

THE DOLL TERROR

A Pulp Short Story

By [Author Name]

I. THE BOUNTY

The marsh mist clung to Jack Reeves like a wet shroud as he rode into Mireholm. Five hundred credits—that's what the telegram had promised. Five hundred credits to find one missing girl in a dying town that smelled of sulfur and rot.

The Dalton house leaned into the swamp like a drunk against a bar. Jack tied his horse to a post that looked more moss than wood and knocked. The door opened before his knuckles left the frame.

Martha Dalton's eyes were red-rimmed craters in a face gone hollow. "You're the bounty hunter."

Not a question. Jack nodded and stepped inside, his boots squelching on warped floorboards. The house tilted wrong—five degrees off plumb, maybe more. Made his inner ear scream.

"Clem's at the table," Martha said, voice flat as Kansas. "Been there three days. Won't eat. Won't sleep."

Clem Dalton sat with a piece of paper in his gnarled prospector's hands, staring at it like it might burst into flame. Four words in careful child's script: *I'm going to be better*.

"Rosie left this," Clem said without looking up. "Three nights back. Window open, favorite doll gone. Just... gone."

Jack pulled up a chair that groaned under his weight. "Tell me about the doll."

"Porcelain thing. Victorian-style. Mr. Hollowgrave made it special for her. Said she had talent." Clem's voice cracked. "She called it Mother."

"Hollowgrave?"

"Silas Hollowgrave. Runs the Toy Festival. Been awful generous to folks around here. Even helped with the bounty." Martha twisted her apron in white-knuckled hands. "Rosie loved his workshop. Spent hours there learning to make dolls."

Jack's instincts prickled. "Show me her room."

The room tilted worse than the rest of the house. Jack gripped the doorframe and stepped inside. Dolls lined every surface—on the dresser, the nightstand, the windowsill. All facing the door. All watching.

He moved to the desk, flipped through drawings. Dolls with glowing eyes. Dolls with too-wide smiles. And beneath them, a journal in that same careful script.

Mr. Silas says I'm special. He says I can help fix people. Mom cried again today. She's so weak.

Jack's jaw tightened. He kept reading.

The festival is coming. Mr. Silas says I'll be the Mother. I'll take care of everyone. Make them perfect. Make them quiet.

"Sweet merciful hell," Jack breathed.

Behind him, a doll's head rotated with a soft porcelain click.

Jack spun, hand on his raygun. The doll stared at him with glass eyes that reflected lamplight like tiny green stars.

He backed toward the door, grabbed the journal, and descended the stairs three at a time.

"Where's this Hollowgrave Mine?" he demanded.

Clem looked up, eyes focusing for the first time. "Five miles west through the wetlands. But you can't go there—radiation levels'll cook you from the inside out."

"Rosie went there."

"That's what the journal says." Clem stood, swaying. "But nobody goes to Hollowgrave Mine. Not since old Silas Holloway's partners left him to die down there. Must be seventy years ago now."

"Holloway or Hollowgrave?"

"Same man, different name. Story goes he survived somehow, came back changed. Calls himself Hollowgrave now." Clem's voice dropped. "Sometimes I see him in town—never seems to age. Eyes wrong somehow. But he's been nothing but kind to Mireholm."

Jack headed for the door. "I'll need a radiation suit and a map."

"What about the bounty?" Martha called after him.

"If your daughter's alive, I'll bring her back," Jack said. "But Mrs. Dalton—you might not like what I find."

II. THE FESTIVAL

The town square pulsed with activity despite the early hour. Workers erected stalls while children ran between their legs, laughing. Colorful bunting hung from buildings that leaned at sick angles, Spanish moss dripping from every beam like funeral shrouds.

And dolls. Dolls everywhere. In shop windows, on display tables, clutched in children's arms. All porcelain. All similar. All watching.

Jack pushed through the crowd toward a makeshift stage where an old man directed workers with the easy authority of someone long accustomed to command. Silver-haired, gaunt-faced, wearing a prospector's weathered clothes. He turned as Jack approached, and his smile was warm as summer sun.

"You must be Mr. Reeves! The Daltons mentioned they'd hired help." The old man extended a hand. "Silas Hollowgrave. Pleased to meet you."

