

A Treatise on Editorial Zealotry: On a New Understanding of Judgement

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/31440110) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/31440110>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	The Locked Tomb Series Gideon the Ninth Series - Tamsyn Muir
Characters:	Palamedes Sextus , Camilla Hect , Juno Zeta
Additional Tags:	background cam/pal , cameo appearances - Freeform , Alternate Universe - College/University , Alternate Universe - Academia , Banter , light medical (an injection is given) , sometimes a family is a bunch of nerds and their postgraduate degrees , appropriating real life scientific discoveries for jokes
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Sapere aude
Stats:	Published: 2021-05-21 Words: 3,715 Chapters: 1/1

A Treatise on Editorial Zealotry: On a New Understanding of Judgement

by [heliocharis](#)

Summary

Palamedes Sextus is just trying to get through his PhD and maybe publish a bit of research along the way. There's a reviewer out there somewhere who's determined to stop him.

Or, the Sixth House, but make it a university genetics department.

Notes

Important: Make sure you have 'Show Creator's Style' turned on.

Based on JeanLuciferGohard's reply to a Twitter meme along the lines of "Tell me a fic premise that sounds like something I'd write." Please be warned that this is just me going absolutely ham.

I imagined this taking place some years before P.R.N., but they can be read independently.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

I. Impact factor

“Cam,” Palamedes said, walking into the second floor write-up room. “Ready your sword. I am in need of defence.”

Camilla looked over from her usual spot by the lab entrance, where she was surrounded by what looked like the contents of someone’s paper recycling bin. “Sure,” she said, “if you mark these second-year lab reports.” She held out a page for him to see. “Look at this graph.”

Palamedes looked at the graph. It was unfortunate. He felt his brow furrow.

“Thought so,” Camilla said, turning back to her work.

The pile of unmarked lab reports in front of Cam was smaller than the pile of marked ones, which was both a good sign and a bad one. Palamedes took the neighbouring seat, facing Cam rather than the desk, and cleared his throat. “I have been attacked,” he said.

“Really.”

“I have been *libelled*.”

“Have you.”

“I have been cruelly and unreasonably slighted. I lie wounded on the library steps.”

“Did you call Campus Watch?”

“*Cam*,” Palamedes said, clutching at the fabric of his shirt over his heart. “This is serious.”

Camilla turned towards him, her eyebrow raised just a little. She did not look like she thought this was serious. Palamedes might as well have told her that he’d gone to the lab today. “Alright,” she said. “Your honour has been impugned.”

“Yes. Like I said.”

Cam ignored the last part, as was her custom. “By whom?”

“By Reviewer Three,” said Palamedes.

It was a very particular subset of his anxiety dreams, finally unfurling before him in terrible reality. Like a scalpel accident, or a house fire. There’d been opinion pieces in *Critique*, the student magazine, that had attracted less of a response.

The lab report was put down, but only because Cam was done with it. “Was it the *pax6* paper?” she asked.

“Yes, it was,” Palamedes said. “And it’s frankly unfounded. The paper is good. In fact, the paper is exemplary. Someone is trying to sabotage me.”

“You never know,” said Camilla. “This could be the beginning of a long and beautiful rivalry.”

“I haven’t even told you what they said.”

Camilla switched from tapping her foot to drumming her fingers on her thigh, an unprecedented sign of patience. “I suppose you’re going to.”

Palamedes was ready for this. He took a deep breath, thought about the hitherto forgotten preventer inhaler in his bedside table, and recited from memory the baseless, unwarranted comments of Reviewer Three. “*This appears to be on the perimeter of meaningful investigation,*” he said. “*The scientific contribution of this paper—if there is any at all—is at best hopelessly insignificant... This may eventually be a cited paper.*”

“Ouch,” said Camilla.

Palamedes continued. “*With the appropriate revisions, these results could provide a very limited contribution to the field.*”

There was a brief silence. Cam tipped her head to one side. “Wow,” she said. “You inhaled all that formamide for that?”

“What I *did* was generate results that no one else has yet published. I don’t see how that’s not worthwhile.”

The desk was hard and cold when Palamedes laid his head on it, contemplating how best to make an immediate breakthrough, publish it in *Nature* with a barely coded ‘fuck you’ in the acknowledgements, and set a new record for citation metrics.

“What did the other reviewers say?” Cam asked.

“They thought it was fine.” This was said into the desk. Cam would understand. “Suggested a few cuts here and there, but nothing drastic.”

