Ptolemaic Period: 4th-1st century BC

Papyrus, pigment

The repetitive downward strokes within the curving bounds of the column are a strange catharsis. He keeps his eyes averted, focused within the smooth arching lines he had previously laid with such care on the left side of the papyrus scroll. Working right to left, like languages he could never read, enabled him to dispose of the most difficult tasks before the numbness faded in the wake of his brother’s death. That same repetitive motion to fill Am-mut’s snarling outline brought anything but relief. He knows his brother has nothing to fear from the scales he drew in their moment of balance, the feather on one side, the heart on the other. Just as it has been for thousands of others over thousands of years. But that doesn’t really help. Instead, Re and Anubis hold this set of scales steady, just in case. Their bodies are the epitome of convention: he has made sure of it.

Just like he makes sure, once again, that the heads of each deity are as they should be, in form, in shade along the middle two registers. Just like he makes sure that Osiris is sitting proudly, larger than all others, as befits a divine being of his stature. Honestly, at this point he barely care what Osiris thinks, but he stops that thought before it transfers through his pen to the page. Instead, he darkens the line along the top of one of the ankh’s below the god’s statuesque feet: an apology.

The geometrical symmetry of Osiris’ throne is soothing, just as the divine heads that appear over and over in cleanly divided registers to the right of the narrow columns. Above, lines curve into the sinuous serpentine bodies, smooth curves between straight lines, never twisting, never knotting around the feathers between their bodies. More straight lines. They are clearly defined. They are simple.

There is just the pattern across the top to finish before he is done: feathers. Then this fragile piece of parchment will accompany his brother where he cannot. He has
drawn these before, hundreds of times, but never has it been so poignant as this. Never have his clean lines come so close to smearing for the tears threatening to rain from his eyes. It is scant comfort that Thoth, too, is recording the event from his traditional position, ink moving over his divine papyrus as ink is now running over this tangible, terrestrial surface.

He looks over the dark lines he has drawn, the detail, the stark color contrast of the black ink, the carefully proportioned attributes of each figure. Even the flower blooming on Osiris’ throne was carefully contemplated, carefully placed facing Osiris, below Osiris, in perfect subservience. He takes no chance of giving offense.

There is a gap between Am-mut and the scale, a chasm between cause and effect to delay what might be the inevitable. It is without thought, without careful contemplation that his hand moves to that space and traces first the curving line of a bare shoulder, then the slender figure of an arm. Before he realizes what his hands have wrought, a body is taking shape in front of the monstrous, toothy jaw: his body, as always, between his brother and danger. Because that’s what big brothers do.

He can almost feel the hot, rank breath on the back of his neck. He disregards it as his pen places his hand on the scale, staying the inevitable.

Though he does not want to think it, he knows that the worst might come and that, if it did, he would want to be there. He wants to manipulate his body into taking a last lingering look at his brother, to do what human eyes cannot, but Osiris is to the other side of the painting and every small head is turned his way. So his eyes too are ringed with kohl, facing forward. He traces once more the curve of his brother’s head, the last stroke on this page: good-bye.