Jack shook the offered hand and nearly recoiled. The skin felt wrong—waxy, preserved, like touching a corpse that refused to rot. And the eyes... they caught the light wrong, glowing faint green in the shadows.

"I'm looking for Rosie Dalton."

"Poor child. Such a talented student." Hollowgrave's smile never wavered. "I fear she may have wandered into the old mine. Dangerous place. I'd be happy to guide you there."

"That won't be necessary."

"As you wish." Hollowgrave turned back to his workers, but not before Jack caught it—the shadow that moved a half-second out of sync with its caster.

Jack made for the saloon.

The Soggy Nickel lived up to its name—water stains on every surface, floorboards soft as sponge. Behind the bar, a man called One-Thumb Pete (you didn't ask about the missing digit) poured drinks with mechanical efficiency.

"Rosie Dalton," Jack said, slapping coins on the bar.

Pete poured whiskey that smelled of turpentine. "You asking about that missing girl or asking about what she really was?"

"Talk."

"Strange kid. Too quiet. Too... observant. Like she was studying folks instead of just seeing them." Pete downed his own shot. "And lately, people been acting wrong."

"Wrong how?"

"Like they're here but not here, y'know? Sheriff Clayborne—yesterday he laughed at my jokes. This morning he barely blinks. Moves too smooth, like a wind-up toy."

Jack's hand tightened on his glass. "How many?"

"Fifty? Hundred? Hard to say. But something's wrong in Mireholm, and it started when Hollowgrave showed up talking about his damn festival." Pete leaned close. "People say he's been here forever. That he should be dead but ain't. That the radiation in that mine didn't kill him—it changed him."

"Into what?"

"Something that ain't quite human no more."

Jack found Sheriff Clayborne in his office, staring at paperwork without reading it. The lawman looked up when Jack entered, movements too precise, eyes slightly unfocused.

"Can I help you?" Perfectly polite. Perfectly empty.

"We talked yesterday about Rosie Dalton. You remember?"

A pause. Too long. "Of course."

"What did I tell you?"

Another pause. The Sheriff's eyes didn't quite focus on Jack's face. "You... said you were investigating."

Jack drew his raygun and aimed it at the Sheriff's chest. "Who are you?"

"Sheriff Clayton Clayborne." No fear. No reaction at all. "I don't understand the question."

Jack backed toward the door. Whatever sat in that chair wearing the Sheriff's face, it wasn't the man he'd spoken to yesterday. It was something else. Something hollow.

He ran.

III. THE TRUTH

Jack made it back to his boarding room as the sun bled into the marsh. He barricaded the door and spread his findings on the bed. Rosie's journal. The map to Hollowgrave Mine. A doll he'd liberated from a merchant's stall.

He pulled out his multi-tool and cracked open the doll's back panel. Inside, where clockwork should be, he found something else entirely—a fragment of glowing green crystal, pulsing with sickly light.

X-ranum. Refined and weaponized.

And something else. Something organic. When he touched it with his probe, a voice whispered in his mind—a woman's voice, screaming.

Help me help me help me—

Jack dropped the tool and scrambled backward, heart hammering. The voice faded, but the implication remained. The dolls weren't just animated. They were **vessels**. Prisons for human consciousness.

A knock at the door.

"Mr. Reeves?" Martha Dalton's voice, thick with tears. "Please, I need to talk to you. About Rosie."

Jack grabbed his raygun and cracked the door. Martha stood in the hallway, and she looked... wrong. Same hollow eyes. Same too-precise movements.

"How did you find my room?"

"Mr. Hollowgrave told me." She smiled, and it didn't reach her eyes. "He wants to speak with you. About the girl. About everything."

"Tell him I'll meet him at the mine."

"He thought you'd say that." Not-Martha produced a doll from her apron. "He wanted you to have this. A gift. So you understand."

She set the doll on the threshold and walked away with mechanical precision.

Jack stared at the doll. It was perfect porcelain, beautifully crafted.

And braided into its scalp was a lock of Martha Dalton's hair.

Midnight found Jack in the wetlands with a radiation suit that smelled of rubber and fear. The marsh glowed faint green where X-ranum leached into the water. Things moved in that glow—things that should have been dead but weren't.

The mine entrance yawned like a mouth, bleeding green light into the mist.

Jack descended.