“Okay,” said Cam. “What does that tell you?”

Palamedes gave what he thought was only a moderately petulant sigh.¹ He lifted himself up to rest his chin on one hand. “Reviewer Three is an outlier and should not be counted,” he said.

“There you go,” Cam said, and turned back to her reports.

There was no point offering to help with the marking, and Palamedes didn’t want to. He’d earned pocket money pre-screening undergrad assignments from the age of seven and frankly he was sick of it. He got out of Cam’s way instead.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UW3333333333

II. Homologous pairs

Palamedes and Camilla were drinking actual coffee across the road from campus when Professor Juno Zeta, a biochemist of Palamedes' acquaintance, established herself on the other side of their table.

"Professor Doctor Doctor Zeta," Palamedes said.² "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you," Juno said. "I saw my favourite child as I was walking past, and I thought, you know what, I might stop for a chat. I figured I might as well say hi to you too."

"*Enchanté*," said Palamedes.

Camilla was sipping her coffee. "Hi, Juno," she said. "What's new? Did you get that lecture block sorted out?"

"I *did*. Easier to teach a pre-med class if you ask me. You know Pent was apparently lined up to do it—she had something she was calling ideas—and then someone thought I was doing it and I ended up with Shasta's materials, which aren't bad even if they could use some modernising, and so many of the Notch signalling diagrams out there really are terrible... Anyway, I'm going to teach it, is the conclusion. Probably for the next few years. It might even be fun. And, speaking of," she said, rounding on Palamedes as best she could sitting down, "I saw you hanging out with Pent yesterday."

"She had some comments on my reviews."

"I won't hesitate," Juno said, leaning back only because her coffee had arrived. "What reviews?"

Under the table, Camilla nudged Palamedes' leg with her own.

"Well," Palamedes said. "First the *pax6* paper, and now the *sox11* one too. Suffice it to say that someone hated them. Or maybe a separate person hated each of them, I'm not sure."

Juno looked interested. This would be due to a desire for entertainment, with only a minimum of sympathy. "How badly?"

"The *sox11* paper is apparently 'neither exciting nor harmful,' and is apparently publishable, but the reviewer questions why. Similar for *pax6*, but in more words. It stops just short of urging revocation of my degree."

"I wouldn't have thought they were that bad," Juno said.

"That's because they're not." Palamedes took his glasses off, then said, "Oh, hell, I really can't see," and put them back on.

"I mean, they are a bit pedestrian," Juno continued, "but I suppose you don't have a lot of choice with papers like that—tedious but necessary, much like undergrad. I hope they told you to cut down the discussions, though.³ Look. It's happened to all of us. Maybe except Camilla. You just revise the paper and get on with it."

“I never thought of that,” Palamedes said, in tones that he hoped Cam would be proud of.

“Don’t get smart,” Juno said. “That’s how you get responses like that in the first place.”

“I don’t know where I could possibly have learned that.”

Camilla set her mug down on the table.

“Anyway, Cam,” said Juno, after a pause. “What’s new with you?”

“Not much. Just demonstrating those developmental biology labs. They’re alright this year. It’s either that or bioinformatics.”

“You have a rat allergy yet?”

“No,” Palamedes said, “she still talks to the Tridentarii.”

Juno and Cam both snorted. “God, aren’t they all awful over there,” Juno said. “I had to listen to them sucking up to Quinque, that horrible little man. Not to speak ill of my colleagues—but any one of them would sell you out for one corn chip. I once heard about some zebrafish guy whose own postdoc got him kicked off a conference lineup over something pointless. Next thing you know you’re on the ninth floor with nothing but an ancient PCR machine and a bunch of skeletons in jars. Can you just imagine it?”

Palamedes wouldn’t have minded the skeletons. “We’ll see how the next one goes,” he said. “I might just make it hateable on purpose.”

“That’ll definitely help.”

“Can I contribute?” Cam asked, finishing her piece of ginger slice. “That actually sounds like fun.”

“Who am I to refuse?” said Palamedes. “You’ll do a better job than me.”

Juno’s eyebrows were raised. “Are you really still mad because her karyogram turned out nicer than yours in third year?”

“The thing is,” Palamedes said, “that Cam is incapable of doing anything badly, and everything she touches immediately becomes a hundred per cent better.”

Juno said, “Perhaps one notable exception.”

“I’m working on it,” Cam said.

