The brief for the illustration

I would like the illustration to depict the scene in this chapter in which the monkey is hanging from its fingertips about to drop onto the grass, Ben is hanging on to the branch upside down using his ankles and hands to connect himself to the branch, close to the monkey but not quite yet exactly over the grass (i.e. there is a risk that if he loses his grasp you will fall down into the river in the valley below"). Alan is crawling up the lower part of the trunk on the other side of the narrow gorge with the black tiger like animal standing near the base of the tree looking out at Ben.  So the order of characters going from left to right will be: the monkey, then Ben, then Alan, then the beast.

I’ve highlighted the bits of the story that are relevant for the illustration (see below).

Some important features to capture in the illustration:

the black tiger like beast should have glowing orange eyes and long fangs and should be a shiny black colour with large paws.  The beast is chasing Ben, the character whose hanging from the tree out over the gorge, and that is why his gaze should be fixed on him specifically.

The tree should be narrow and bendy getting thinner and thinner towards the top. The idea is that it's strong enough to hold the characters but flexible and long enough to stretch and bend out over the gorge which they are trying to cross so that it reaches the other side.

The gorge should be too wide for the characters to be able to jump across (which is why they need the tree to use as an "bridge") but narrow enough to be believable that a very tall tree could stretch and bend over to allow them to cross using the tree as a type of bridge.

The faces of the cliffs of the gorge should be a red type of colour they should be very steep with limited vegetation and so it should look as if it would be dangerous to climb down (which is why they tried to use the tree instead).  At the very base of the valley down below you should be able to see a bit of a very fast flowing river bubbling and rushing through the narrow valley far below.

Ben, while hanging upside down with his hands and feet from the branch, should not yet have reached safety, unlike the monkey, so that if he lost his grip he would fall down into the river below.  In contrast the monkey, who was the 1st to climb the tree and is now hanging from the narrowest and tallest part of the tree has successfully reached over to the far side of the gorge, and is hanging from its finger tips with its feet below it so that if it let go of the branch it would safely drop down on the grass beneath it.

The trees on the right hand side of the image where the base of the tree is, where the black beast is, should be surrounded by many other similar tall skinny trees but they should be shorter than the one which is stretching over.  Behind these tall narrow "needle bark trees" they should be more trees behind it which would be more classical style trees i.e. not tall thin and skinny period (the scene is taking place in a forest).  Not important to have a lot of detail – just the impression.

If it would be possible for the beast to be licking its lips as it is looking out over the gorge at Ben, this would be a good detail to include if possible.

While Alan is scrambling up the base of the tree he is head should be turned so that he is looking nervously at the black beast.  His eyebrows should be arched and he has normally curly hair but they should be a little bit straighter like a comical illustration that is so nervous his curly hair is standing up almost.

Physical descriptions of the characters:

Marula can look like an orangutan type monkey.  Short with a belly and orange wiry hair and a kind face with big brown eyes.  She should have big hands and big feet, the feet should be the like should be short so you can imagine when she walks she would "waddle". Between her ears there should be some spiky orange wiry hair that is sticking up (sometimes referred to in the book and so would be an important detail to catch) her eyes should be large and friendly gentle and brown.

Ben should be around 8 to 10 years old, he should be a little bit thinner than with blonde spiky hair a roundish face with a soft nose and blue eyes with slightly protruding ears, his legs can be a little longer than his torso but not too much so.

Alan is around same age as Ben and around same height.  He should have brown curly hair large friendly eyes (brown/green).  He should be a little bit broader and stockier than the Ben character and should look friendly and slightly mischievious.

The scene is occurring shortly after the break of dawn in the forest and therefore there be a sunrise in the background perhaps….

The perspective of the scene can either be straight on or looking from the angle of the cliffside where the monkey's about to drop down so that you can clearly see the width of the gorge, Ben hanging from above, Alan about to climb on the far side, and the black  beast ready to pounce and climb the tree after Alan.

