

# COUNT MEINRARD THE DEADLIEST MAN ONLINE

in

## The Shopping Mall Misadventure

"You had better get it right this time, Harry. You had better get it bloody right," the Count muttered as he scrutinized his reflection in a mirror. "It's 'alive,' not 'online.' *Alive.*"

He was checking his face for dermal irregularities—some people called them pimples. Cherry Ripes had a nasty habit of bringing out the irregularities. Last night he scoffed three king-size bars, a cylinder of sour cream and onion Pringles, and half a lobster that Tolly, the BO-sodden truck driver who lived in the flat above him, had traded him for some karate lessons. His pomegranates were still the worst for wear thanks to an unconscionable kick from one of Tolly's steel-capped boots.

"You want me to take off me clodhoppers, mate?" Tolly had asked as they prepared to spar in the flat's car park.

"There's no need," the Count said, "they'll never touch me."

At the time it felt as if he had made violent love to a steam shovel. He winced just thinking about it.

"You don't kick a man until he's ready to be kicked," he said to his reflection. He gave it an approving look. For a man of his 40-something years he was gaspingly handsome.

He scanned the tiny dressing room, which was sandwiched between the stage in the shopping mall's atrium and an escalator, and clicked his tongue in disgust. "Sticking a man of my breeding in a bloody matchbox like this . . . it's an insult to human intelligence."

He consulted his watch: five minutes to show time. A hair unit check—some people called them wigs—was in order. He placed his hands on the unit and wriggled them about. There was only some minor dislocation, but apart from that the double-sided cloth tape was doing a commendable job of securing the unit. He used to have a metal stud in his head that would click into a socket beneath the unit, anchoring it to his scalp. Unfortunately, the stud had a habit of drowning out calls on his mobile phone with static and making him run to the toilet every time his electric kettle whistled, so he had to have the ruddy thing surgically removed.

Face and hair unit were impeccable. So too were his well-starched karategi and his white socks and black sandals. As a rule, he demonstrated his martial arts prowess barefoot, but corn pads made that a rule meant to be broken.

There was just one more item for him to inspect before he took the stage. He loosened his karategi to reveal a flesh-colored midriff compressor—some people called them girdles. He ran his hands over its elasticized surface. It was so firm he could bounce a shot put off it. *Perfect.*

As he wiped the lenses of his Coke-bottle glasses with a handkerchief, a squeal of feedback told him his faithful assistant, Harry, had the microphone.

"Wadies and gentlemen—" A second, louder squeal interrupted Harry's Elmer Fuddesque intro.

The Count grimaced. "Oh for goodness . . . you're supposed to speak into the microphone, Harry, not eat it."

Onstage, Harry, who looked like a malnourished Danny DeVito, leaned gingerly into the microphone, as if it were a deadly snake that could strike him at any instant. "Wadies and gentlemen," he paused for a second in case there was more feedback, "boys and girls, put your hands together for the gweatest martial artist in the whole wide world. Here he is, the deadwiest man onwine, Count Meinward!"

The Count rolled his eyes at Harry's flub, then crossed himself and bounded onto the stage.

The 20-strong audience gave him a huge round of indifference.

He had barely hit the stage bounding when he tripped on something sticking out of the floor and fell flat on his face. "Ooh, you bastard of a thing," he said. He groped around for his glasses, which had flown off his face and were now lying somewhere in the blurry beyond. After several slaps of empty floor, his hand hit pay dirt, and the fog that had suddenly descended lifted just as suddenly.

Faces, sneering, grinning, snickering faces, were staring at him.

The Count sprung into damage control mode and started doing push-ups, as though that were his intention all along. He stopped at five. He didn't want to aggravate his hiatus hernia.

He got to his feet, not altogether steadily, and straightened his karategi. "Carry on, Harold," he said, then marched three steps back.

While Harry addressed the audience, the Count engaged in a spot of bird watching. Being a virile master of the ancient Japanese art of karate with enough testosterone to fuel a caber-tossing competition, he often found himself the object of women's feverish yearnings. Chick magnet was too crude an expression for a man of refined tastes, but it was an accurate one nonetheless. His hands and feet were deadly weapons, but his lips and thighs were even deadlier. Many a fetching lass had swooned when his potent loins had come within hormone-firing distance of her.