“Why was I born?” Palamedes asked, in case anyone was listening.

Juno said, “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Draft of response to peer review, P. Sextus. Unsent.

With all due respect (none),

U wot m8

III. HBB

Over the final half hour of the two-til-six-pm third year lab, Palamedes watched the last of the sunlight disappear from the world outside. The lab hadn't been bad—it was generally entertaining to watch the undergrads try to sort themselves into mitochondrial haplogroups from a limited length of sequence (Palamedes had only been able to resolve his as far as HV, which he thought was a very ugly combination of letters, something for which he liked to hold Juno personally responsible)—but then he had to go back to his own lab and dissect the frog embryos for his next few runs of samples. The lights came on as he headed down the corridor, revealing as he went the taxidermied animals displayed in the alcoves along the walls.

Palamedes turned on the radio and set himself up with a couple of Petri dishes and a spare scalpel blade. The whole time he thought about going home, and was only interrupted once by a master's student looking for an incubator at the right temperature.

It was a couple of hours later when Palamedes gave up and left, making the old trudge down King Street (cold and dark), Great Union Street (dark and cold), and the far reaches of Georges Street (beset by seagulls).

"You made it," Cam said from the hallway, where she was doing handstand push-ups against the wall.

"Only barely." Palamedes put his things away and dropped onto the couch. "The stage 51s were being difficult."

Cam came and sat on the other end of the couch from Palamedes, gesturing for him to lie down. He laid his head in her lap and closed his eyes.

"When was the last time you had B12?" Cam asked, running her fingers through his hair.

"Don't know," Palamedes mumbled. At that moment he was not capable of thinking about anything else. He imagined that this was like being a cat.

Cam started drawing circles around his temples, and he could have wept. "Couple of months, by my count," she said.

“Mm.”

That was another gift from Juno: microcytic anaemia. Only a mild version, but it caused enough fatigue that the B12 helped. Palamedes’ main take on it was that he wanted to get the gene sequenced one day out of interest in exactly which mutation they had.

Camilla gently lifted Palamedes’ head from her lap and put a cushion under it as she stood up. Palamedes huffed, but with no real conviction. He lay there and halfheartedly pushed his shirt off one shoulder.

“You can stay there,” Cam said when she came back, getting down to sit on the floor next to the couch. “Alright?”

“Mm.”

This was routine. “You finish all the lab stuff?” Cam asked as she gave him the injection.

“More or less,” Palamedes said. “Even if it’s not done, I was. How about you?”

“Under control.”

“Finally, some good news.”

Cam put a plaster on the injection site and gave it a couple of gentle pats. “It’ll be alright,” she said. “Eat something, go to sleep, et cetera.”

Palamedes wanted to go to sleep right there on the couch, but he also wanted to please Camilla. He ate something and went to bed with Cam’s arm around his back and the blankets pulled right up over his head.

IV. $p^2 + 2pq + q^2 = 1$

“This is,” said Gideon Nav, leaning back in her chair, “an absolute fucking circus. Like, real first-class entertainment. Thank you.”

“I’m glad it amuses you,” said Palamedes. He had just come from a fruit fly lab where about half the class had gassed themselves with ether (at least, that was what it felt like) and was, as the kids say, Tirèd.⁴

“No, seriously. So Reviewer Three says you’re dumb. Surely you’re just gonna ignore that.”

“Nope,” said Cam.

“Camilla, do not enjoy this.”

Looks were exchanged in various combinations. Palamedes turned back to his laptop. “The thing *is*,” he said, “that it’s been several papers in a row that have been viciously disparaged. I don’t think it’s at all justified and I don’t even know if it’s the same person.”

“And that troubles you.”

“It vexes and haunts me.”

“The papers are worthwhile,” said Harrowhark from the adjacent table, where she had her nose buried in three separate osteological journals. “Sextus is assigning too much value to unrepresentative data.”

This was one of the few possible criticisms that Palamedes’ reviewers had not made. It was no comfort.

“I don’t see how it could be that bad,” Gideon said. “There’s gotta be worse stuff that’s actually been published.”

“There is,” said Palamedes. “I would’ve liked to see the reviews on Sarpedon, Tridentarius, and Rua’s 2012 paper. Incomprehensible at best.”

“Septem, Novem, and Pent, 2010,” said Camilla.

“Universally hated.”

“So there’s actually nothing to worry about,” Gideon said. “They’re still gonna get published so they can be available for no one to read.”

