

The Footstool

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For Anita Maartens, first made-up for her when she was my little girl.

Attila the Hun gathered about himself a band of bold raiders. Their horses thundered across the countryside as the most devastating of plagues. Whatever they could wrest from another by violence became their own. Of their spoils, they divided evenly amongst themselves. They fought for gain and one another, and followed Attila because he was ruthless and bold. In time, the whispered name of "Hun", uttered with a shudder, embodied the greatest calamity that could befall one.

Villages, nations, and empires quelled at the approach of the Huns. Even mighty Caesars paid tribute to keep Attila from his borders. But those who had not the wealth to buy the Huns off, paid the most devastating price. It was into a hapless village as such, that one morning the forces of Attila rode. The people of the glade were peaceful but hardy, a hard working clan of Germanic stock. Of them, a great nation would eventually rise, but on this morning the victims would they be.

The village was not caught completely unawares, as many industrious folks had been busy in the pre-dawn. A cry was raised as the thundering horde descended the valley. Swords and hoes, staves and shepherds crooks, hunting bows and arrows, axes and rolling pins were snatched from their resting place and employed against the Huns. But what use was such an effort against the practiced mayhem of Attila and his warriors? Many a valiant father fell where he stood, his back to his family, facing certain death. Many a mother crumpled at her door, the enemy's blood on her hands, her children trembling by the hearth.

For Attila, it was over in what seemed like only moments. Enthroned upon his prancing war-horse, he surveyed with satisfaction the workmanship of his hands. Wails and moans, shrieks and sobs, the hysteria of newly orphaned children, the dull thud of the coupe de grace, the triumphant shout as a prize was found among the carnage; this was the symphony of pillage. It fell with satisfaction upon Attila's ears, yet he was discomforted. It hadn't been that long ago, in another battle in yet another unnamed settlement, when his stricken war-horse had pinned him to the ground. In the horse's death throes, Attila's leg had been badly broken and poorly set. Now, the constant pain left him sullen and irritable. His men had learned to fear this mood.

The Huns piled the collected plunder near Attila's post. Meanwhile, in a far corner of the settlement, pillagers noticed a haystack trembling. When prodded with the haft of a spear, the haystack shrieked in a most un-manly fashion. Laughter erupted from the hardened men at the comical tones emitted from under the hay. Bemused, one produced a flint, steel and tinder, and commenced to light the haystack on fire. They roared with laughter as the smoke and flames provoked the haystack to hysterical noise and flailing. The laughter of the men attracted the attention of their fellows, and by the time a young man shot from the smoldering haystack, a large group had gathered 'round. Amused, their brute instincts were overwhelmed, and rather than strike him down, they taunted the boy with the flats of their swords, pokes from the hafts of their spears and the ends of their bows. The young man groveled and writhed and produced the most amusing noises in his distress. One fellow, more astute than his peers, suggested Attila's mood might be lightened by such a ridiculous performance.

With shouts of agreement, the small band herded their rare survivor towards the middle of the village. Attila saw the merry mob approach. Dismounting, he walked around the growing pile of plunder. The crowd parted and the young man was tossed at Attila's feet. Quivering and moaning, the young man groveled there. The grand warrior looked down on the youth with a bemused smile and absentmindedly put his hand to his sword. But even as his fingers closed upon the hilt; the captive at his feet, the ache in his leg, the plunder behind him, and weariness born of a life of danger, all conspired against Attila's intentions. He sank to the pile of plunder and propped his weary legs upon the youth's back.

The relief was instantaneous! The throbbing in Attila's leg eased and his grip upon his sword relaxed. The lad hunched still as a stone. Attila let out a long low sigh and slowly reclined upon the pile. The assembled warriors, seeing their chief's change of mood, sighed as well. Attila contemplated the youth at his feet. He was large and hearty with heavy bones. He was even handsome, a fine specimen of his people. Yet a young man, he was taller than all the gathered Huns. It amazed Attila that fear could squeeze such a strapping lad into so tight and compact a bundle.