A prepubescent schoolgirl digging out the last scraps of raspberry flavored ice from the bottom of a Slurpee cup, an old lady in a wheelchair who was either asleep or dead, and a 400-pound Greek woman with a barbed wire tattoo around her neck, squawking into a mobile phone, were all the female companionship the audience had to offer. Even a starving vulture would have turned its beak up at such slim pickings. Although the Greek woman was anything but slim.

"The Count would wike a vowunteer to come up onstage to help him demonstwate his kawate," Harry said.

"What's the old perv gonna do with them?" a young layabout with spiked hair said.

The Count stormed to the front of the stage and thrust his finger at the layabout. "I'll have you, sunshine!"

Rather than flee, which would have been the normal, life-preserving action of any sane fellow, the layabout stood his ground. "Is that your real hair?" he asked.

The audience chuckled.

"Hold me back, Harry! Hold me back!" the Count said as he shook his brick-smashing fists at the insolent whippersnapper. "Don't let me kill him! Don't let me kill him!"

Harry pulled the Count away from the front of the stage. "Don't wuwee, Count, I won't wet you."

"Up yours, Pom," the layabout said, giving the Count the finger.

The Count glared at him, furious. "Cheeky young baaaaastard!"

The layabout's pink-haired, multi-pierced girlfriend coaxed him away from the stage and over to a smoking paraphernalia shop.

Harry returned to the microphone and scanned the shrinking audience. "Any vowunteers? Any vowunteers?"

Peering over the top of his glasses, the Count clapped eyes on an ideal candidate. Over by a map of the shopping mall was a 12-year-old boy trying to talk his mother into letting him go onstage. She was shaking her head but smiling at the same time. Just a little cajoling from Harry was all it would take to convince her that the safest place on earth for the boy—for anybody—was with the deadliest man alive.

"Anyone wike to vowunteer?" Harry asked once more, looking in every direction save the boy's.

"Harry," the Count whispered in frustration. "Harry!" Harry looked at the Count, who motioned to the lad and said, "The boy over there with his mother, get him."

Just then, the boy and his mother scrambled up an escalator to be with some friends they had spotted on the next level, and in their place waddled the 400-pound Greek woman and her hulking 15-year-old son. When Harry finally looked where the Count had indicated, he saw the humongous pair instead. "How about the boy wooking at the map?" he said.

The boy gazed up at Harry quizzically.

Harry nodded. "Yes, you, young felwa."

The Count was ogling a juicy bird in a pair of derriere-fondling shorts who was coming down the escalator. He glanced at the approaching boy mountain, went back to ogling the bird, and

then did a double take that almost gave him whiplash. "Oh my goiter!" he said under his breath.

Grinning vacuously, the boy lumbered onto the stage, which groaned beneath his behemoth footfalls. He wore a maroon T-shirt with an ice cream stain on the front of it, black shorts, and lime green thongs which were absorbed into near-invisibility by his immense blob-like feet. At six-foot tall and 220 pounds the Count was no midget, but when the mammoth teen stood next to him he felt like Gulliver staring up at a Brobdingnagian barrel of pork fat.

"What's your name, young man?" he said at sufficient volume for the audience to hear. He eschewed microphones because his lung capacity, which was greater than that of any normal man, allowed him to project his commanding voice unaided.

After several seconds of excruciating silence, the Count said, "Well, names aren't that—"

"GEORGE!" the boy blurted into the microphone, which Harry was holding up to his mouth. The sound system shrieked in protest. "George Liacopolous!"

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, George," the Count said, somewhat taken aback. "And thank you for coming onstage. It takes a brave person indeed to face the deadliest man alive. And let me assure you . . ." he glanced at the boy's mother, who was placing a bet on the fifth race at Randwick with her mobile phone, "and your dear mother that no harm shall befall you today." He proudly displayed his timber-splintering hands to the boy. "These once saved Princess Margaret from an angry mob of merchant seamen in Barbados."

The Count turned to the audience. "All right, ladies and gentlemen, what I'm going to do is—"

"BARBADOS!" the boy said, as if the answer to a jackpot-winning question on a TV game show had just come to him.

The Count jolted so violently that his glasses skipped off his nose and came to a rest on his bottom lip. He returned them to their rightful place, then opened his mouth to pick up where he left off, when—

"BARBADOS!" the boy said again.

