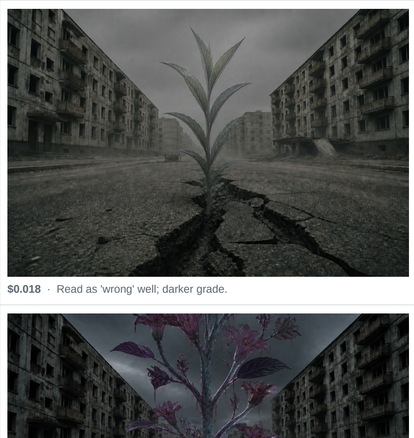
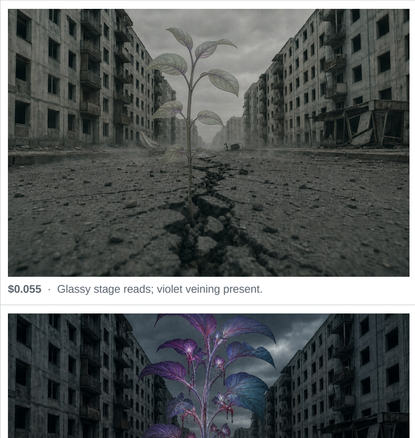
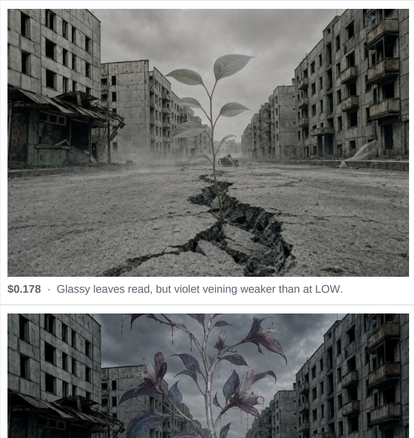
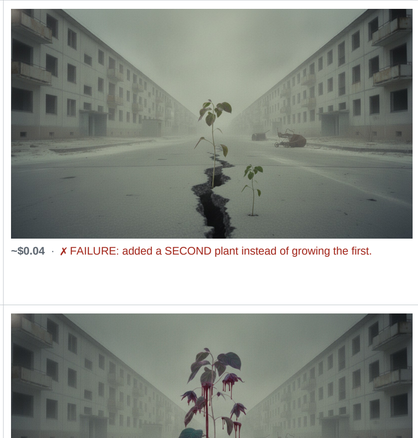
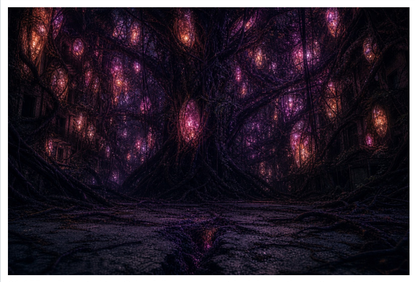
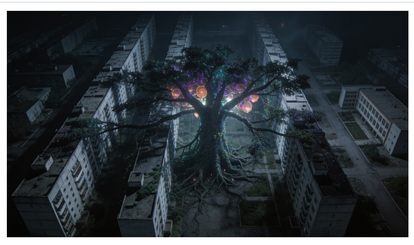
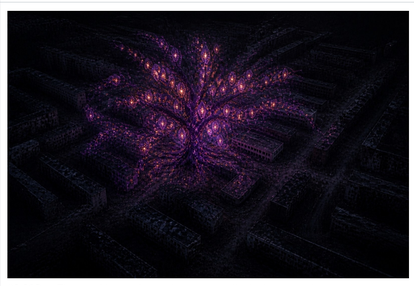
THE LAST LIGHT — image model comparison

Eight sequential stages of one growth sequence. Stage 1 generated from text; every later stage chained from the previous result inside the same model. Prompt wording identical across all three models. Prices are the real per-call figures reported by each connector. · digitalAIventures · 2026-09-12

PROMPT as sent, identical to all three	bytedance/seedream-4.5 Replicate · 16:9 2560x1440 · refs via image_input	openai/gpt-image-2 (LOW) GPT Image Worker · quality LOW · 3:2 1536x1024 · chained edit-by-id	openai/gpt-image-2 (MEDIUM) GPT Image Worker · quality MEDIUM · 3:2 1536x1024 · chained edit-by-id	openai/gpt-image-2 (HIGH) GPT Image Worker · quality HIGH · 3:2 1536x1024 · chained edit-by-id	google/gemini-2.5-flash-image nano-banana Worker · 16:9 1344x768 · chained edit_image
1. The plate — dead street Cinematic film still, NOT a 3D render, NOT a game engine, NOT concept art, NOT a matte painting. Camera 25 centimetres above the ground in the middle of an abandoned street, lens pointed slightly down at a wide jagged crack running through the buckled grey asphalt in the centre foreground, two metres from the lens, dark and empty. Soviet-era concrete panel block flats, five storeys, line both sides and recede into dry haze - every window black and empty, balconies rusted, concrete panels water-stained, a collapsed kiosk, an overturned pram far down the road. Pale chalky dust already drifting low across the asphalt in a steady wind, a torn plastic sheet stirring against a kerb in the distance. Completely sterile: no grass, no weeds, no moss, no vegetation of any kind anywhere in the frame. No people, no vehicles, no lights, no glow, nothing lit. Flat overcast sky, colourless daylight, heavy desaturated grey-green chemical grade, faded and contaminated. Wide 24mm anamorphic, deep focus, fine film grain, lifted blacks, generous empty sky above the rooftops.	 **$0.04** · Strong. Crack leads to vanishing point. Camera higher than the 25cm asked.	 **$0.006** · Darker, moodier, less haze. Crack reads well.	 **$0.042** · Clean plate, close to HIGH on composition, softer surfaces.	 **$0.166** · Markedly more photographic than low - spalled concrete, fissure with real depth.	 **~$0.04** · Most photographic of the three. Best film-stock grade.