The Huns went about their ravaging as Attila contemplated the bright morning light, the refreshing breeze, the song of the woodland birds rising above the noise of scavenging, and the merits of his new footstool. At length, Attila addressed the boy. He spoke in what he had learned of the northern woods language. "Boy, good for feet. Be with me for feet, live you. Be not with me for feet, die you. Angry with you I be, die you anyway! Head off!" And with that Attila struck the back of the boy's head with his riding crop. "Understand you?"

he shouted, and struck the boy again. The boy was as still as a stone, yet his head bobbed ever so slightly. Attila lay back again on the plunder and actually grinned.

Fear consumed the footstool. He had barely escaped the horrors of death to now live continually in the horrors of life. He had understood enough of the barbarian's course speech to know he would live under the constant threat of death. If ever he were not at the Chief's feet when he desired to recline, it was clear his life would end. Not a brave nor courageous soul under the best of circumstances, the footstool was motivated by fear. Life in the northern village was motivated by fear; fear of hunger, fear of sickness, fear of ridicule, fear of failure, fear of what lay beyond the comfort of the familiar. It was fear that motivated his superhuman efforts to escape as far as the haystack before his trembling legs gave out. Now, it was fear that would make him the best footstool alive.

The life of a footstool quickly became a blur of hunger, discomfort, pain, humiliation, and ever-present fear. Ultimately it was fear that saved the footstool's life and drove him to persevere. As cruel and inhumane as his existence was, it was the fear of what lay beyond the Last Breath that drove him onward. What the young footstool had seen of death was often painful and always accompanied by fear. There were many stories of what lay beyond the Last Breath, but it was always fear that was frozen in the eyes of death. Not knowing was the most frightful of all. Not knowing what lay beyond was fearful enough to drive the footstool to survive.

A sturdy war-pony was tied with a long rope to Attila's saddle. The war-pony was equipped with worn but serviceable saddle and tack. On this pony the footstool was expected to ride through any mayhem or punishing march, to be at Attila's feet if he decided to dismount. A riding crop to his head, neck, or shoulders was the footstool's reward for falling at Attila's feet too slowly. And, sometimes it was his reward for being there in time. The footstool learned to watch from the corner of his eye as he crouched. He came to know from the way Attila balance his weight on his feet, from the rhythm and gate of Attila's walk, from his mood, if it was necessary to lean away from and roll with a swift kick, or brace for the impact of Attila's bony heels or sharp spurs upon his back. But always there was the fear.

The footstool clung desperately to the back of his lunging pony as Attila drug him through the unthinkable carnage that was the warfare of Attila's life. As harrowing as the brutality of combat was, as close as the footstool came to death on those many raids, the wrath of Attila was the fear that drove him. Even as the footstool learned to dodge the blows of combat following Attila into mayhem, he

began to chance a glance at Attila. The footstool would look up to catch one of the many spectacular feats that defined Attila as the leader of this fearsome band. The acts of bravery, of sheer strength and cunning in combat, took the footstool's breath away and left him stunned. It was as if one of the ill-timed blows aimed at Attila glanced off the footstool himself, (as sometime was the case)!

It happened one bright morning that stung the eyes. They thundered down the valley with the sun at their backs. The village was rent open with the viciousness of their attack. Wails, shrieks, and angry curses filled the air. Blood flowed and entrails dropped into the dirt as the sun glinted off flashing swords of lightning. It was just another day traveling with the Huns. The footstool jostled along after Attila's charging mount. Somehow a village warrior hadn't been laid low by Attila's sword or bow, and was too close to the trailing footstool. The footstool stretched out his stirrucked foot and braced for impact. The collision jarred the footstool to his shoulders and wrenched his leg. Glancing back from his crouch in the saddle, the villager spun and sprawled in the dirt. Satisfaction. Triumph. Relief. This was a new sensation. But the sensation was only momentary.

