



**MY HANDS
ARE
CLEAN**

a short story by

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It had been a winter since the Boat People had landed in the harbor and drawn their Compact and begun to build their strange, angular homes, but Samoset feared they would not survive a second despite all of the intent and hard work. Perhaps more importantly, to both he and his tribe, was the question of whether the Boat People should be allowed to survive. Certainly other men from across the water had come, but none had stayed long, which was good as they were difficult to understand in both language and custom. These new people, though, had kept their boat anchored through the first winter and looked better set to survive the second now that they had built their walled compound upon the shore. But their stores had run dry and still they struggled with how to grow food in this land that was new to them. Their survival to the next spring was far from guaranteed.

So it was of no small concern to Samoset when he was told that the last of the Patuxet was headed to the settlement of the Boat People with a satchel filled with maize, squash, climbing beans, and nets for catching eel. Because the traveller was the last of his tribe most of Samoset's people, in fact almost all of the Wampanoag, avoided him. They had given him the name Tisquantum, for they believed that the disappearance of the Patuxet was the wrath of a divine being. This vanishing, though, coincided

too closely for Samoset's liking to the arrival of the Boat People. He had seen the boils that rose from the skin and chased the Patuxet from the Earth, and while he thanked providence that he had not seen it amongst his own, he still sent two to meet Tisquantum along his path and bring him to Samoset.

Entering his weetu, Samoset bowed low to step in through the sapling-frame door. Tisquantum waited for him, sat before the fire, his silence the only thing to indicate he was not a visitor. Samoset felt something pull at him then, seeing the lone Patuxet there, knowing he would always be alone. But Samoset steeled himself – there was nothing he could do about that now and he could only take action that might prevent the same fate from befalling one of his own people.

He walked around the fire, asking by way of greeting, “Where do you travel?”

Tisquantum looked at Samoset with an expression that said he understood it all and the theater of his being here as a guest was both unnecessary and unfulfilling. He returned to the fire and replied, “To where the land meets the sea.”

“There is much land and there is much sea
Patuxet.”

“Tisquantum.”

“What?”

The man fixed Samoset with his knowing gaze and, as if to demonstrate this knowledge said,
“Tisquantum. Is that not what the Wampanoag call me now? The Wrath of Heaven?”

Samoset nodded slowly, trying to ascertain something about his guest. However, other than an understandable anger at having been detained, Samoset could see nothing about this man other than he appeared to have travelled long and hard, far beyond his walk to the sea. “Yes, they call you that. Some believe the Patuxet have been cleansed from the Earth by the manitou.”

Tisquantum returned his gaze to the fire. “I know.”

Samoset sat down, close to the other man. He listened to the fire's crackling, trying to clear his thoughts, to see the path that would be best for him, his people, perhaps even for Tisquantum. So he said, “I do not believe that.”

“What is it that you believe?”

“The Boat People, the ones who have settled on the rock they call Plymouth and those that came before them. Many who come in contact with them share the same fate as the Patuxet.” Tisquantum nodded. “But you carry the Three Sisters to them. And nets for catching eel.” Again the other man nodded. That Samoset understood his purpose seemed to softened Tisquantum's visage.

“Yes,” was Tisquantum's reply.

“Why?”

“Because without these things they will die.”

“Perhaps,” Samoset breathed in, resolved against the harsh realities of being a creature upon the Earth, “it would be better that way.”

“Better for you perhaps. Not better for the Boat People.”

“My concern must be for my own.”

Tisquantum nodded, understanding but not judging. “And if we let them die, will we be safe?”

Samoset did not answer immediately, turning to stare at the fire with Tisquantum. The Boat People were many, and no matter how many Samoset saw, whether they stayed or left, fought or traded, their motives seemed as contradictory and varied as they were alien. But no matter whether they lived or died, there were always more of them.

After considering this for a time in silence, Samoset answered with the only honest response he could find. "I do not know."

"Neither do I." Tisquantum turned to Samoset. "But I know if I help them my hands will be clean."

Samoset pondered this and then raised himself and left the weetu to speak to his people. When he returned he sat next to Tisquantum again and said, "I will go with you."