Outside in the corridor, someone was talking about mid-year break. If any of Palamedes’ papers were published by then, it’d be a small miracle. “I can’t thank you enough for your support,” he said.

“No worries,” Gideon said. “Hey, Cam, have you gotten anything like this before, or is it just him?”

“No,” said Cam. “Apparently a lot of people said our latest one was good.”

“Did J. Z. tell you that, perchance?”

Camilla did not bother answering. She said, “It did take ages to actually get in, though. We were about to ask them if they’d lost it.”

“Tragic,” Palamedes said under his breath.

Cam gave him the side-eye. “You know what they say.”

Palamedes and Gideon turned to her. Harrowhark might or might not have been listening.

Cam put her pen down on the table. “Publish... then perish.”

Excerpt of Acknowledgements section of doctoral thesis, P. Sextus. Draft.

I also thank all the reviewers who have provided feedback and suggested improvements to my work.

Except one.

V. Dura mater

In the inner halls of the family estate, Palamedes Sextus carefully placed an ancient heirloom in its proper location and turned back to the remainder waiting to be cleaned. He pushed his glasses up his nose with the back of his wrist.

The family estate was Juno's two-bedroom townhouse, where one and a half of the bedrooms as well as the living room were for books, and human habitation was an afterthought.⁵ The only reason Camilla had never threatened to change this was because there was actually a system. ("Best you leave it," Juno would say. "That's your inheritance.") Cam and Juno were currently playing Jenga, with no obvious victory in sight, and Palamedes was getting close to done with the dishes.

"If one of you doesn't do me a solid and knock that tower over I am going to whack it off the table myself," Palamedes said. "I was promised cards."

Juno said, "Patience."

Camilla high-fived her and slid a block out of the tower.

"*Et tu*, Camilla?"

"We can give you some other virtues to practise, if you want," Cam said.

The tower was still in quite good condition. Juno said, "Temperance."

"Good humour," Cam said, examining the blocks.

"Moderation," said Juno, "the noblest gift of Heaven."

"Who said that?"

"Euripides."

This fulfilled ‘take two sips’ in the official Juno Zeta drinking game, which was one that Palamedes and Cam had made up, and which to the best of their knowledge Juno still was not wise to.

They both drank. Palamedes said then, “Well, I’m going to talk to you whether you like it or not. You might be pleased to hear that I have received no further censorious reviews.”

“Have you submitted any more papers?” Juno asked.

Palamedes put the last dish in the rack to drain. “I have, as you know perfectly well.” He dried his hands, picked up his glass, and sat at the table, at a safe distance from the tower. “No more than minor revisions.”

“Maybe you just got different reviewers.”

“Or they’ve given up,” Palamedes said. “You’d think after saying things like, ‘I cannot make out signs of anything groundbreaking,’ and, ‘The manuscript may have some archival value,’ they’d be tired from the sheer audacity of it.”

Juno picked up her glass, sipped, and looked at Palamedes over the top of it. “Well,” she said. “I haven’t heard the word ‘audacity’ yet in comments on my reviews, so that’s a first.”

“What?” said Palamedes.

“Don’t tell me you wouldn’t have done it,” Juno said.

“What?” Palamedes repeated. “Reviewer Three was *you*?”

“It’s a teachable moment,” said Juno.

“Juno,” said Palamedes, “I am going to emancipate myself. I really mean it this time.”⁶

Camilla was not so much watching the scene as wildly enjoying it. Betrayal from every corner. Palamedes should have known.

Juno said, “Need I introduce to you the concept of filial piety—”

“No,” Palamedes said. “I choose furor. *Juno delenda est.*”

“Nice one. Maybe a bit over the top.”

“Argh,” said Palamedes. He slouched back in his chair and drank some more wine. “I cannot believe this.”

“Go weave a basket,” Juno said. “I think the point has been made. You see, Palamedes, the thing is that you’re a bit too smart—this I will take credit for—and what happens in these situations is that you don’t get enough criticism from people you might actually listen to, and it’s bad for your constitution. You end up the worst person alive. You can take this as fact because I know several of them. Hence, I took the opportunity, and I figured you could deal with it.”

Palamedes was dealing with it by trying to figure out how much it would cost to bribe someone to disrupt all her lectures for the rest of the year. He could hear Cam saying it wouldn't be worth it.

What Cam did say was, "I can respect that, and I understand why you didn't warn me."

"He can read you too well," Juno said. "I couldn't have that."