Before the footstool could enjoy the moment, a wooden stave braced against the ground drove deep into the shoulder of Attila's war-horse. The mount twisted on the heavy shaft but even as the wood splintered from the impact, the war-horse was on its way down. Attila was launched as if from a catapult. The footstool was surprised to see the chief of the Huns scribe a graceful arc across the skyline and crash into two of the village's defenders. The footstool panicked. The cruel training ingrained in him compelled him to be at Attila's feet when he stood up.

The footstools' war-pony wasn't confused at all. Having the intelligence and training of its hearty breed, the little horse skidded to an abrupt stop rather than snap its neck at the end of the rope tied to the fallen war-horse. Laying back on its haunches with front legs stiff, the little pony went into a slide to save its life. Almost any Hun could have kept his seat in such a stop, but the footstool traced an arc across the morning sky, following only moments behind Attila. The footstool lay senseless in that blissful state between life and death where nothing matters. The battle raged about his lifeless form and he stirred not.

Blackness. Nothingness. A state of non-existence. Peace. If the footstool would have been conscious of his unconsciousness, he would have enjoyed it. Unfortunately, consciousness returned with the primal instinct of fear. "I will be slain if I am not at his feet!" his brain screamed at his senseless twitching limbs. The distant and dull sounds of battle slowly grew in his ears. Blackness faded to gray movement. Formlessness takes on the tangible. "The battle!" "Attila!" "I must find his feet before I am slain!" With lurching exertion, the footstool heaves

himself onto elbows, then to his knees. With effort he lifts his reeling head and searches the carnage about him for any sign of Attila. A small cluster of villagers actively jabs at something, a flash of color, "Was that Attila's tunic?" One of the villagers crumple into the dust and Attila is briefly in view. Heaving to his unsteady feet, the footstool lurches towards the fray. His bruised mind not comprehending the danger he faces, the footstool only recognizing the fear that drives him on.

In his unsteady rush to Attila's feet, the footstool shoulders aside a villager and sends him sprawling. The footstool breaks through and sees safety and survival at the feet of Attila. To the addled mind, Attila seems much closer than he is. With a final desperate lunge, the footstool falls and curls into his instinctive ball of survival, but falls short.

Attila wields his short sword with grim determination realizing the inevitable, but they will pay. They will not take him alive to taunt and torture him. They will have to wring every last drop of blood from his body before he gives up the fight. He will leave behind a pile of their kinsmen that will rob joy from their victory! From the corner of the eye Attila perceives a rush of movement. A desperate slash sends his foe reeling and Attila spins to face the advancing threat. In amazement Attila sees the footstool rushing towards him sending a villager sprawling in the dust. It is only then Attila notices the large villager plowing through the crowd. Assessing the villager with the instincts of a warrior, Attila judges by the heavy shoulders and large forearms, this villager must work iron. Poised over the villager's massive shoulder is a sturdy hickory beam the length of two Huns. The fire-hardened point wouldn't slice as cleanly as an iron blade, but it would hurt much more and still do the job. It was aimed at Attila's chest!

Across the square, a war-horse prances beneath one of Attila's archers. Years of conflict and battlefield confusion have hardened the archer's senses. The graceful but powerful recurve of his mighty bow sends a messenger of death speeding toward his foe. Experience told him it would find its mark, so the warrior scanned the battlefield rather than watch the man fall. It was the unexpected action that drew the archer's attention to the footstool. Accustomed to seeing the footstool groveling at the feet of Attila, it was with amazement the archer watched the footstool charge across the field of battle. The curiosity of it intrigued the Hun and he yanked on the reins to spin his horse about. It was then the archer realized the footstool was charging head-long towards armed villagers!