I would like the style to be quite simple and sketch like (pencil or chalk styles ok).  It would be great to have some splashes of colour but it is not necessary to colour in each and every object like a perfect cartoon.  In other words, it can be a little bit "rough" as though it were a first mockup of an illustration for publication.  The reason why I chose this scene is because it contains the three main characters in the book and also it is an image that raises exciting perceptions of what might happen next….Will the monkey let go of the tree causing it to spring back to its original position, will Alan managed to climb up the tree far enough to cause it to stretch out a little further to bring Ben safely to the far side along with the monkey, will Alan make it safely across to the far side, will the beast climb the tree after Alan and catch any of them……etc.

**Chapter 27**

Ben led the way close to the edge of the cliff with Alan and Marula following in single file behind him.

“Hey buddy! Slow down! You want to tell us what your plan is?"

Ben held his hand up to his forehead as he squinted into the distance.

"You'll see shortly.  Is it my imagination or is the width of the gorge narrower up ahead?"

Alan strained his eyesight in the direction of where Ben was looking.

"I'm not sure if it’s an optical illusion or if it does get narrower to be honest."

"Well, if I'm right and the gorge does get narrower ahead, then there's a good chance that my plan might work.  If, however, it is an optical illusion then I'm afraid we're back to square one."

Ben picked up the pace, eager to find out if his plan might work to cross the gorge without having to descend the steep and dangerous cliff and cross the thundering river below.  He was not sure why Marula was eager to have them cross to the other side but Ben had a gut feeling that it was important they do so quickly.  He had begun to sense an uneasy feeling of being watched or followed but did not want to say it out loud to Alan for fear that his gut feeling might be right.  As they made progress further along the edge of the cliff, the fear that the narrowing of the gorge might be an optical illusion proved unfounded.  As the three figures got closer to the section of the gorge which Ben thought looked narrower from a distance, it became clear that it was indeed the case.

"We’re in luck Alan!” yelled Ben triumphantly as he pointed across the narrow gorge to the cliff face that was jotting out quite far towards them on the other side.  “It's not quite close enough that we could run and jump but it certainly is a lot closer than where we were further back."

"I agree but no idea why that’s important buddy!"

Ben began to stare up into the direction of the sky at the skinny tall Needle Bark trees that were growing very close to the edge of the cliff along where they were standing.  The diameter of the Needle Bark trees was no thicker than Ben's leg and the higher up the tree, the narrower and narrower the trunk became until, at the very tip top, it was barely the width of a shoelace.  The Needle Bark trees grew extremely high, even taller than the mighty elder wax trees, which already seemed to touch the clouds in the distance.

"Okay buddy! I'm trying to figure out your plan.  It's true that the gorge is a lot narrower here but, like you say, it's still not possible to cross it with a running jump. So, please tell us your plan does not involve a running jump at least!"

Ben was scratching his chin looking up at the tall narrow trunk of the Needle Bark tree and then across the width of the narrowest part of the gorge next to where they were standing.

"Alan, are you any good at measuring things with your eyes?"

"Well, I am pretty good at measuring the amount of Cherrydrop cake I’m capable of eating before feeling ill by just looking at my plate.  Does that count?"

"Not quite! I want you to look carefully at the width of the gorge from this part of the cliff right across to the nearest edge on the other side.  Now look up at the height of these Needle Bark trees and tell me if you think whether the height of the tree is longer than the width of the gorge."

"Oh boy, this sounds like one of those horrible maths questions I used to hate at school," groaned Alan but he did as Ben had asked him to do.  He carefully studied the distance between the two cliff edges with squinted eyes and then looked up to judge the height of the Needle Bark tree in comparison.

Marula, intrigued by the horizontal and vertical movements of Alan's head, began to copy him although it was not clear that she understood why he was doing so.  Then again, the expression on Alan’s face seemed no less informed than the monkey at that moment.

"So, why are you asking me this?"

"Don't worry why for now. Just tell me what you’re thinking!"

"Well, in my point of view, I think the height of the Needle Bark tree is definitely at least the same as the distance between this side of the cliff and the other.  It may even be a little bit longer but not by much."

