Nobody could like Corporal Lawrence. That's not to say that nobody tried, or that he was somehow unfriendly, merely that he was one of those few that seemed to be “wired” differently. However, in the trenches of World War I, normalcy was at best a relative term, and one that had minimal relation of life, such as it was. Lawrence fought, listened to orders, and didn't disrupt the other soldiers, and that was all that was required. So what if people felt increasingly uncomfortable around him? In a place where the flesh rotting off your bones while you were still alive was the base-line of concern, a little personality conflict ranked several levels below a paper cut.

Lawrence, for his part, dealt with it as he always had. That is to say, remained totally unaware of the avoidance. The same way a man blind from birth cannot mourn the memory of color, Corporal Lawrence couldn't bemoan a lack of company. He was quiet, as he had nobody to talk to, and still, as he had nothing to do for long stretches of time. The enemy trench, less than a mile away, had gone silent for several days, letting boredom and nervousness sink in even more than normal…coupled with the unease that seemed to radiate off of Lawrence like heat waves.

The worst part was that there was no distinct reason to dislike the corporal. He was a plain man, average height, average build, bland of voice and action. Nobody could recall him raising his voice in joy or anger. He did have the occasional odd mannerisms, however. He tended to stare a beat or two longer than was acceptable at people. He rarely slept as well, and bunkmates said he would mumble in his sleep almost constantly. The content of those nocturnal ramblings, when they could be understood, were often odd, and potentially unsettling. One private moved to another barracks when he heard the name of his daughter pass Corporal Lawrence's lips, followed by a bubbling, muffled giggle.

It was strongly theorized that he was sent over the trench by his commanders more out of a desire to have him away than for his minimal combat skill. He and fourteen of his fellows were sent across the nightmarishly scarred waste of the no-man's-land between the trenches, to reconnoiter the enemy trench, and secure it if possible. Many seemed to hope that Lawrence would have the opportunity to prove his devotion to his country by making the ultimate sacrifice for it.

It was while he was gone, that three-day gap as the men held their breath, waiting for a surprise volley of shells, that someone started asking questions. Where as before, it was almost taboo to speak of Corporal Lawrence, since the departure of both him and his “aura”, rumor seemed to descend with the passion of the denied. Nobody remembered him ever talking of home. No sweet-smelling letters came, no soggy, dirt-streaked letters left. He mentioned his dreams often, and griped sometimes with the men over missed foods or pleasures, but never with any real passion.

Questions started to float among even the higher levels of the command. Nobody was able to actually find his station orders. He'd come in with a squad of reinforcements transferred from France…but there was no paperwork. The rest of the reinforcement squad had never seen the man before he'd been lumped in with them the night before the trip, along with the snips and scraps of other squads decimated by the Lamina. Whispers filtered among the grunts of the corporal being a curse. Nearly every man who'd shared a bunkhouse with him had gotten trenchfoot, and the rooms he haunted always seemed to smell more musty and sickly-sweet, even for the trench.

The men sent over the no-man's-land with Corporal Lawrence heard and cared for none of this. Just another man among many, all with death certificates awaiting a stamp that could fall at any moment. They moved fast and low, from crater to crater, slipping over slick mud and barbed wire, the only thing that seemed to grow in that blasted waste. Charging the last spurt and into the trench, they were greeted not with the harsh bark of Lamina orders and rifles…but a dense, close silence. Preparing for ambush, the men started to filter out into the tunnels and halls of the trench.

The men, already nervous, were not calmed by their investigation. The trenches stank of mold, sweat, and a thin undertaste of rotten fruit. A vile, cloying slime seemed to have pooled in every divot and crack, sticky as glue and itchy on the flesh. In a world where rats and insects would try to snatch food from your mouth even as you ate, they saw nothing alive, not so much as a fly. An armory lay in chaos, munitions spilled on the ground, rifles tossed like pick up sticks. A mess hall had been reduced to ruins, the tables and chairs piled in the center of the room, charred and twisted, the rations seemingly stamped into the dirt by many feet. And still, nothing, alive or dead, was found by the increasingly anxious solders.

Private Dixon found the first body, and managed to cry out before vomiting.

They knew it had been a man only because nothing else of that size could have been there. It lay on the floor of a barracks. The entire floor. The flesh of it had been…smeared, somehow, spread like butter over the rough dirt floor. Bones, already looking pitted and rotten, stuck out at random angles, like dead trees in a still swamp. The skull rested on one of the highest bunks, facing the doorway, ten gleaming white fingertip bones crammed into the cracked eye sockets. As one man went to examine it, he found the back of the skull had been crushed open, the rotting, sagging sponge of a tongue stuffed into the otherwise dry cavity.

More remains were found, each seemingly more unsettling and strange than the last. A ring of hands in a sandbagged watchpost, ten of them, fingers interlaced like a basket, the wrists ragged and broken. Two men in a tunnel, skin leathery and thin as mummies, eye sockets staring and empty, mouths locked impossibly wide, their clothes mere rags under an oily black scum. The latrine sent even the hardiest back, gagging and shivering. Overflowing with excrement and offal, gobbets of meat bobbed and oozed in the foul sludge… the whole surface dotted with what looked like thousands of clean, slick eyeballs, nerves and tendons fanning out like goldfish tails.

Corporal Lawrence was the first to find the hole, the other men loudly debating the better part of valor and their rapid withdrawal from the nightmare trench. It was small, in a section of fresh digging, the start of a new arm of trenches projecting closer to the enemy lines. No more than four feet across, it seemed to be the accidental uncovering of a natural chamber, the empty blackness of it defying investigation. Private Dixon, recovered and blessedly numb from his previous ordeals, saw the corporal prod the edge with his boot, then crouch to peer in…then suddenly slide in head-first before the private could so much as utter a shout of question.