Even as the archer instinctively nocked another arrow to the bowstring, he realized with panic Attila was the center of the angry mob. The seasoned

warrior instinctively took in the whole scene, as his hardened muscles strained to draw the taunt bow. The footstool charged unarmed to Attila's aide, knocking aside the enemy. A mountain of a man charged Attila with a javelin that could have impale several Huns. Attila slashed at his enemies and spun to meet the giant.

At that moment the archer witnessed a sight of bravery and cunning he had never expected to see, especially from the lowly footstool. The footstool, unarmed, sacrificed himself lunged into the path of the giant. Even as the archer trained his arrow on the giant, the villager tripped over the footstool and sprawled at Attila's feet. Attila's sword fell across the giants broad shoulders at the base of the neck with such strength as to nearly cleave him in two. The footstool rolled with the impact of the giant and lay face-up, lifeless under the heavy feet of the departed foe. The battle raged on about them, but the giant and the footstool cared not.

Rest. Peace. Calm. Darkness. The hazy dull comfort of non-existence was interrupted by a distant slapping, like a fish on the surface of a calm lake. A tingling sensation filtered down to his numbed brain and he struggled to interpret it. "Leave me alone. I'm at peace." But again the slapping sound, only nearer this time, the tingling sensation slowly floating down from the darkness...annoying.

The battle ended with victorious Huns in their celebratory looting. The archer had rushed to Attila's aid and after the fierce battle had relayed to Attila the bravery of the fallen footstool. When Attila learned of the footstool's bravery, he momentarily regretted his frequent impulses to dispatch him. Seeking out the footstool in the aftermath, Attila found him pinned beneath the heavy feet of the giant. Surprisingly, there was still breath in the footstool's crushed chest. Perhaps Attila wouldn't have to find another footstool after all. He had grown accustomed to the luxury of putting his feet up. Another footstool would be hard to train. No telling how many he would have to kill before he found one as comfortable as this one.

With a warm grin at the thought, Attila lightly slapped the footstool's face. There was enough of a reaction to convince Attila the footstool might survive. He slapped him again, harder. Several times he slapped the footstool, each time with increasing vigor. Finally, the footstool's eyes fluttered open. When his eyes finally focused on Attila's face, the look of bewilderment on the footstool's brow was replaced with panic. Squirming against the legs that pinned him to the ground, the footstool struggled to roll over and curl up before the sword descended on him for the last time. Instead of a sword, it was Attila's warm hand that rested on his throbbing head. In the course language of the Huns,

Attila said, "Rest my footstool. You have had a hard morning. I will recline without you until you recover. Then perhaps I will kill you." The grin on Attila's face and a gentle slap, drove the last shreds of fear from the footstool's heart. He relaxed and closed his eyes. Rest. Peace. Calm, but no darkness.

From that day forth, the footstool rode on a gallant war-horse, no longer tethered to Attila's steed. He still rode under threat of death, but warriors closest to Attila were tasked with teaching the footstool the arts of war. He was issued weapons stripped from the fallen and would no longer have to rush to Attila's aid unarmed. The footstool was surprised to find himself heralded as a minor hero in the battle. The accounts he heard retold about himself, (it was the most popular tale around the fires at night), weren't the way he remembered things. He would listen intently, curled up under Attila's feet. Unlike a foot in the ribs or a riding crop across the back of his neck, this was attention he relished. Now he was more likely to get a pat on the head or a clap on his shoulder before Attila settled in. If it had been possible, the chief of the Huns seemed almost kindly disposed towards the footstool at times. The footstool was careful not to let anyone see him smile as he crouched under Attila's feet.

The footstool had grown so accustomed to the oppression of fear, though his days were still severe by any standards, he felt as free as a lark. Weeks became months, and months turned to years. The footstool was by Attila's side through sun and storm, battle and council. The footstool marveled at Attila's prowess in battle, the fearlessness with which he faced death a dozen times a day. The footstool was even more impressed with Attila's meticulous military mind. Though the Hun had no formal training, he instinctively knew the ebb and flow of battle, the pride and fear of his opponents, the strength and will of his own men, and how to press a military advantage.