"Of course not," Palamedes muttered.

"Alright, then," Juno said. She started testing the next block in the tower. "That's quite enough of that. Time for something fun. We'll finish this round, and then Palamedes can suggest all the card games he thinks he can beat me at as revenge. *Iacta alea est.*"

Palamedes and Camilla drank.

VI. *Ab ovo*

Science library study room, two p.m. It was the one with the big window and the sun was making an attempt to shine. Palamedes was writing up his methods. He would have felt a lot worse about it had Cam not been sitting across from him, occasionally reading out something interesting from the science news websites she was browsing.

"Oh, here's one," Cam said, as Palamedes was transcribing his *in situ* hybridisation protocol from memory. "They finally found the receptor for that sperm protein Izumo."

"Let me guess, it's at 6p94.20."

"Polymerase it," said Cam. "It's a folate receptor. Guess what they called it." She turned her laptop around to show him.

Palamedes read the sentences she'd highlighted: ... *necessary for fertilisation. The protein is named after the Roman goddess of fertility and childbirth...*

"Oh, my God," said Palamedes.

"Thought you'd like that."

"Cam, this is the best day of my life."

"You'd better get there quick," Cam said, taking her laptop back, "before someone else does."

Palamedes got there quick.

The Professor's office door was ajar, so Palamedes stood in the doorway and pushed it open. "Professor Doctor Doctor Zeta," he said. "I have a question."

Juno looked at him over her reading glasses. This was a reasonable intimidation tactic for strangers.

Palamedes said, "Why did the sperm cross the cumulus?"

"To get to the oocyte," Juno said. "I don't see why you have to remind me about any of that."

"Simple. You made me this way and now it's your problem."

"That's fair."

"I have important scientific news for you," Palamedes said, pushing up his glasses. "Sperm-egg fusion has been unscrambled."

"Please explain to me why I would want to know that," Juno said, and immediately looked like she regretted it.

"Well, you see, Professor, they have discovered the receptor on the oocyte that Izumo binds to, thereby elucidating an essential component of mammalian fertilisation. And they have named the protein"—here Palamedes was doing a bad job of hiding his delight—"Juno."

His mother made an expression like somebody had suggested she give up research for full-time teaching. She said, "*Kai sú*, Palamedes?"

"I thought you'd want to hear it from me."

"How distasteful," Juno said. "How *organic*. The whole thing is just unsavoury."

"As you have said," Palamedes replied. "To me, many times, in fact."

"Lucky you, having sprung fully formed from my head."

"I thought this was more of a 'cast me down from Olympus' situation."

"It's not too late."

Palamedes gave her a grin, on the off chance that it would inspire affection.

"Are you satisfied?" Juno asked.

"Yes."

Juno regarded him with what he knew was a kind of humour. "Away with you," she said. "Go tell Cam about it. Actually, go and do some work so they'll give you a PhD, and maybe then I'll write you into my will."

Palamedes was laughing as he walked out.

Notes

¹ He sensed that Camilla would not agree.

² She had three PhDs.

³ They had.

⁴ Source: The kids.

⁵ If Palamedes hadn't already known that Juno *didn't* sleep on a pile of articles rather than a pillow, he would have suspected her of it.

⁶ He had been meaning it since he was twelve.

End Notes

Getting these idiots into genetics (and giving them thalassaemia) is probably the most self-indulgent thing I have ever done, and definitely the most niche. Sorry. Basically all of the background details in this are from my own sordid history. I am pleased to inform you that the Juno protein is also very real – it was discovered in 2014, when I myself was in postgrad – and the fertilisation jokes are from the titles of genuine scientific articles.

I do have to confess here that most of the review content came from [shitmyreviewerssay](#).

Finally, huge thanks to @searchforthescars for editing, especially while you were getting ready for holiday <3

Works cited:

- Bianchi, E., Doe, B., Goulding, D., & Wright, G. J. (2014). Juno is the egg Izumo receptor and is essential for mammalian fertilization. *Nature*, 508(7497), 483-487.
- Myles, D. G., & Primakoff, P. (1997). Why did the sperm cross the cumulus? To get to the oocyte. Functions of the sperm surface proteins PH-20 and fertilin in arriving at, and fusing with, the egg. *Biology of Reproduction*, 56(2), 320-327.
- Schultz, R., & Williams, C. (2005). Sperm–egg fusion unscrambled. *Nature*, 434(7030), 152-153.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!