greatest discovery of my research came from a damaged collection of theological correspondence preserved beneath a monastery whose name is of no consequence to this work. The collection contained numerous letters discussing judgment, balance, and the responsibilities of divine authority. Most were unremarkable. One was not.

Though portions were illegible, a surviving passage reads:

**The Scales do not accuse the Judge.
The Scales accuse the lie.
Should the lie sit upon a throne,
then the throne is accused.
Should the lie wear a crown,
then the crown is accused.
Should the lie call itself divine,
then divinity itself shall be weighed.**

No author is named. Yet accompanying notes attribute the quotation to Argethal. If authentic, the implications are remarkable. For nowhere else have I found evidence that Argethal viewed balance as applying equally to gods and mortals.

Most faiths assume judgment flows downward. From divine to mortal. From ruler to subject. From judge to accused. Argethal appears to have believed otherwise. He appears to have believed that all things should be weighed. Even those claiming authority to perform the weighing.

This realization forced me to confront a question I had long avoided.

What happens when a god dies?

The common answer is simple. Their worshippers fade. Their influence diminishes. Their power is inherited, stolen, or dispersed. The matter is considered settled.

Yet such explanations raise further questions:
Who determines that transfer?
Who decides that succession is just?
Who verifies that the outcome reflects truth rather than power?

Most theologians answer with confidence. I find myself unable to do so. For if the principles of balance apply universally, then no being should stand forever beyond examination. Not kings. Not priests. Not gods.

It is here that I must acknowledge a personal failing. I can prove none of what follows. I possess suspicions. Questions. Fragments. Nothing more.

Yet honesty demands I record them. I believe Argethal was judged. I do not know by whom. I do not know how. I do not know under what authority. But I believe judgment occurred.

I further believe that the outcome of that judgment led directly to the disappearance of his faith. Again, I possess no proof. Only absence. Only contradictions. Only the lingering sensation of a shape visible through fog. A silhouette whose details remain obscured.

The temptation, at this point, is to assign blame. To identify a villain. To transform uncertainty into certainty. I refuse. Such conclusions belong to zealots, not scholars.

What I know is this:

A god once taught that balance applied to all things.

That god vanished.

His teachings vanished.

His followers vanished.

Yet traces of all three remain.

The question is not whether something happened. The question is whether anyone still cares enough to ask what.

I began this work seeking answers concerning the Scales. Instead I found questions concerning Argethal.

Perhaps the two are unrelated. Perhaps I have wasted decades pursuing coincidence. Perhaps future generations will rightly dismiss these writings as the final obsession of an aging disciple unwilling to accept the fading of his faith.

If so, I welcome their criticism. Balance demands humility. Humility demands the acceptance of error. Yet if I am correct, even partially, then the implications are difficult to ignore.

For if a soul may be judged incorrectly, then justice suffers. If a mortal may be forgotten unjustly, then history suffers. And if a god may be forgotten unjustly...Then what does that say of those entrusted to preserve truth?

I am old as I write these final pages. The temples of Argethal are gone. The disciples are gone. The songs are gone. The rituals are gone. If any remain besides myself, I have not found them. Perhaps that is why I no longer seek answers. I seek witnesses.

Someone willing to continue asking the questions I can no longer pursue. Someone willing to examine what others have accepted. Someone willing to weigh truth against certainty.

For balance has never required agreement. Only honesty. And honesty compels me to leave the reader with a final observation.

The records of Argethal's life have been lost.

The records of his teachings have been lost.

The records of his judgment have been lost.

And yet one fact remains.

The questions he asked have never been answered.

If the Scales are functioning perfectly, then the inconsistencies described in this work must have another explanation.

If the Scales are functioning imperfectly, then every generation that ignores those imperfections inherits the consequences of them.

Either possibility demands investigation.
Yet investigation requires evidence.
And evidence requires truth.

It is here that my frustration has grown greatest.

For I have searched for a definitive account of Argethal's final years and found only fragments. References to debates that no longer survive. Correspondence with missing pages. Witnesses described by authors whose names have been removed from the records. Most troubling of all, repeated mentions of a weighing. Not a trial. Not a war. Not a dispute. A weighing.

The details are absent. The conclusions are absent. The outcome is absent. Only the references remain. Like fingerprints whose owner has been deliberately erased.

Perhaps there is an innocent explanation.
Perhaps the records were simply lost to time.
Perhaps I have mistaken coincidence for design.
Such possibilities must always be considered.

Yet I find myself returning to a simpler question.

If Argethal was wrong, why was his work not preserved as a warning?

If his conclusions were disproven, why do so few records survive describing those errors?

History is filled with failed ideas. Scholars preserve them precisely so future generations may learn from their mistakes. Why then does Argethal occupy a different place? Why is he not remembered as wrong? Why is he scarcely remembered at all?

These are not the questions of a disciple. They are the questions of a historian. And they remain unanswered.

I therefore leave the reader with the same challenge that has occupied the latter years of my life.

Seek the records.

Seek the testimony.

Seek the evidence.

Not to prove Argethal correct. Not to prove him innocent.
Not even to prove him worthy of remembrance. Seek them
because balance cannot exist where truth has been
discarded.

If Argethal was judged fairly, let the record show it.

If he was judged unfairly, let the record show that as well.

For justice does not fear scrutiny. Only falsehood does. And
should some future scholar, priest, or seeker uncover
evidence that has escaped my grasp, I ask only this:

Examine it honestly.

Wherever it leads.

Whatever it reveals.

Even if the conclusions challenge the foundations upon
which we have built our understanding of judgment itself.
For the pursuit of balance begins not with certainty. It begins
with the willingness to ask whether certainty has been
earned.