But what brought wonder to the heart of the footstool was the shrewd way Attila could read men and negotiate. As the footstool, he was taken as much for granted in the secret councils, negotiations, and conferences, as were flies. Not a Hun lifted a brow at the crouching footstool or worried about his fidelity. He could easily be killed. Many groveling dignitaries however, could not take their eyes off this human furniture. Often, the footstool was taken for some elaborate carving, a clever prop to impress Attila's enemies. But, when the footstool would cut a sideways glance at a visiting emissary, they would often jump back or recoil in surprise and horror. When this would happen, Attila would roar with laughter till he was in danger of toppling from his cushions. Yet, Attila was cool and calculating in his negotiations for tribute. Such mighty powers as The Roman Empire paid homage to the Huns. Yes, even the great Caesars knew and feared Attila and paid him handsomely to stay clear of their territories. For some reason, that made the footstool proud.

In this way the footstool spent his years; riding into danger, crouched quietly in the most important councils of the Huns, learning to embrace the open and democratic, playful and familial society of marauding killers. Without even thinking about it, the footstool had begun to participate in the raids and battles of the Huns. At first, it was just a swing of a sword to deflect a blow. But as his training under Attila's lieutenants intensified, the footstool naturally took a more active role in combat. In battle, the footstool always fought with his back to Attila, glancing over his shoulder to see if Attila needed his footstool.

In one intense battle it was touch and go. It looked as if it might be the end of the mighty Hun. From the years prostrate at his feet, the footstool could read Attila intuitively. Reacting to Attila's rhythm of war, the footstool knew each move intuitively and the two moved as one. The effects was such that it was more than two warriors battling together, but they had the devastating efficiency of ten! But the defenders were relentless fighters and the end could come quickly.

Aware of their dire straits, Attila realized this might be the end and wanted to encourage the footstool. With puzzlement he realized he cared if the footstool lived or died! So Attila joked, "These little girls aren't so mean! I could slay them all sitting down!" In an instant the footstool threw himself at Attila's feet and in horror Attila thought him struck down. But with a twist of his head, the footstool looked up and winked. The Hun kicked the footstool gently in the ribs and roared with laughter, even as he began to swing his sword again. Throughout the rest of the battle, they would catch each other's eye, and laugh all over again. Attila's closest warriors who had witness the scene, considered themselves privileged.

Over a decade had passed. Thousands of hard-riden miles, hundreds of bloody campaigns, countless warming fires, and the two men were never far apart. One evening, in the glow of burning logs, Attila studied the back he had come to know so well. It came as something of a revelation, the warm affection he felt for his footstool, and here he was under his feet. Suddenly, something about this arrangement didn't seem quite right to the warrior. But what to do? Attila reached down and roughly squeezed the footstool's shoulder. The footstool rewarded Attila with an upturned face and a smile, the smile of a friend, not a footstool.

The next morning started as so many had, with a headlong stampede into enemy lines. The Huns fought fiercely, as did their foe. In one pitched engagement, Attila glanced at the footstool who stood between Attila and a half a dozen men. The footstool's long blade repeatedly flashed in devastating arcs, as the dagger in his left hand deftly found vulnerable targets. Attila was awed by the skill with

which his footstool fought. With a flash of pride Attila thought, "Why not? Has he not learned from me! How many times has the footstool fought between me and certain death?" The thought nagged at Attila's conscience.

Latter that day after the spoils of war were evenly divided, the whole tribe of the roving Huns was called before Attila's tent. The footstool was amazed how large the Army of Attila was when all in one spot, and not spread out across the battlefield. The warriors parted as the footstool stepped into the space open before Attila. The footstool bent to throw himself at Attila's feet. Attila stepped forward and stopped his footstool with his riding crop across the footstool's chest. The footstool froze with unaccustomed uncertainty and fear in his eyes. Attila almost laughed at the comical sight. With a pang in his heart, Attila remembered the first time he had seen this groveling lad.