The tunnel opened into a massive chamber. Walls lined with X-ranum crystals. And in the center, a ritual circle made of bones and doll parts, surrounded by hundreds—no, thousands—of dolls arranged in concentric rings. All glowing. All containing trapped consciousness.

Silas Hollowgrave stood in the circle's heart, arms raised, green light pouring from his eyes and mouth. His shadow writhed independently on the cavern walls.

"Mr. Reeves. I'm pleased you came." Hollowgrave's voice echoed wrong, layered with harmonics that shouldn't exist.
"You're early. The ceremony doesn't begin until the festival reaches its crescendo."

"What are you doing to these people?"

"Perfecting them." Hollowgrave gestured at the glowing dolls. "Humanity is broken, Mr. Reeves. Small-minded. Cruel. Petty. So I'm giving them peace. Replacing their fractured consciousness with something... purer. The Others will inhabit their vessels and make them whole."

"The Others?"

As if in answer, reality **tore**. Through the rip came... something. Too many eyes. Geometry that hurt to perceive. Colors that shouldn't exist. Jack's mind screamed at the wrongness of it.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Hollowgrave breathed. "I met them during my century underground. After Marcus and Jacob and Samuel left me to die. The radiation opened my mind, and the Others showed me truth." His eyes blazed brighter. "They'll make Mireholm perfect. And then every town on this frontier. No more betrayal. No more cruelty. Just pure, eternal peace."

"That's not peace—that's extinction!"

"It's evolution." Hollowgrave raised his hands, and dolls around the chamber began to animate, their tiny limbs clicking as they rose. "I offered you mercy, Mr. Reeves. The chance to be perfected willingly. But you've chosen the hard way."

The dolls swarmed.

IV. THE FIGHT

Jack's raygun split green fire, shattering porcelain bodies. But for every doll destroyed, two more crawled from the shadows. Their tiny claws raked his radiation suit, seeking flesh.

And when each doll shattered, a psychic scream echoed through his mind—the trapped consciousness inside, dying.

He was killing people to save himself.

Hollowgrave laughed, and it sounded like breaking glass. "You feel them, don't you? Every doll contains a soul. Destroy me, and they all die. The ritual is self-sealing. Kill me, kill them all."

"Then I'll just have to stop you without killing you," Jack growled, switching his raygun to stun.

"Foolish." Hollowgrave's eyes blazed, and Jack's mind **screamed**. Psychic fingers digging into his consciousness, trying to pull it out by the roots. "You think you're the first to try? I've been perfecting this for a century. I am beyond you. Beyond all of you."

Jack fired.

The stun bolt hit Hollowgrave square in the chest—and passed through him. The old man's form became intangible, shadowy.

"The radiation doesn't just heal me, Mr. Reeves. It transforms me. I'm not entirely flesh anymore." Hollowgrave solidified and gestured. A wave of psychic force slammed Jack against the cavern wall. "I'm something more. Something that will outlive your pathetic species."

Jack struggled to rise, vision blurring. The ritual circle pulsed brighter. Through the tear in reality, more of the Others were pushing through—tentacles and eyes and wrong angles multiplying.

He was losing.

Then he heard footsteps.

"Mr. Silas?" A child's voice, sweet as honey. "Is it time?"

Rosie Dalton walked into the chamber carrying the Mother doll. She wore a white dress that was impossibly clean despite the mine's filth. Her blonde braids were perfect. And her eyes...

Her eyes glowed the same green as Hollowgrave's.

"Rosie!" Jack called. "Your parents are looking for you!"

She turned to him, and her smile was cold as winter stars. "You mean those weak, broken things? I left them behind. Mr. Silas showed me what I really am. What I can become." She set the Mother doll down, and it began to move independently. "I'm going to be the Mother of the new order. Isn't it wonderful?"

Jack's heart sank. The girl wasn't a prisoner. She was a willing participant. A child apprentice to a monster.

"Rosie, listen to me—"

"No." Her voice cut like a knife. "You listen. I'm special. I'm perfect. And when the Others come through, I'll be their vessel. Their queen." She raised her hands, mimicking Hollowgrave's pose. "You can't save me because I don't want to be saved."

The betrayal hit harder than any psychic attack. Jack had come to rescue an innocent. Instead, he'd found a monster.

