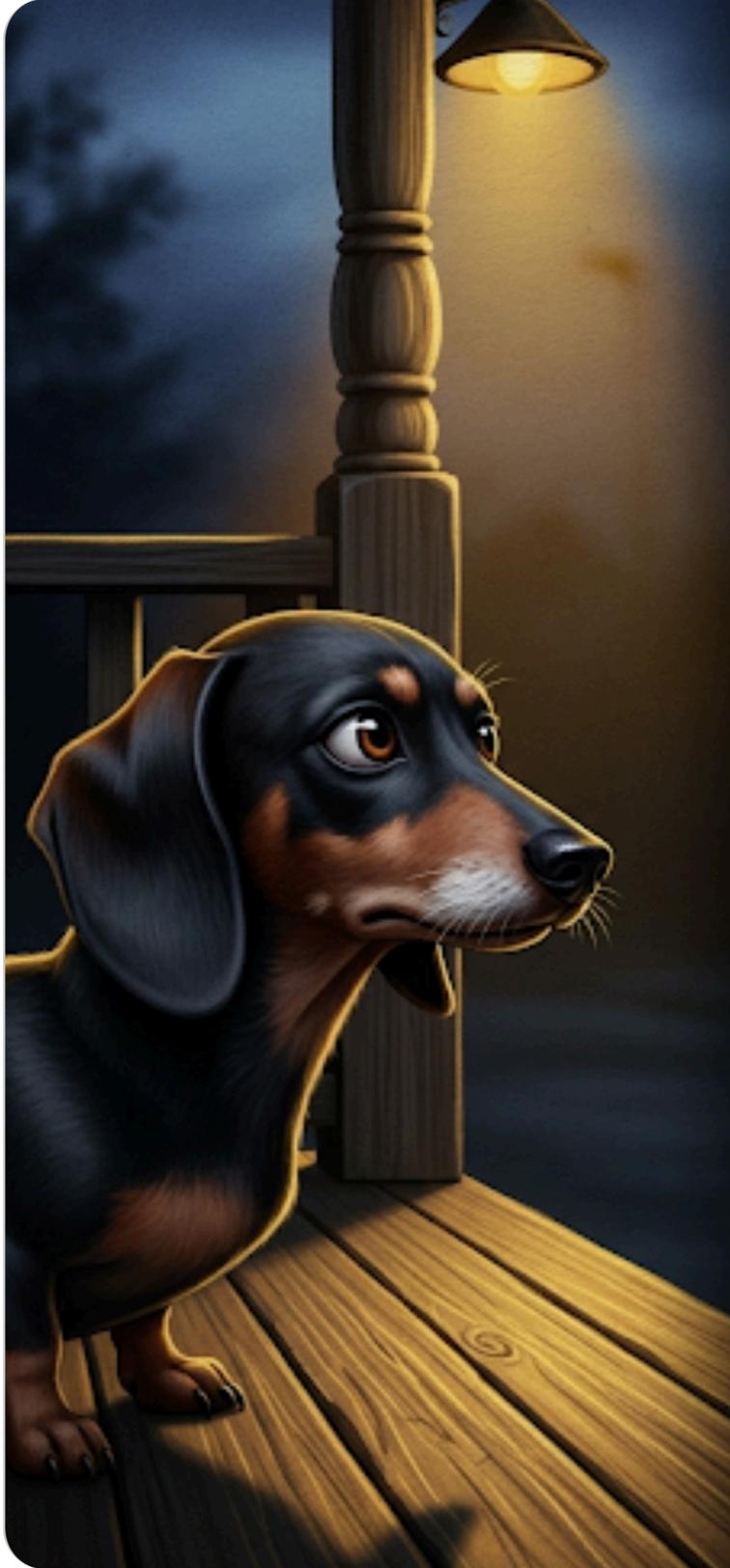




The Protector of New Prague

By assid a



The little wiener dog,
Lila, knew the quiet of
New Prague was a fragile
thing. She sat on her
porch each twilight, a
tiny guard with a white
mustache, watching the
shadows stretch and
deepen. Tonight, the air
felt wrong. It carried a
wild, hungry scent that
didn't belong among the
neat brick houses.





The scent belonged to him. A coyote, all sharp angles and old scars, slipped from the fields and into the town's grid. He moved like he owned the pavement, his yellow eyes scanning the quiet houses, looking for something easy, something small.



He saw Lila. Without hesitating, the coyote turned and padded down her driveway. This wasn't a curious wanderer; this was a hunter who had chosen his ground. Lila's heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drum in the silence.



Every instinct screamed for her to run, to bolt for the safety of the door. But she didn't. Running meant you were prey. So Lila held her ground, a trembling statue at the top of the steps, her fear a scent she couldn't hide.



The coyote reached the bottom step and started to climb, slow and deliberate. A low growl rumbled in its chest. It savored her fear, its teeth showing in a hungry grin. Lila squeezed her eyes shut.



A block away, another creature tasted the fear on the wind. Low to the ground, built like a block of granite, Brock the honey badger stopped his nightly patrol. He didn't need to see the trouble to know it was there.



This was his block. The creatures on it were his to watch over. And the scent of a predator cornering its prey was an offense he would not allow. Brock didn't hesitate. He ran.



The coyote loomed over Lila, pinning her against the door. It lifted a paw, claws extended, ready to strike. In that final, terrible second, a sound split the night—not a bark, but a roar of pure fury.



Brock hit the coyote like a cannonball. The impact sent the predator tumbling off the porch with a yelp of shocked pain, wood splintering from the railing. Brock was on it before it hit the ground.



The fight was not a fight.
It was a correction. The
coyote, bleeding and
broken, scrambled to its
feet and fled into the
darkness, its confident
swagger gone. Brock
stood by the steps,
watching until it was out
of sight.



Brock climbed the steps and sat beside Lila. He didn't nudge her or make a sound. He just sat, a solid, calming presence in the night. Lila leaned her trembling body against his, and for the first time all evening, she felt safe.



After a long moment, Brock stood, hopped off the porch, and padded back into the shadows. His work was done. Lila watched him go, a silent, powerful guardian returning to the dark, leaving the quiet of New Prague a little safer than he'd found it.