Attila swallowed hard. He grasped the footstool's shoulders and held him at arm's length. In the strong clear voice that could be heard above the din of battle, Attila addressed his warriors.

"With each of you I would entrust my life. Of all the people we have met in battle, you alone Oh Mighty Huns, am I proud to pitch my tent among!" The assembly lifted up a mighty and prolonged roar that struck fear into the hearts of their retreating enemy, now over two miles distant. The vanquished quickened their pace.

When the roar subsided, Attila was nearly overcome with pride in his men. "You have served yourselves and our people proudly! But one among us has rendered service as a brother, though he has lived as a slave." Now, all eyes focused on the back of the footstool. Only the footstool stood before them, not curled at Attila's feet. Those men who still lived; who has shoved and prodded the footstool till he groveled before Attila, openly wept without shame. Their pride in the footstool was understood by all.

Attila turned the footstool to face the Huns. "This day..." Attila choked on his own emotion and steadied his voice before his men. "This day," he repeated in a clear and resounding proclamation. "This day, I swear by my blood and sword, this brave man, worthy of being born a Hun, will no longer serve as my footstool, but rather serve as our trusted advisor and closest friend!"

The earth shook with their thunderous approval. Almost three miles away the retreating enemy cried aloud at the terrible din. The Huns could not be stopped in their unanimous and heartfelt roar. They continued to yell and pound their swords upon their shields. They stomped upon the earth till they were at last as fatigued as if from battle. The footstool looked as if struck across the face.

As the roar subsided and silence spread across the assembled warriors, the footstool spoke out in a strong and resonating voice. The power of his speech shocked all who heard, because the footstool seldom spoke at all. "Mighty Attila, chief of the glorious and exalted Huns..." the footstool was interrupted by uproarious cheers. "Mighty Attila, you both honor me, and cut me to the heart today." Not a Hun breathed. "Who am I among these mighty warriors that you would exalt me this day? Every one of these men before you is worthy to be honored." With this the Huns exhaled in unison.

The footstool continued, "But who among this great tribe has already been honored more than I? Am not I alone the one closest to the Mighty Attila? Am not I alone the one counted on to bring rest and peace to your weary soul? Who among your mightiest and bravest warriors has been allowed this great honor?"

Turning to address the gathered warriors, the footstool spoke directly to the men he had grown to respect, if not love. "Which of you has not secretly wished to trade places with me at the feet of Attila?" A deep hush descended upon the assembly as each man recognized the fleeting desire of his heart. "Who among you would not have fought for the privilege to be in the most intimate of councils of our great people? All of you! But which of you would dare face me on the field of battle and fight me for my right at the feet of Attila?"

Silence followed the bold challenge, but then one of Attila's closest warriors shouted, "Not I!" The theater erupted in a defining chorus, "Not I!" Three and a half miles away, frightened men looked over their shoulders. Turning once again to Attila, the footstool spoke. "Attila, chief of the Great and Mighty Huns, if I have found any favor in your sight, do not strip from me the honorable title of 'Attila's footstool'. If you value my service in the least, do not dishonor me before this mighty people and grant another my position of service. If you are to dishonor me in this way, rather kill me now with your own hand, as you have promised so many times before!" And with that, before Attila could lift his hand, the footstool threw himself at Attila's feet.

Attila looked down upon his trusted and beloved friend, his heart rent by the footstool's words. Then without shame, before hardened warriors who had tasted death, Attila collapsed upon his footstool and sobbed. Holding the footstool tightly, Attila wet the footstool's back with tears. The mighty and warlike Huns stood in silence. Each one deeply envied the bond of brotherhood the footstool shared with their chief, but not one begrudged the footstool the honor. When Attila's gratitude and humility had spent itself, Attila wiped his face on the footstool's tunic and blew his nose on his shirt. Rising up to his full height, Attila clapped for his cushions. Then, settling himself upon his pillows,

Attila gently laid his feet across his Footstool's back. The emotions of the Huns could not be contained for quite some time. Their approval shook the very foundations of the earth. Over four miles away, grown men cried and those who were still able broke into a run.