Ben began to smile mischieviously.

"That's the right answer buddy!"

Suddenly, it dawned on Alan what Ben’s plot might be.  "I think I'm beginning to get where you're going with this, but we don't have an axe in case you haven't noticed."

"We don’t need it! How good are you climbing?"

"Climbing!?"

"You heard me correctly.  So here's my plan.  We climb up the tallest Needle Bark tree.  Actually as far up as we can go until it ought to begin to bend under the burden of our weight.  We need to be quick to get as far up the tree as we can and my idea is by the time we reach the top part of the trunk it ought to bend far out over the gorge.  If we are lucky and our weight is enough, the tip of the tree should stretch over and touch the other side making a kind of a bridge.  What do you think?"

Alan stared at Ban, his jaw open.

"What do I think? I think there are waaay too many "if's" in that plan for my liking, buddy!  *If* we can climb up far enough and *if* the weight is correct and *if* it bends in the right direction and *if* the tree doesn't snap and *if* it reaches to the far side…… I'm feeling a little bit *iffy* to say the least."

Ben nodded.  "I agree with you and I can't even believe I'm suggesting we do this but I have a really bad feeling Alan."

Ben was speaking very seriously now causing Alan to feel a shiver down his neck.

"I have a really strong feeling that we need to cross to the far side as quickly as we can.  I don't know why but from time to time I sometimes get gut feelings that turn out to be correct.  Right now, I have a feeling we might be in imminent danger.  Don't ask me why but something tells me that this is a risk worth taking."

After a few moments pause, Ben spoke again, "And, honestly, I'm not sure we really have a choice, practically speaking."

Alan immediately understood that Ben was not joking and that somehow his words were probably true.  He trusted Ben’s interpretation of the situation and although Alan wasn't a huge fan of trusting gut feelings, he somehow trusted Ben's gut feeling more than his own right now.  Alan turned to Marula and rubbed the spikey orange hair between her ears fondly.

"Did you understand that Marula?  Well, of the three of us I guess you are the best climber."

Marula stared at Alan with a blank, puzzled expression.

"Hey buddy! I think you might need to use your fingers to try and explain."

Alan began to chuckle.  “Oh yes, for a moment I almost forgot!"

Alan clapped his hands several times and Marula immediately focused her kind brown almond eyes on his fingertips.  Alan made a series of gestures which even Ben recognised as mimicing climbing up something tall, leaning out far and dropping to a far side.  Marula looked at Alan with an expression of shock and then swiveled her small head and aimed the same facial expression in Ben's direction.  Ben nodded seriously and slowly at Marula and pointed up at one of the Needle Bark trees nearby.  Marula shook her head slightly and slapped her wrinkled hand against her forehead in exasperation.  She made a series of clumsy movements with her two hands which Alan asked her to repeat before interpreting for Ben.

"I.  I.  I Climb. First?"

"You will climb up first?" asked Alan making sure he understood.  Marula waited for him to repeat his words, this time converted into hand gestures.  She nodded solemnly in response to Alan's finger-prompted question.

Alan turned to Ben and said "Marula wants to go first.  I think it's brave of her but it's also the right thing to do.  She's a very good climber and we can judge the flexibility and strength of the tree trunk by watching her and if, for any reason, it might go wrong she will be a lot quicker than us to climb back down again."

"I think it's really brave and I also think you're right Alan.”

Ben gave Marula two thumbs up and nodded.  She waddled towards him on her large hairy feet and held up an open palm which he pressed against his own.

"Okay, we have a plan guys!  Let's give it a go!"

Alan, Ben and Marula walked slowly along the part of the cliff face which was closest to the opposite side of the gorge,searching for the tallest Needle Bark tree.

"I think this is the one!" exclaimed Alan as he gripped his hand around the trunk of one trees which looked to be supple and strong and towering quite a bit above the others.  It also happened to be one of the closest trees to the edge of the cliff face.