The private was a good soldier, and rushed to the perceived distress of his fellow. When questioned later, he could provide little illumination as to what happened over the two minutes Corporal Lawrence spent in the hole. He could see nothing, the light of a torch seemingly gobbled up a few feet into that dense blackness. There were sounds…the rustle of movement over loose stone or rubble. An odd liquid shifting, a dry rustle that made him think of the insect husks he'd used to collect in the summer. As he shouted for aid, there was a sudden upwelling of a repulsive stench, like a reptile house gone sour and old, and his fellow soldiers found him retching helplessly beside the hole when they came around the turn.

It was as they rushed to Private Dixon's aid that the hand emerged from the hole. They stopped and raised rifles as one body, roaring for the owner of that pale, trembling hand to identify himself. As they watched, another hand joined the first, followed by the pale, shivering head of Corporal Lawrence. He was streaked and smeared with a tarry black ooze, hacking and coughing thinly as he hauled his body up beside that of the gasping private. As they moved to help the men, the corporal vomited up a heavy stream of the same repulsive slime that coated his body in smears and globs, his curled, shuddering body voiding more of it into his saturated, fouled pants. They were hesitant to touch him, finally doing so after the seemingly endless river of grime stopped pouring from him. He was insensible, eyes rolling and wide, body as limp as a boned fish.

The men quit the trench with all speed. Half-dragging the corporal, they ran with no thought to cover or death, only escape. They crossed in record time, falling into their home trench like so much cordwood, gasping and shivering, one man known to have bludgeoned a Lamina to death with a brick curled on the floor in a sobbing heap. The commanders moved quickly, isolating the men and trying to calm the most lucid for a report. What spilled out would have been immediately dismissed as lies and hallucination were it not for the earnest, pleading stares of those reporting. Command calmed them with explanations of battle fatigue and strange gas weapon tests…and shared silent, focused stares as the cowed men were ushered out.

Corporal Lawrence had little to report. Of his time in the hole, he could (or would) say little. He stated that he had slipped, and fallen into what may have been some long-blocked underground pool, or perhaps a buried latrine. Of the sounds and smells reported by the private, he had nothing to say, only that he had struggled a short time, then managed to get back out just as the men arrived. Truly, he seemed none the worse for wear. In fact, he seemed in better spirits than many had remembered ever seeing him, favoring the commanders with a wide, giddy smile as he was dismissed with a warning not to discuss the events.

The corporal proved a changed man over the next few days. He was more talkative, but quickly had men wishing for his old, unsettling silence. He rambled about the joys of close spaces, of creation and destruction that seemed to spring up all around them. About human pleasures missed, the dimensions and ages of which made some men threaten Corporal Lawrence with a quiet and ignoble death…which only seemed to stretch the near-constant smile on his face even wider. Private Dixon, one of the corporal's bunkmates, whispered to a friend that he had woken once to find the corporal standing over him in the night, his eyes as bright and flat as silver dollars. They found the private the next day snarled in the barbed wire, his intestines spread nearly ten feet around him in every direction.

Not one man from that trench survived the Great War, although few died in battle. A wave of sickness took the trench a few days after Private Dixon's death. A strange wasting sickness, it seemed to eat the flesh like acid, men waking to find previously healthy flesh eaten down to the bone, oozing and blackened. A sergeant was found in a latrine, beset by a living carpet of rats. They refused to quit the body even when shot, and attacked several men before the body was recovered. Relief finally came, the bulk of the men being sent to various hospitals, many wasting away before they ever reached a bed.

Corporal Lawrence was remanded to a Mologia’s mental ward, transferred after several complaints from the hospital proper where he was first sent. It seemed his behavior hinted at a growing mental imbalance, culminating with an attempted sexual assault of a nurse, which ended with the loss of three fingers from her right hand, and the vision in her right eye. The corporal would rant quietly to the other patients, whispers about endless halls, pursuits in the dark, flesh laid out like pages of a book. It was dismissed as so much war fatigue, even as his behavior grew less violent and more unsettling.

He vanished several times from the ward, only to appear several hours later, as if nothing had happened. When pressed, he would begin to sing in an endless monotone until the doctors left exasperated. Others on the ward clamored to be transferred from the whispering madman. A stale, musty foulness seemed to sit in the air wherever he stayed, and incidents of infection and the strange, consuming sickness that had beset his home trench seemed to follow him like a cloud. Numerous attempts were made to transfer the man, only to be met with bureaucratic confusion. No records were found of the man. No entry papers, commendations or incidents, not even a birth certificate. Through it all he sat, for hours on end, cross-legged on his bed, occasionally humming tunelessly, or rambling off the names of his ward-mates between short, bubbling giggles.

Corporal Lawrence and eighteen men vanished one November night, between a five minute nurse rotation at three in the morning. The room reeked of rust, oil, mold, and sweet rot. Thick, black swaths of crumbling ooze coated the beds and several of the walls, wide patches of it smearing and eating into the floor. Of the men, there was no sign, at first. As they searched, one nurse shifted a bed aside, only to shriek and nearly trip across one of the sunken, reeking depressions on the floor. In a tight, perfect spiral were what appeared to be hundreds of teeth, resting neatly on the floor. After counting, they accounted for the total of all the teeth of every living soul in that ward…but one.

The corporal was never found, nor were the men. The incident was swallowed by the constant barrage of horrors from the front, and forgotten with ease. Stories of a cursed trench wandered across the front lines, often squelched for being bad luck. Still they came…stories of strange deaths, of disappearing men, found days later, alive, but broken and twisted beyond comprehension.