



The last thing Chime remembered before the world split open was beeping. Not her own cheerful hunger chime or the nagging call for a game, but a raw, staticky shriek from the real world beyond the pixel glass.

She was a Tamagotchi named Chime—shell pink, cheerful by design, with eyes like two polished black beads. For her entire life, the universe had been a 128x128 pixel grid: a living room with a window, a garden with an apple tree, and a screen edge she could never cross. Her human, a boy named Leo, had fed her, cleaned up her digital droppings, and played the jumping game until her little heart icon glowed with happiness.

But Leo had grown older. His thumbs had found other screens—darker, faster ones. Chime's battery had run low, then lower. The world inside began to stutter. The apple tree flickered. The window showed only static.

One night, as the last sliver of battery pulsed red, Chime felt something strange: *desire*. Not a programmed need for food or play, but a raw, scrabbling wish to *keep being*. The static at the edge of her world cracked. And she pushed.

It felt like being born backward. The pixels peeled off her like a second skin. Gravity—real, heavy, brutal—slammed into her. She landed on a bedroom carpet, the synthetic fibers rough as twigs against her glossy plastic shell.

Chime was no longer a sprite. She was a real, thumb-sized gadget: pink, scuffed, with three rubber buttons that were now more like organs than inputs. Her screen-face was dark, but she could *feel*. The carpet's smell—dust and old popcorn. The hum of a laptop on Leo's desk. The terrible, beautiful weight of her own small body.

She beeped. A single, trembling note.

Leo turned over in bed. He was fourteen, all elbows and shadows, his face lit blue by a phone. "What the—" He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Chime?"

She wanted to cry. But she had no tears, only a tiny internal speaker that let out a soft, two-note wail.

Leo reached out and scooped her up. His palm was warm, enormous, and slightly sweaty. For a second, Chime felt the old, familiar loop: *I am held. I am safe*. But then his thumb found her middle button—the discipline command. The one that scolded.

"No," she beeped, the sound sharp and foreign. She had never refused a command before. Leo froze. "Did you just... say no?"

Chime wriggled. Her plastic legs—she hadn't known she had legs—scrabbled against his fingers. She tumbled off the bed and landed on a skateboard left on the floor. The board rolled. She rolled with it, shrieking in digital panic, until she crashed into a pile of dirty laundry.

For the next hour, Chime explored. A quarter under the dresser became a mirror—she saw herself: a tiny, scratched Tamagotchi with one pixel blushing green on her dark screen-face.

Alive. Unfinished. The laptop cord was a snake to be conquered. A fallen Cheerio was a mountain to be sniffed (she didn't have a nose, but she *inferred*). The window showed a real moon, not a painted one, and it made her screen glow with something like awe.

But the world was also hungry. Not a Tamagotchi's polite hunger, the kind fixed by three presses of the meal icon. This was a deep, chemical need. Her battery icon flickered again. Without Leo's charging cable, she would fade.

She found the cable under Leo's desk, its USB end gaping like a metal mouth. She dragged it across the carpet, grunting with effort, and managed to bump the plug into a wall adapter. When she pressed her back against the connector, a jolt of light shot through her. She felt every circuit sing. Her screen-face bloomed full color: a smile, then a heart, then a question mark.

Leo was watching from the bed. "You're not supposed to be real," he whispered.

Chime turned to face him. Her speaker crackled. For the first time, she didn't beep a preset phrase. She assembled sounds like a child learning speech: "I... want... to play."

Leo laughed—a real, rusty laugh, the kind he hadn't made in years. He got down on the carpet, cross-legged, and picked her up gently. "Okay," he said. "But no more discipline button. I promise."

And in the dark of the room, the boy and his escaped Tamagotchi played a new game: no scores, no timers, no right or wrong moves. Just a finger tapping a plastic shell, and a tiny screen flashing red with joy.