

*Scene: Athenian demagogue Cleon, his son Phales, and son-in-law Scebylas are having a business meeting.*

Cleon swept in and instantly took possession of the room. “Excellent news. Incredible. Believe me. I just bought the Great King of Persia’s personal trireme. We’re talking top of the line. Top of the line. I renamed it the *Cleon Princess*. A lot of upgrades are being made to make it worthy of the Cleon brand. New sails, with a big letter C on them. Granite rowing benches. Gold plated steering oars. The works.”

“Super, Dad! I can’t wait to take her out for a spin.”

Looking uneasy, Scebylas said, “Won’t, um ... won’t granite rowing benches make the ship top-heavy? We don’t want a repeat of the *BoukáliXanthiá* incident.”

(At Cleon’s insistence, the *BoukáliXanthiá*—named after his daughter—had featured a solid-gold crow’s nest. The leverage of the weighty crow’s nest atop the tall mast caused the *BoukáliXanthiá* to founder in a light wind on its maiden voyage. It could have been worse, though, because of the eighty sailors on board, all three freeborn crewmen survived.)

Cleon scowled. “No comparison. None. A lot of people have told me: that was the work of the gods. A lot of people. All of them, really great people.”

His son-in-law shifted about nervously in his chair. “Sir, I’m uncomfortable with the expenditure. Didn’t we agree we needed to reduce your expenses?”

“Scebylas, you’re sounding like a loser. This boat’s part and parcel of the whole Cleon brand thing. Now, let’s get down to business. Callicles!”

Callicles, Cleon’s chief accountant, had been waiting patiently outside the door for his summons. He shuffled in. Callicles was a good sixty years old and looked older, with stooped shoulders, a bald pate, and the oversized ears of the elderly male. Though freeborn, he had the hangdog look of a slave.

“Allow me, sir,” he told his master, “to offer my sincerest sympathies for your mother’s grave illness. I pray to Asclepius nightly that he will apply his healing arts ...”

“Fine. Old business. Make it snappy.”

Callicles unrolled a papyrus that evidently was a summary of other more detailed documents and began to drone on. “Three offers for the purchase of the *Cleon Shuttle* shipping line have been tendered. Negotiations are underway with the money lenders to restructure the debt on the *Cleon Castle*. The *Cleon Estates*, *Cleon Manor*, and *Cleon Villa* housing developments are

under receivership and thus no longer part of *The Cleon Organization*. One hundred-sixty-seven lawsuits are in progress against *Cleon Academy* ...”

“Don’t you have any good news, Callicles?”

The assistant glanced over the scroll, then kept unwinding it till he got to the end. “No.”

“Then make yourself scarce, Callicles.”

With an almost audible creak of his bones, the chief accountant stood and shuffled out the door.

“I just don’t understand,” said Scebylas glumly, “why the business climate is so bad.”

“It is what it is,” replied Cleon.

Phales seemed puzzled. “It seems so much harder these days to make money than it used to be.”

“I agree,” said his father. “It isn’t what it was.”

“True,” said Scebylas. “It is what it wasn’t.”

“But Dad: The overall economy seems no worse than before.”

“Yes, I suppose it is what it was,” replied Cleon grudgingly.

“Sir,” said Scebylas, “in your youth you must have had the same sorts of problems you have today.”

“Now that I think about it, you’re right. Back then it was what it was too.”

“So I guess it was what it is?” asked Scebylas.

Cleon vacillated. “It was, and it wasn’t.”

Scebylas screwed up his face. “Logically, if it is what it is, then it necessarily isn’t what it isn’t.”

Cleon frowned. “That isn’t a profundity, Scebylas, it’s just a tautology.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes—it isn’t.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes—it isn’t.”

Phales interrupted them. “I was just thinking, Dad: Even when you were young, conditions must have been different from granddad’s youth.”

“Correct, son. In the hard times I remember my dad telling me: ‘*Cleon, it is what it is; but it wasn’t what it is.*’”

“How did you react to that, Dad?”

“I completely disagreed with him and said in no uncertain terms that I thought it wasn’t what it isn’t; and the old bastard got all hot under the collar and insisted that not only *was* it what it wasn’t, but some days it wasn’t even what it wasn’t.”

Cleon changed his tone. “Let’s not dwell on the bad news. We’ll move on to new business. Me first.” He settled himself in his chair. “Our family’s been leather makers from way back. Way back. That’s how we made our fortune.”

Phales beamed. “And our specialty’s the giant leather phalluses used in the stage comedies, right Dad? Those things crack me up!”

Cleon nodded. “Tremendous margins on those. Tremendous. But I sense a softening in the market. Sales of the fake leather stage-tits are declining too. Phalluses and tits, both trending downward. Now, there’s no need to panic, not yet. The tits we can handle; but we’ve got to firm up the phalluses. Diversification. That’s what I’m talking about.”