The audience laughed. A couple of shoppers wandered over to see what was amusing them.

Undeterred, though a trifle irritated, the Count carried on like the eye-poking hero he was. "What I'm going to do now is demonstrate the superior strength of a karate master by chopping a timber beam in two with my bare hand."

"Borrrrrring!" said an unappreciative and profoundly stupid fellow in the audience. He promptly received the Count's death stare.

Harry shuffled over, dragging a table on which were two stacks of bricks spanned by a length of timber. Not looking where he was going, he slammed against the boy's megalithic back. The boy looked over his shoulder and down at Harry, who gazed nervously up at him and smiled apologetically. The boy responded with an amiable nod.

Harry handed the piece of timber to the Count, who held it up to the audience and said, "To prove this is a genuine piece of two by four and not a stunt prop, I'm going to get George here to examine it."

He placed the two by four in the boy's baseball glove-sized hands. Then he grinned smugly at the audience while the boy made sure it was the real deal.

A reverberating SNAP shot his smug grin dead.

He wheeled to see the boy gazing in befuddlement at now two pieces of timber, one in each hand. The boy grinned at him and said, "SNAP!"

The audience applauded the startling feat of strength. The boy raised the pieces of timber in triumph, which brought him whistles and louder applause. "SNAP!" he said again, with delight.

The Count looked like a political candidate who had been caught torching an orphanage on Christmas morning.

Mocking laughter crashed onto the stage like a giant wave. He staggered back half a step from the sheer force of it.

A member of the audience chanted, "Fake!" Then the rest joined in. The din roused the old woman in the wheelchair, who choked back a snore as she fell awake.

At a complete loss, the Count glanced at poor Harry, whose look of utter discombobulation told him it was a glance wasted. He knew he had to do something—*anything*—to win the audience back, but what?

*Take charge, Albert. Take charge.*

The Count recognized the soft, almost imperceptible voice immediately. It was his inner-sensei. Only his inner-sensei called him Albert. Well, he called himself Albert sometimes, as did Yaroslav, his local butcher, but that was neither here nor there. The fact was he had to take charge, *now*. Take charge like he did when he punched out a bank robber making off with the proceeds of a hold up. *Who would've believed an 80-year-old cross-eyed midget would rob a bank?* Take charge like he did when he stopped a bus filled with school kids from driving off a cliff. *Thank God he woke up in time and jumped on the brakes.* And take charge like he did when he dove on a crazed protestor lunging at the Prime Minister with a knife. *He had been drinking at the time and had fallen off a second-story balcony.*

The Count squeezed his eyes shut, sucked in a deep breath, and shook like a belly dancer operating a jackhammer as the limitless power of chi infused every cell of his body.

The audience watched the supernatural top-up in silent awe.

He stopped shaking and glared at them. "This. Is. Not. Fake," he said through clenched teeth.

None of them dared say a word.

With the audience back in the palm of his steel-hard hands, he lightened up and said, "And I'm going to put the next one of you who yells 'fake' in a headlock. And when Count Meinrad, the deadliest man . . ." he cast Harry an admonishing look, "*alive*, puts you in a headlock, you stay in a headlock!"

From behind him came a booming cry of "HEADLOCK!" Before he had a chance to react, his head was being constricted by the boy's anaconda-like arm.

"HEADLOCK!" the boy said to his growing fan base.

"Arrrrgh!" the Count hollered to no one in particular.

The boy's bicep squashed the Count's hair unit into either a crepe in bad need of a shave or Animal from the Muppets, depending on one's viewing angle.

"Use your karate on him, Count!" some smart-arsed bastard in the audience said.

The Count stomped on the boy's size 14 foot and whapped him multiple times in the solar plexus but stomped and whapped in vain.

With no thought for his own safety or the Count's, Harry launched himself onto the mountainous brute's back. "You weave the Count awone!"

The boy twisted this way and that trying to ditch his unwanted passenger. A bellowing Count shuffled back and forth in time to his thoughtless rhythm.

The audience whooped and clapped. Shoppers were pouring down from every level of the mall to get a closer look at the onstage action.

The boy's mother had just found out she had done her dough on the gee-gees and was royally pissed, and was even more so when she saw her son being viciously assaulted by a pair of middle-aged bullies. "George!" she shrieked and raced to his rescue, her jiggling bulk skittling members of the audience.