From that day forward the Footstool's honor among the band knew no bounds. His humility in service exalted his deeds above Attila's own feats in the esteem of the Huns - and Attila was happy that it should be so. For years they fought bravely, side by side. In councils of war, in councils of peace, and in negotiations of tribute, the wisdom the Footstool had learned among the Huns was sought from beneath Attila's feet. Attila would often tap the Footstool's shoulder when he desired the Footstool's wise counsel. "And why not?" Attila would say to himself, "Did he not learn it from me!"

The years passed and the great Roman Empire grew complacent toward the Huns. Mistaking peace for the absence of threat, Caesar neglected his tribute to the Huns. This did not go unnoticed by the Footstool and was brought to Attila's attention. Not being the diplomatic sort, rather than send a reminder to Rome, the Huns marched. Reports of looting and pillaging on the fringes of the Roman Empire were soon circulating in Rome. Arrogance is often the result of power and pride and the rulers of Rome were no exception. Strapped for funds, the counselors of Caesar encouraged treachery rather than tribute, and Caesar was eager to listen.

Late one afternoon as Attila reclined chatting with his Footstool, word came that ambassadors from the Roman Empire were approaching with news of tribute. This made Attila merry and soon the whole encampment was celebrating. It would be a day before the Romans arrived. Arrangements were made to ready the camp. Attila wanted his people presented in the most impressive array. Expected significant tribute from a nation of Rome's stature, Attila intended to get his money's worth. All was ready and the Ambassadors arrived.

The Footstool knelt beneath Attila's feet. The Footstool's knees had been aching for the last few years but he never mentioned it. Attila had noticed his Footstool was slower to rise and it tugged at his heart. As the flaps were drawn back on the counsel tent, five ambassadors of Rome entered. This was a large group to be sent to counsel, even with tribute, but Attila considered a power like Rome should send a large delegation. The counsel tent would hold twenty war-horses in full array, so it took a few moments for the emissaries to make their way to where Attila reclined. The Footstool stole a glance from the corner of his eye, and what he saw made his heart jump.

The Footstool had been watching feet for decades. He could read a man by his feet and his stride. What he saw now were not the feet of ambassadors. Nor did they walk like men who brought news of tribute. The purposeful stride was not the approach of men who carried favor. The solid footfalls were not light steps of ones who would not offend. Instead, each man placed his feet as if to balance himself for sudden action, of this the Footstool was sure. He didn't need to study the flowing robes of the men for hidden daggers or swords. Assassins know how to hide the tools of their trade. But, they couldn't conceal the intent of their footfalls from the Footstool.

Attila felt the sudden hardness in the Footstool's back. Without warning Attila was thrown backwards over his cushions as the Footstool leapt forward. Drawing his sword as he rose, the Footstool didn't wait to see any weapons but cut down the nearest ambassador. Attila's guards closed on their fallen chief. The Footstool plunged his sword deep within the next emissary which was his final mistake. Unable to withdraw his deeply buried sword, the Footstool snatched out his dagger. Weapons flashed from the folds of robes as the Footstool fell in among the assassins. Stabbing and slashing fiendishly, the Footstool's art of death was well learned, but employed within the reach of the assassin's blades. Though may time cut through, the Footstool did not stop till the last Assassin fell.

Attila recovered his feet but the Footstool had turned back from his carnage to resume his proper place at Attila's feet. But the Footstool's strength failed him. Pitching forward, Attila caught the Footstool and gently laid him down, cradling the Footstool's head to his chest. Stroking the hair back from the Footstool's face, they both knew.