Scebylas was listening intently and nodding to himself. “Please continue, sir.”

Cleon’s eyes narrowed, giving him a sly look. He glanced from his son-by-marriage to his son-by-ejaculation and back again. “Tell me: Where do dildos come from?”

“I get mine in the Agora, from Priapus,” Phales answered.

Scebylas averted his gaze, and Cleon looked pained. “No, no—I mean, who makes them?”

“Miletus,” said Scebylas. “It’s their leading export. They make a good solid product and have cornered the market.”

“Well, we’re gonna un-corner it,” replied Cleon. “We’re the leather experts. We’re gonna go into production and flood the market with low-cost dildos and put those Ionian bastards out of business. Soon every household in Attica will have one of our dildos. In a year’s time the words *Cleon* and *getting screwed* will be synonymous.”

Scebylas frowned. “Uh, sir: Starting a new product line is a very expensive undertaking. Where are we going to get the money?”

“Way ahead of you. I’m arranging a loan from Darius, the Great King of Persia. The Persian ambassador has granted me an audience tomorrow, and I want you both to be there.” He settled himself back into his chair and folded his arms. “Now, what have you two come up with since last time?”

Phales took his turn. “Dad, you’re gonna love this. It builds on our expertise and will solidify the family brand. We already run the *Euandria*, right?” (The *Euandria* was the beauty contest for youths and men. Like any Athenian competition, its participants were in the nude.) “And the *Pyrrhic Dance*” (in which young soldiers-to-be danced while appareled in helmet and shield and nothing else).

“Absolutely, son. Beauty contests are a huge part of the Cleon brand. Huge. Nothing Athens likes better than nude men. So what’s your point?”

“I say we make a hostile takeover of another beauty contest.”

Scebylas interrupted. “I feel obliged to point out that we lose money on both of those two festivals.”

“But with a third,” said Phales, “we’ll make it up in volume.”

“Which beauty contest were you thinking about, son?”

“The *Festival of the Naked Boys*.”

Scebylas was shocked. “The *Gymnopaedia*?”

“Damn right.”

“But the *Naked Boys* is a Spartan festival.”

“So?” challenged Cleon.

“So?” echoed his son.

“Well ... we’re at war with Sparta.”

“Scebylas, you’re not thinking big,” replied Cleon. “No Greek ever got rich by refusing to do business with the enemy. We don’t cancel the Olympic Games just because we’re slitting each other’s throats, do we? We don’t refuse to let our enemies travel through our land to consult the oracles, do we? This is the same thing. Phales, I want you to get on top of the *Naked Boys* immediately. Should be right up your alley. Okay,” he said, turning to his son-in-law, “what do you have for us this week?”

Though he was sure he had a winner, Scebylas was not at all confident that his patron would see it that way. “Father-in-law, brother-in-law: You know how, of all our hundreds and hundreds of city officials, only two are elected?”

“I know, I know!” answered Phales, raising his hand. “The Board of Ten Generals and the Magistrate of Finance.”

“Uh, yes, correct. Well, all the others—the Council, the *Prytaneis*, the magistrates, the *Archons*—they’re all chosen randomly.”

Cleon stared at his son-in-law. “You know, I went to the school of Anaxagoras, the toughest place to get into. I was a great student. He thought I was the best student of all time.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t mean to sound like I was lecturing.”

Cleon hadn’t finished. “I’m very highly educated .... I don’t have to be plainspoken. I have, like, this incredible vocabulary. My intelligence is one of the highest. Please don’t feel so stupid or insecure. It’s not your fault. Just get to the point.”

“Absolutely, sir.”

*Smarmy bastard*, thought Phales.

“The point is, with most of the government being chosen by chance—”

“Not by chance,” Cleon insisted. “By the will of the gods. Totally different thing.”

“Uh, yes. Anyway, you’re only appointed to office by luck—I mean, by the will of the gods—and your term’s up after a year, and you’re no longer eligible to serve. That means there’s only two paths to real power in Athens. The first is to be the sort of man that can, through eloquence or personal stature, bend the Assembly to his will.”

“You’ve got that covered, right Dad?”

*Smarmy bastard*, thought Sceblylas.

Cleon was unable to stifle a proud smile. “And the second way?”

“To be elected one of the ten generals. They’re the real power. In addition to commanding the army and navy, they advise and preside over the Assembly and carry out its major decisions. And unlike the randomly chosen officials, generals can be reelected year after year after year, like Pericles was.”

“And I’d be a great one,” replied Cleon. “Another Miltiades. Even better: Themistocles. People have given me credit for potentially being an incredibly great, great general. But it’s out of the question. Bone spurs in my feet.”