Harry had the boy in a choke hold as firm as grilled cheese. "Lemme go!" the boy said.

"You wet go of the Count and I'll wet go of you, awight?" Harry said, struggling to stay attached to the boy's tree trunk of a neck.

The Count managed to wriggle his head free. The audience pealed with laughter at his hair unit, which had been squashed into a limp mohawk.

He was just getting his bearings when the boy's mother, screeching like a 400-pound cockatoo, decked him with a running clothesline.

With the Count down for the count, she glowered at Harry. "Get your dirty hands off of my son!" she said, then body-avalanched him from behind. Groaning hoarsely, he slid off the boy onto the floor.

The packed audience was going mental.

The Count wobbled to a standing position. His collision with the floor had knocked his hair unit back into place, albeit back to front, though none would be the wiser. He focused on the boy's mother, eyes narrowing into enraged slits. "Madam, a word in your rear!" (Her brutal clothesline had left him a shade wonky in the head.)

She was too busy examining the boy for physical damage to hear him, anyway. "Chocolates!" the boy said excitedly as he ransacked her bulging handbag.

The Count refilled his mighty lungs and delivered a louder, corrected version of his previous request. "I said, Madam, a word in your ear!"

This request too was ignored by the woman, who slapped the boy's hand and plucked her handbag out of his reach. "No, greedy guts, you've had too much already."

"Give him some lollies!" the audience chanted.

"Mind yer friggin' business, ya bastards," she said.

They came back at her with a "You're an ugly fat bitch!" chant.

She returned fire with enough expletives to fill an urban dictionary. Two urban dictionaries.

"Madam . . ." the Count began to say again, but then stopped when he realized that a more hands-on approach was needed to gain her attention.

He stormed toward her but in his haste tripped over Harry and slammed into the boy. The boy caromed off his mother, who belly flopped the floor. The Count stumbled after her, his face splashing down between the vast acreage of her butt cheeks.

The atrium quaked with laughter. In seconds the mortifying configuration was being uploaded to Facebook and YouTube.

The Count's nose alerted him to the alarming real estate he was inspecting, and he shot to his feet.

The audience chanted, "The Count!" in appreciation of his grand comic performance.

The Count beamed with pride. He thought they were paying tribute to his incomparable martial arts skills. He stood at the very front of the stage to address the adoring crowd. "Friends," he said, "what you have just witnessed is a real-world example of why one should never tangle with a master of karate."

Somebody tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned to see an enormous fist blocking out the world. It was attached to the boy's mother. "That's for hitting a lady from behind, asshole!" she said as she smashed him in the face.

He flew backward off the stage and landed on top of a Vietnamese lady's shopping jeep.

"Count!" Harry said. He strode toward the boy's mother to give her a piece of his mind. "Hey, you can't do that to the Count, wady."

The boy intercepted him. "Don't you hurt mama!" the boy said, then scooped him up and put him in an airplane spin.

As the Count struggled to emancipate his posterior from the shopping jeep, which was wedged tighter than a bowling ball in a drainpipe, the boy's mother grabbed the microphone. "This is all your fault, ya big turd. So don't blame me. I needed this like I need a kick in the head."

Suddenly Harry's feet whacked her noggin as the boy spun him a little too close to her. She lurched sideways and met the floor.

The audience eclipsed its previous high-decibel mark in terms of laughter.

With the aid of a burly bloke in a pair of overalls, the Chinese lady tipped the jeep over, causing the Count to spill out, posterior and all.

"Count, help!" Harry said as the mall whirled around and around him in a dizzying blur.

"I'm coming, Harry," the Count said, scrambling back onstage.

The boy took one look at the Count and dropped Harry, whose fall was cushioned by the boy's mother, who would soon have a bruise to add to the one already sprouting on her head.

The Count and the boy stood facing each other like two gunfighters preparing to see who was the fastest draw.

*Time to bring this savage beast down, Albert,* the Count thought.

*I want some Mars Bars,* the boy thought.

The audience clapped their hands and stamped their feet, egging the two combatants on.

With a frightful roar the Count charged the ginormous juvenile and rained karate chops on his neck and chest, announcing each with a "Haiya!" The merciless flurry would have leveled a tyrannosaurus, but the boy was completely unfazed by it.

The Count backed away from the boy to rethink his strategy.

The boy poked his tongue at the martial arts legend.