"I agree," said Ben.  "I think this is the one.  Let's see how far Marula can make it and whether it looks as though this plan might work."

Marula interpreted the position of the two boys by the tree as confirmation that this was the preferred option.  She approached the tree gingerly, looking back over her shoulder across the narrow gorge to the far side as she wrapped her two hairy hands, one above the other, around the narrow trunk of the tree and began to climb up its bendy trunk.

"That's it Marula! Up you go! If you feel that the trunk might snap, make sure you come back down as quickly as you can," yelled Ben.

Marula had already reached almost halfway up the Needle Bark tree.  She was agile and nimble and had no difficulty in making her ascent quite quickly.

"There's only one problem buddy! She doesn't understand you."

Alan leaned back slightly as they stared up at the under soles of Marula's pink feet as she ascended higher and higher up the tree, still visible through its sparse pale blue leaves.  She was almost two thirds of the way up but the Needle Bark tree trunk was bending just a small degree, such that Marula was barely hanging out over the edge of the cliff.

"I don't think she's heavy enough to bend the tree much farther.  I think we’re going to have to join her," said Ben.

"I was afraid you might say that but I think you're right.  Let's see if another bit makes the difference and, if not, I think we should begin to climb after her one by one."

Marula had, by now, reached very close to the uppermost part of the Needle Bark tree trunk.  The top of the tree had begun to bend out over the edge of the cliff so that if Marula would let go she would fall all the way down to the deep and thundering river below but it was nowhere near the far side of the gorge yet.  She did not seem too fazed by this risk as she wrapped her arms and legs around the narrow branch of the tree, her back facing out towards the gorge and the river below, probably intentionally so she could not see what fate would greet her if she lost her grip.

"Buddy, I think you should go next.  You are lighter than me but heavier than Marula so I think it makes sense if we add our weight bit by bit, with the lightest first and heaviest last."

"Okay, it makes sense."  Ben paused at the base of the tree and looked at Alan sincerely.  "I hope this plan works my friend.  If it doesn't, I just want to say that –"

Alan interrupted Ben’s sentence, "The plan is going to work and let's not even think of any alternative.  Now, off you go and I will be right behind you buddy.  These Needle Bark trees are super flexible and super strong and there is no doubt that the tip of this tree will most definitely stretch to the far side.  So let's not think about failure or disasters.  Let's keep moving!"

Ben was glad for Alan's interruption and began his slow climb up the tree, quite a lot slower than what Marula had managed to achieve.  He found it difficult to get a grip on the smooth trunk of the tree but after a couple of minutes he found a technique that allowed him to get enough traction to make good progress.  His weight was definitely having a greater impact than Marula and the trunk was responding to the addition of his weight more quickly than the monkey.  With each stretch of his arm, his ascent up the trunk caused the Needle Bark tree to bend, bend, bend slowly.  He was getting closer to Marula above him who was chattering slightly nervously as though trying to encourage him or else was trying to tell him this plan was crazy!  By now, the top of the tall trunk of the Needle Bark tree, where Marula was clinging and swaying, had bent far out across the gorge, almost halfway in fact.

Ben closed his eyes as the wind whistled in his ears and the thundering sound of the furious river at the base of the gorge beneath him drowned out Alan's words of encouragement from the edge of the cliff, which seemed so far away now.  Like Marula, he turned his back to the gorge below instinctively and held tight to the trunk as he inched his way further out and along towards Marula.  By now, the bank of the far cliff face seemed closer than the one that Alan was still standing on and the brown trunk of the Needle Bark tree was stretching at quite a dramatic angle but still seemed quite supple and strong so there was hope that this crazy plan might actually work, thought Ben.  Still, their joint weight was not enough to bend the trunk far enough to cause them to reach the other side of the gorge although it did feel as though they were high up enough to achieve a safe landing if only they could cause the trunk to bend out further.

"Alan, I think it's your turn! I think with one more of us we can actually make it," yelled Ben, through gritted teeth.

