

Who: Sgt. Rick Riley, Marines Special Unit, USA

Died: In space orbiting earth at 14:30 Pacific Standard Time.

Cause of Death: Hit with lazer fired from a Drax henchmen.

Miss Schroder dropped another file into the completed stack, letting out a small sigh. She stretched, arching her back with her arms thrown up behind her head. She held this pose for a few moments before setting them back down on the desk. She began picking at the top of the pile of folders on her brown oaken desk, her fingers trailing lines over where the names should be, but she didn't read any of them. The Marines didn't provide her much, but at least they'd splurged on a larger than average sized desk. Of course, she knew that was partly because of the morbidity of her work. Being the one to check the cause and then sign-off on the deaths of soldiers in the field wasn't something most took on with any sort of joy, and anything she'd felt about her desk had already faded away, like spilled ice cream on a bitterly hot summer day. Indeed, though it was mostly peacetime in 1979, continued clandestine operations all over the world meant her work was, and never would be, actually finished.

It also meant she held a higher than average clearance level, as she was tasked with reporting cause of death in locations most people wouldn't be able to find on a map. The latest batch of files she had come across today fell hard into that category in wildly different ways than she had ever really anticipated.

She was discovering there were a lot of ways to die in space. She had already signed a few documents that listed quite horrific ways one could meet their demise. Being exposed to the vacuum of space was something Miss Schroder decidedly would try to avoid in the future and she felt lucky for one of the few times in her life to be sitting behind her large, light brown desk.

She picked the next file up off the top of the pile, sparing a moment to sigh at the sheer size of it. The only time her piles were this tall was when something had gone horribly wrong. Though this time the officer that had dropped the files off had described it as a victory... she couldn't really see how. That was something she knew she would never really be able to understand. She saw a LOT of death in her own way, her mind designing and showing her all sorts of terrible ways to succumb to the chaos of being alive. It wasn't a pleasant experience, but after all the years of constant death on paper, she had almost grown accustomed to the feeling of nauseousness and the crippling despair at it all.

This latest batch was something entirely new, as death in ways she'd never given thought to always spawned such fierce images in her awareness. She glanced at the name typed across the top of the folders tab: Rick Riley, Sgt. XXXX-XXX X-XXXXXXX. The crossed out part gifted her the knowledge that he was a soldier of a special grade, one that the U.S. government could not, and would not, acknowledge the actions of even though he only operated under their orders.

Ms. Schroder quickly skimmed over his background information, her eyes darting left and right as she checked the type for any obvious mistakes. 'What a handsome man,' she thought as she flipped past his graduation picture from the Marines. His short and cropped jet black hair that peeked out from the side of his hat was a pretty common look, but she quickly turned back to take one more peek at him. The black and white photo didn't do him justice at all, but his eyes showed a

certain softness that stuck out as it was surrounded by the hardness of his features. She sighed again.

She continued scanning the miscellaneous documentations of Rick's career... the few awards he had received while a normal marine accompanied by the hidden accommodations and demerits of his more recent and more shadowy years. She marked each page as she completed them before finally arriving at the after action report.

It started with the same information as the last seven she had already completed: a small fighter group, able to fit within the cargo bay of two space shuttles was assembled from various forces training in the secret space program. Ms. Schroder absently reminded herself that she wasn't even suppose to know about Code-name: Hermes Wheel. If she was to ever let it slip, the consequences of her accidental discovery could prove very dire to her own well-being. Despite that, she also knew this was one operation she wouldn't soon forget. These men had gathered together, been loaded onto some of the most recently designed space shuttles, and went to take down a single man in a giant suddenly viewable space station. The thought of a madman orbiting high up above her made Ms. Schroder shudder with a cold fear.

It hadn't gone as planned though, or she wouldn't have such a large pile of dead stacked up in letter form on her desk. She quickly found Riley's cause of death in the after action report. He had been tasked with entry to the station to gather information and capture any enemy combatants. The woman looking through his file knew what had happened from the already completed ones: after exiting the shuttle, they had been met with laser fire from the enemy that had launched from the station. The reports described fierce fighting and some of the earlier injuries and deaths had been truly disturbing. Cracked helmets which led to suffocating on the lack of space air and laser's ripping holes in space suits leading to frostbite and/or death had been numerous. Some had been declared KIA without a body, as the packs they used to navigate the 3d planes of space had been hit and spun them either towards earth, or out into the void. Ms. Schroder shuddered again at that thought specifically. Just the idea of watching everything you know and love slowly drift away with no hope of return... she suppressed another shudder though she felt the goos bumps rise on her arms.

Riley was one of the first to actually make it aboard the enemy space station. She read how other officers had watched Riley and his team of five make their way towards and entry hatch, losing two en route as enemy fire stopped one dead and another was struck by an enemies floating body and spun away from the group.

Rick Riley and the others had entered the hatch and closed it behind them, but that was the last any of them were seen alive. The group was discovered dead a short time later during the clean-up sweep, him and his team cut down by a laser within the station. The shot had apparently been from close range as well, and Ms. Schroder sighed as she fixed a mis-type in the word range, dabbing gently with whiteout before writing in very neat script over the spot. She quickly glanced to the bottom of the document to see if there was any next of kin for the poor man, but she only found deceased parents. That meant his body would be burned, and he would be listed as officially missing in action. No one would notice, as no one would

ever ask or come looking for him. No family made it easier to sweep under the rug, but not any less sad.

Ms. Schroder lightly licked her finger tip as she glanced one last time through his file. She gave one last slightly longing look at Riley's photo, before closing the folder and setting it atop the completed stack. She heard footsteps walking outside her office and glanced at the clock on her desk. She quickly got up and exited her office to catch them as they made their way towards the break room. The folder and papers on her desk laid completely still, as still as headstones among the grass.