"Please", Attila softly said, "after all these years together, please tell me your name dear brother. The name of Attila's Footstool must be honored and remembered among the Mighty Huns for all time." The Footstool looked up at him with a grim smile.

"I will tell you, Oh Mighty and Brave Attila of the Great Huns, if you grant my final request."

"Anything my brother. Anything you ask I will do, even if it costs me my very life!"

The Footstool faintly nodded his head. "This I will ask of you my Father; that you will not bestow my honor upon any other. Allow me to serve you in death, even as I have served you in life." The Footstool saw the stricken look upon Attila's face as the request registered on his grieving soul. "Swear it by your

blood and your sword Mighty Attila, and then I know it will be done for me in death, even as you have honored me in this life.”

The air was forced from Attila’s chest as heaving sobs racked his frame. But he knew time was short. He shook his head. “I so swear before this band of brothers, warriors of the Mighty Huns. By my blood and by my sword, no other soul will rob you of your honorable service. You will serve me in death as you have served me in life. And your name will be honored and remembered among the Might Huns as long as there is a sword to swing. And warriors of all nations and every tribe will hear of your deeds and utter your name with honor. Now, my son, tell me your name.”

The Footstool slipped back through time, trying to remember his insignificant life before he was Attila’s Footstool. His lips moved, but life was rapidly escaping. Attila leaned close with the Footstool’s cold lips upon his ear. And then he was gone. Rest. Peace. Calm, but no darkness. Attila wept.

Two weeks had passed, and Attila reclined with his feet upon the fresh-turned dirt. Not even a rug would he suffer between himself and the resting place of his Footstool. Attila mourned his friend and ate little. And then the day arrived. It was the day Attila anticipated yet dreaded. The artisans were finished, and according to Attila’s strictest orders, every detail had been followed. Two of Attila’s closest warriors approached his couch, between them they carried a burden, draped in fine tapestry. They lay it gently at Attila’s feet. Solemnly, they lifted the tapestry.

At Attila’s feet sat a tall, stuffed cushion. It was made of extraordinarily fine leather and fabric. The fabric was recognizable as being fashioned from the Footstool’s garments. It was a handsome and functional piece of furniture. It was just the right height. Attila leaned forward and stroked the leather overlay. Gently, he traced scars in the leather he remembered...some he had put there. Then Attila reclined, and ever so gently, lay his aching feet upon his Footstool once again.

Attila emerged from his tent, his Footstool clutched against his chest. According to Attila's orders, two war-horses awaited them. The gallant steed of the Footstool had been outfitted with a special saddle, and was tied with a long rope to Attila’s war-horse. The Huns watched silently as Attila lifted the Footstool to the special saddle and fastened it securely in place.

Stepping around the war-horse Attila faced the assembly. In his vigorous voice, Attila cried out, “This day, Brave and Mighty Huns, I present to you, the Footstool of Attila! Not just a footstool, but a trusted brother who even in death

continues in honorable service. Be mindful of what he taught us of service and sacrifice. Not only in the way he lived life but now how he serves in death. No longer will he be remembered among us as a footstool. From this day forward, he will be remembered with honor by the name we never knew. We will always speak with respect of our brother, Ottoman.”

With that, Attila mounted his war-horse and pointed his nose towards Rome. He would extract a terrible tribute from those heathens. Ottoman faithfully followed, even as he had in life. A hard day's ride led them through a few minor battles and one day closer to the arrogant Caesar. As Attila dismounted for the day, he clapped for his cushions. But, when a faithful warrior reached to unloose his Ottoman, Attila angrily brushed him aside. Attila had vowed by his blood and his sword, no soul would serve him as Ottoman had. This was Attila's duty to his brother. And so it was for many generations. The name of Ottoman was honored...until no longer was there a sword to swing, and his loyal service was lost in the memory of the terrible and glorious Huns.

**How much more honorable and glorious to live and to die in the service of
The One,
The Creator of All Things,
The One Who Was - and Is - and Who Is To Come!**