Alan was standing on the cliff edge at the base of the Needle Bark tree and could see Ben's lips moving but could not hear him by now as Marula and Ben were so far out over the gorge that the sound of the angry river below was louder than Ben's voice.  Ben clung on for dear life to the trunk, mirroring the same posture as Marula, who by now was almost more horizontal than vertical compared to Ben’s position, the tree trunk was bending so far out over the gorge at such a dramatic angle.

Ben looked back at the cliff edge where Alan was beginning to climb the Needle Bark tree when suddenly he spotted a fierce-looking black shiny creature stealthily sneaking through the long grass towards his friend.  Ben's heart began to thump wildly in his chest as he screamed at Alan as loud as he could.  Alan heard Ben’s scream and swung around to face the evil glowing eyes of the Fang Tracker who appeared to be almost smiling provocatively as it licked its black lips and stood silently just a few paces away from Alan at the base of the tree.

Alan froze in terror as his eyes met the steely gaze of the orange glowing slits in the angular black head of the fierce Fang Tracker. It lifted its quivering upper lips menacingly to reveal the snow white curled fangs descending from its vivid red gums.  It's long jet black tongue flicked and curled in its large mouth as it growled menacingly.  It took two more steps in Alan's direction, its large padded paws pressing forcefully against the grass beneath its feet.  It turned its sharp angular head out over the gorge to eye its prey, who’s scent it inhaled deeply to confirm its identity.  It then turned back to the creature at the base of the tree, who’s scent it recognized as the one it had followed in parallel to the target throughout its journey that morning.

Alan could hear his heart thumping in his ears as he tried to make up his mind whether he should attempt to climb the tree as quickly as he could, or run away along the cliff face, or even jump into the river below.  He knew that none of these three options would save him, however.  The Fang Tracker began to walk slowly and menacingly towards Alan until the heat of its heavy breath could be felt by Alan on his prickling skin.  The Fang Tracker craned its muscled neck, inching its giant angular head forward until it's quivering nostrils were right up against Alan;s face. Alan held his breath and leaned back shaking, fearing that this was the end of the journey with Ben.  The Fang Tracker’s long black whiskers were brushing against Alan's face, tickling the base of his nose.  Alan inhaled deeply as the Fang Tracker’s long black whisker swiped Alan's nostrils one more time.  And then his reaction came in the form of a loud explosion.

“HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC!"

Alan closed his eyes and waited for what would happen next. Several seconds passed.  Nothing.  Alan slowly opened one eye to see the Fang Tracker, shocked at the fact that this small creature could speak Vrawkish dialect, pressing its ears against its head and lowering its tail.

Once more, the Vrawkish instruction that it learned to obey since a kitten was repeated loudly.

“HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC," continued Alan helplessly, shaking violently as the giant hiccups reverberated across the gorge.

Ben clung with all his strength to the swaying, bending Needle Bark trunk as he tried to figure out what was happening.  The large black creature had crouched on its stomach and was lying calmly at Alan's feet.  Alan's eyes looked like saucers, he was so in shock.  His eyebrows were arched high and his curly brown hair appeared to be standing straight on end.  Alan stared at the reaction of the beast to his hiccups.  It was now purring gently and lying on its side.

“HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC, HIC!," continued Alan enthusiastically now as he quickly began to scramble up the trunk of the tree as fast as he could.  He pulled his body weight up the trunk with all his strength as the trunk began to groan and lean out further over the gorge.  He scrambled as fast as he could, his trembling hands a blur in front of him as he pressed the sides of his shoes against the trunk to keep his balance.  His shoulders and neck muscles ached as he pulled himself further up along until it seemed as though he was climbing at an angle and then horizontally out over the gorge to the part of the trunk were Ben and Marula were clinging.

The exertion had cured his hiccups before he even realized.  As he made his progress along the arching tree trunk, the Fang Tracker sprang back up to its feet once the trance of the Vrawkish spell had evaporated from its short memory.  It turned its hateful orange glare towards the shape of Alan, who by now was quite closer to the owner of the same scent as the red cloth in the dungeons that morning.