"Why, you insolent . . ." the Count said. "All right, you asked for it." The "it" to which he referred was his jaw-breaking mega-kick. He only ever used it as a last resort because it could kill very badly, but on this occasion he was happy to take the risk. He placed all of his weight on his left foot and raised his right knee to execute the deadly maneuver.

Suddenly 400 pounds of bone-crushing femininity grabbed his right leg. "Just what were ya planning to do with this, ya fat bastard?"



"Madam, release my leg immediately. And you're in no position to call an elephant seal fat, let alone myself."

Her eyes flashed with rage. Snarling insanely, she wrenched his leg upward. He roared in agony as a cramp racked the underside of it.

Laughter flooded the atrium.

The Count made a mental note never to grace a shopping mall with his towering presence again.

The boy's mother wrenched his leg higher. "How do you like that, homo?"

The Count lost his balance and swung away from her, inadvertently uppercutting her with his corn pads. She reeled backward and landed in the boy's arms. "Hebrokemyfrigginchin," she mumbled.

The boy dropped her like a cardboard box full of bricks and tramped irately toward the Count. "You broke mama's friggin' chin!"

Incapacitated by his cramp-assailed leg, the Count shuffled away from the approaching giant on his behind. "Stay away from me, you daft brute. Can't you see I'm an injured man?"

The boy leaped into the air to bring his size fourteens down on the Count's head. "CRUSH YOUUUUUU!"

The Count slid out of the way, just.

The boy's seismic landing sent a shock wave through the stage floor, causing the Count to bounce a good three inches into the air.

The boy stood over him, nostrils flaring. The Count knew that a second attempt at a head stomp was imminent. He also knew that he didn't have enough petrol left in his tank to shuffle, shimmy, roll, crawl, wriggle, or even fart his way out of this one. The Angel of Death in the guise of a gelatinous dullard was about to extinguish his noble flame and there wasn't a bloody thing he could do about it.

Or maybe there was.

He could see Harry getting to his feet behind the boy. Whenever he had trouble felling an opponent, which was so rare it was statistically zero, he initiated his I'm-Cliff-drop-over-sometime maneuver. He would get Harry to crouch behind the opponent, push the opponent over Harry, then neutralize the opponent with an emphatic stomp to the groin area.

The Count held up a bent index finger to Harry, signalling him to take the position. He did. Now all the Count had to do was stand up. This was easier said than done, since neither the boy nor his cramped leg might let him.

Solving the Count's problem, the boy's mother grabbed him by his karategi and yanked him to his feet. He welcomed the solution with a pained grunt. "Youbrokemychin," she mumbled.

"Now I'm gonna break yer balls." She rammed her knee between his legs to make good on her threat.

The Count's eyes spun upward. "Ooooooh, me pomegranates!"

"How does that feel? Would ya like another?"

He shoved her away from him but went with her since she still had him by his karategi. They collected the boy. All three of them piled on Harry, pinning him to the stage floor. The section host to the human avalanche remonstrated at its colossal burden, then imploded with a thunderous crash, casting the quartet several feet below.

The audience went mental. A chant of "This is awesome!" started up.

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"Who turned out the bloody lights?" the Count said as he came to in the darkness. He couldn't see a thing. He reached up to ensure his hair unit was where it should be. It wasn't. He fumbled around for it and found it hugging his face. After sliding it back where it belonged, he could see a small part of the world again but not much.

Voices filled with urgency.

He could hear voices filled with urgency.

"What's all the kerfuffle about?" he said groggily.

A horrendous weight was dragged across his chest, which squashed the air out of his lungs and tested the breaking strain of his rib cage.

Light filled the hole in the stage floor. He looked up to see four mall security guards gazing down on him. "Stay back, I'm a master of the marital aids," he said.

Two of the guards started to pull him feet first out of the hole. As they did, there was an explosive release of pressure on his stomach, then a hideous blob monster burst out of nowhere and barreled toward his face.

He emerged from the hole, flailing madly at his copious paunch, which had escaped the confines of his midriff compressor. "Oh my goiter! Get it off me! Get it off me!"

The next morning, the front-page headline of the *Herald Sun* read MALL BRAWL: MOTHER AND SON BEAT UP KARATE EXPERTS. The Count objected strenuously to it. Harry wasn't an expert. No way known.