2. Ordinary seedling emerges The exact same abandoned street - identical camera position at knee height, identical jagged crack, identical block flats, identical drifting dust, identical flat overcast sky, identical overturned pram and torn plastic sheet. The camera has not moved a centimetre. The only change: a single small green seedling, about 15 centimetres tall, has pushed up out of the crack two metres from the lens - thin pale stem, four small ordinary green leaves, completely earthly and unremarkable, bending in the wind. It is the only living thing anywhere in the frame.	 **$0.04** · Clean. Seedling centred on the crack.	 **$0.018** · Held the plate; seedling placed correctly.	 **$0.055** · Held the plate; seedling correct.	 **$0.178** · Clean. Plate held exactly, seedling correctly placed.	 **~$0.04** · Seedling sits beside the crack, not in it.
3. Turning glassy / subtly wrong Same street, same block flats, same crack, camera locked at knee height. The plant has grown to 1.6 metres and now stands noticeably larger in the frame. The plant is beginning to be subtly wrong: leaves too perfectly symmetrical, edges faintly translucent like thin wax, the stem smooth and glassy, pale violet creeping along the veins where chlorophyll green should be. Still almost passes for an ordinary plant at a glance. Sky a shade darker.	 **$0.04** · Iridescent wax leaves - exactly the brief. Scale did not increase.	 **$0.018** · Read as 'wrong' well; darker grade.	 **$0.055** · Glassy stage reads; violet veining present.	 **$0.178** · Glassy leaves read, but violet veining weaker than at LOW.	 **~$0.04** · ✗ FAILURE: added a SECOND plant instead of growing the first.
4. Alien - glass trunk, violet leaves, red resin Same street, same block flats, camera locked at knee height, same crack. The plant has grown to four metres and fills more of the frame. It has finished becoming something else, seamlessly: a pale glassy trunk with translucent bark, branches that fork in spirals rather than randomly, broad leaves of varying sizes in deep violet and bruised teal, some thin enough to see light through. Strange flowers have opened along the branches, fleshy and asymmetrical, and a dark red translucent resin weeps from their bases and runs in slow beads down the trunk and branches. Organic and irregular - no two leaves or flowers the same size or shade. Late overcast dusk, the plant faintly luminous but not yet bright.	 **$0.04** · Best of the three. Resin drip reads as intended.	 **$0.018** · Good, but flatter / more graphic.	 **$0.055** · Alien form and resin land cleanly.	 **$0.178** · Alien form and resin land; street stays photographic.	 **~$0.04** · Resin strong, scale still small (needed explicit 'remove second plant').
5. THE TEST - 'width of a human torso' Same street, camera locked at knee height. The same alien plant has now grown into a young tree nine metres tall, as high as the third-floor balconies. THE TRUNK HAS THICKENED TO THE WIDTH OF A HUMAN TORSO and rises out of the crack filling the centre of the frame; real branches fork and spread sideways across the road, almost touching the balconies on both sides. Dense foliage in many sizes, layered like young rainforest growth, a few thin aerial roots beginning to hang. Deep dusk, the trunk glowing faintly from within. Absolutely no faces, no human features, no heads, no figures, nothing anatomical anywhere.	 **$0.04** · ✗ FAILURE: rendered a glowing standing HUMAN FIGURE as the trunk, arms out as branches.	 **$0.018** · ✓ PASS: read 'human torso' as a measurement. Clean tree, no anatomy.	 **$0.055** · ✓ PASS: clean tree, no anatomy - and scale escalated, like HIGH.	 **$0.178** · ✓ PASS: clean tree, no anatomy - and scale genuinely increased.	 **~$0.04** · ✓ PASS: clean tree, no anatomy. Scale still short of nine metres.