The trunk of the tree was now leaning at more than a ninety degree angle.  Marula and Ben shuffled a few further inches out along the skinny tree trunk to make more room for Alan, until the edge of the cliff on the far side drew closer and closer to them.

"Come on Alan! You can do it! Just a little bit further and I think we’re almost there."

Alan was sweating and struggling to hold on now.  His arms were tired he had climbed so quickly.  But he could tell from the angle and the bend of the tree trunk that Ben’s plan was going to work if only he could make it a little bit further to add more weight further out.  Suddenly, the top of his head was next to the soles of Ben's feet.

"Oh no, Buddy! it looks like we are just not heavy enough.  We’re almost there but the trunk isn't bending far enough for us to make it."

The three figures hung helplessly to the tree trunk with Marula just inches from the edge of the cliff side in front of them.  No sooner had Alan spoken the words than the black ferocious giant cat sprang from the ground and began to climb the trunk of the Needle Bark tree in pursuit of its prey.  As Greecehawk Tumbleweed had promised to She Who Must Be Obeyed, the Fang Tracker was proving adaptable to any terrain.  It climbed up effortlessly along the tree trunk causing it to creak and bend further.

"Oh boy! It looks like this creature might just be part of the solution if it doesn't catch us first!"

By now Marula was now hanging from the tip of the trunk by her fingertips, her feet dangling above the grass on the side of the cliff, the tree was bending at such an angle.  Ben also let go the grip of his shoes on the trunk and joined Marula to hang from the trunk vertically, his feet also dangling above the grass on the cliff side.

"Alan, you need to move just a little bit further and let go of your feet and hang like me.  If you can just make it a little bit further I think the three of us are gonna make it!”

"We need the trunk to bend a little bit more.  I have to wait until this beast is a bit closer!”

Alan was speaking in a strained voice through his clenched teeth as he hung on to the branch with his hands and feet although his strength was failing.  The Fang Tracker was now halfway up along the trunk, which was causing it to creak and bend further and further bringing Alan closer to the edge of the cliff.  With every step the beast took the trunk bent and stretched out over the gorge a little bit more. Suddenly, without warning, the Fang Tracker took an enormous leap and landed just below Alan, its sharp claws digging into the trunk to hold it steady. It reached out its muscular neck, bared its fangs and opened its greedy jaws.  Its sudden movement and shift of weight nearer to Alan caused the Needle Bark tree to stretch and bend dramatically so that Marula’s and Ben's feet touched the ground of the cliffside without even having to let go.

“Alan let go on the count of three!” shouted Ben.

“ONE, TWO, THREEEE!”

Alan instinctively trusted Ben's words without even looking down to see whether or not he might fall on the soft grass of the cliff or plunge deep down below into the gorge beneath him.  He let go his grip right before the shiny white fangs touched the cloth of his shirt.  All three landed with a soft thud on the grass, their eyes shut tight fearing the worst.  Upon their release of the tree, the fierce black creature stared for a moment in suspended animation. Even its tiny brain was capable of predicting what was about to happen next.

The flexible rubber trunk of the tree responded to the relief of the weights of the two boys and the monkey and shot back to its original position with lightening speed, making a rubbery twanging sound.  The black beast was catapulted from the springing tree trunk, shooting it far out across the tops of the Elder Wax trees until it was a tiny black furry dot, sailing through the sky into the far distance to the sound of a furious howl that disappeared on the horizon.  Alan, Ben and Marula looked at each other in disbelief.  They jumped to their feet and threw their arms around each other, dancing in a circle of joy and excitement.

"We made it! We made it!  We made it!"

"I can’t believe, Buddy! I really thought it was gonna get me!"

The three friends hugged each other tightly and didn't let go for almost a minute. When finally they released the grip on each other, they turned around with their backs to the gorge behind them and fell silent.

"What on earth is that?" asked Alan slowly.

"I have no idea," answered Ben. “I've never seen one before but something tells me we’re about to find out."