Hollowgrave laughed. "You see? Some are born broken. But I can fix even them. Rosie will be my greatest work. My legacy. Even if you somehow stop me, she'll continue. The work will go on."

Jack looked at the glowing dolls—hundreds of trapped minds. Looked at Rosie, glowing with anticipation. Looked at Hollowgrave, radiation bleeding from his eyes.

And made a choice.

He holstered his raygun and reached for the belt charges. Shaped explosives meant for mining. He had six.

"What are you doing?" Hollowgrave demanded.

"Something you didn't plan for." Jack planted the first charge at the base of an X-ranum crystal pillar. "You need the radiation to live. Need the crystals to power your ritual. So I'm taking them away."

"You'll kill us all! The explosion will bring down the entire chamber!"

"I know." Jack planted the second charge. "But at least you won't turn everyone into your hollow puppets."

Hollowgrave shrieked and sent a wave of dolls at him. Jack fought through them, taking claw marks across his arms and face, planting charges three and four. The trapped minds in each shattered doll screamed into his consciousness—sorry, so sorry, but it's them or everyone.

Rosie stood perfectly still, watching with cold calculation. "You're going to die down here."

"Probably." Jack planted charge five at the ritual circle's edge. "But so will you. And so will he. And sometimes that's the best you can hope for."

He planted the final charge directly beneath Hollowgrave's feet.

The old man's eyes widened. "You're mad!"

"No. I'm just done." Jack activated the timer—sixty seconds—and ran.

Behind him, Hollowgrave screamed. Reality tore wider. Alien entities pushed through, grasping for purchase in this dimension. Rosie stood her ground, arms raised, welcoming them.

Jack reached the tunnel entrance as the countdown hit five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

V. THE AFTERMATH

The explosion shook Mireholm like a giant's fist. Every doll in town shattered simultaneously, releasing their trapped consciousness in a wave of psychic screaming that dropped everyone to their knees.

Jack dug himself out of the collapsed mine entrance three hours later, radiation suit cracked, bleeding from a dozen wounds. The green glow was gone. The X-ranum veins had collapsed. Whatever portal Hollowgrave had opened was sealed.

He limped back to Mireholm as dawn broke through the mist.

The town square was chaos. People wandering, confused, the last hour a blank in their memories. The festival decorations looked garish now in the morning light. Obscene.

Jack found Martha and Clem Dalton outside their tilting house.

Martha grabbed his arm. "Did you find her? Did you find Rosie?"

Jack looked at these people who'd lost their daughter long before she disappeared. Who'd loved a monster without knowing it.

"The mine collapsed," he said. "Nobody could have survived."

Clem's eyes met his, and Jack saw understanding there. Saw the question: *Was she...?*

Jack nodded once. *Yes. She was one of them. I'm sorry.*

Clem closed his eyes. Martha sobbed into her apron, but it was the sound of someone crying for a daughter who'd never really existed.

"The bounty—" she started.

"Keep it." Jack turned toward his horse. "Use it to leave this place. Mireholm's dying anyway. Find somewhere the buildings stand straight and the air doesn't taste like sulfur."

He rode out as the sun climbed higher, leaving the tilting town to sink into the marsh that spawned it.

Three months later, a report crossed Jack's desk. A town called Whisper Creek, two hundred miles south. Children's dolls appearing in homes. People acting strangely.

And a blonde girl with two braids, teaching doll-making workshops.

Jack stared at the description and felt his blood run cold. He'd seen Rosie walk into that explosion. Seen the mine collapse. But if she'd used her psychic abilities to jump into one of the dolls before the blast...

He grabbed his coat and raygun.

Somewhere out there, a child monster was learning from her mistakes. Getting smarter. Getting stronger.

And Jack Reeves had a new bounty to collect.

Because some evils don't die easy.

Some evils don't die at all.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The events depicted in this story are based on classified reports from the New Sonora Railroad Company's Paranormal Investigation Division. Hollowgrave Mine remains sealed by government order. Mireholm was abandoned in 1926 and is now a restricted zone.

Rosie Dalton's current whereabouts remain unknown.

If you encounter porcelain dolls with glowing green eyes, do not bring them into your home.

Do not look into their eyes.

Do not listen when they whisper your name.

Report all sightings to your local Railroad Authority office immediately.

Stay vigilant, citizen.

The frontier is full of wonders.

Not all of them are safe.

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