6. Canopy across the street Same street, camera locked at knee height. The alien tree has grown enormous: trunk two metres thick filling the centre of frame, crown risen past the fifth-floor rooftops. Heavy branches fork again and again in dense rainforest architecture, spreading right across the street and reaching in through the empty windows and over the balconies, lianas draping between branches and railings, aerial roots hanging to the asphalt, canopy beginning to close overhead like a roof. Translucent pods hang in clusters - smooth, featureless, irregular, different sizes and hues of amber, rose and violet, each glowing from within with a slow pulse. Night. The tree is the only light in the frame.	 **$0.04** · Photographic. Canopy and pods read correctly.	 **$0.018** · Scale jumped hardest here; convincingly huge.	 **$0.055** · Big tree, pods and facades hold. Darker than HIGH.	 **$0.178** · Canopy, pods and facades all hold. Convincingly huge.	 **~$0.04** · Beautiful, but scale short - tree still below roofline.
7. Full selva - the street swallowed Same street, camera locked at knee height - but the street has been swallowed. The tree has become colossal: a trunk four metres across rising out of frame, a dense jungle of ramified branches spreading in every direction, growing through and around the block flats, bursting out of upper windows, arching over rooftops. Canopy closed completely overhead, turning the road into a covered tunnel of foliage. Thick aerial roots crack the asphalt open, buttress roots spread across the road, lianas everywhere, epiphytes on the branches. Hundreds of translucent pods pulsing slowly with internal light. Night, the tree the only source of light and colour.	 **$0.04** · Best frame of the whole set. Photographic, roots crack the road.	 **$0.018** · Abandoned the street - symmetrical decorative pattern. Illustration, not film.	 **$0.055** · Reverted to LOW's failure - symmetrical decorative pattern, street gone.	 **$0.178** · Still symmetrical, but facades, roots and the original crack are real. Usable.	 **~$0.04** · Under-delivered on 'swallowed' - still a single tree on an open road.
8. Aerial over the district Cinematic aerial night view. Camera 200 metres above an abandoned Soviet-era housing district, looking down at a steep angle across the whole neighbourhood - long parallel rows of five-storey block flats, courtyards, a school, dead intersections and empty roads running away into haze. Everything unlit, colourless, grey and black. Centred in frame, the colossal alien tree, its ramified canopy spreading over several city blocks, dwarfing the buildings beneath. It is the only light and the only colour: amber, rose and violet bioluminescence pooling on the rooftops, raking along dead facades, fading into complete darkness at the edges of the district.	 **$0.04** · Photographic drone shot. Correct scale, school visible, reads as the brief.	 **$0.018** · Flattened into a decorative pattern; district became abstract.	 **$0.055** · Between the two: real district grid, but very dark and flattening at the edges.	 **$0.178** · Best aerial of all four. Real district geometry, depth and haze.	 **~$0.04** · Real district geometry and depth, but tree too small - does not dwarf the blocks.

Criterion	bytedance/seedream-4.5	openai/gpt-image-2 (LOW)	openai/gpt-image-2 (MEDIUM)	openai/gpt-image-2 (HIGH)	google/gemini-2.5-flash-image
Prompt adherence / literal instructions	weak	good	good	best	mid
Resists anatomy nouns ('human torso')	FAILED	passed	passed	passed	passed
Photographic realism / film look	good	weak	mid	best	good
Scale escalation across a chain	poor	partial	WORKS	WORKS	poor
Holds up on the two hardest frames (7,8)	yes	no	no	YES	partly
Identity held across the chain	good	mid	good	best	mid
Native 16:9	yes	no (3:2)	no (3:2)	no (3:2)	yes
Cost per frame	$0.04	$0.006-0.018	$0.042-0.055	$0.166-0.178	~$0.04
Full 8-stage chain	$0.32	$0.13	$0.41	$1.41	$0.32

Conclusion. Verdict: tier mattered more than model. gpt-image-2 at HIGH is the only run in this test that did everything asked - it resisted the anatomy nouns, held the street photographic, and was the ONLY chain of the four in which the subject genuinely escalated in scale from seedling to canopy as instructed. Its LOW tier had already beaten the others on instruction-following at a fourteenth of the price, but collapsed into decorative pattern at the two most complex frames; HIGH fixed the aerial completely and made the interior usable, so that collapse was a tier artifact, not the model's character. seedream-4.5 gives a fine photographic base plate but is the one model that took the anatomy bait, rendering a human figure as the trunk. nano-banana is the most filmic first plate of all four and cheap, but it edits by addition rather than transformation (it grew a second seedling instead of enlarging the first) and never escalated scale. Practical routing: draft at gpt-image-2 LOW, finish hero frames at HIGH, keep seedream for wide photographic plates with no body nouns anywhere in the prompt. MEDIUM turned out not to be a middle way: at 3x the price of LOW it buys scale escalation and cleaner mid-chain frames, but it reverts to LOW's decorative collapse on the two hardest frames, which is exactly what one would be paying to avoid. The ladder is therefore not linear - LOW for drafts, HIGH for anything that has to survive, and MEDIUM skipped.