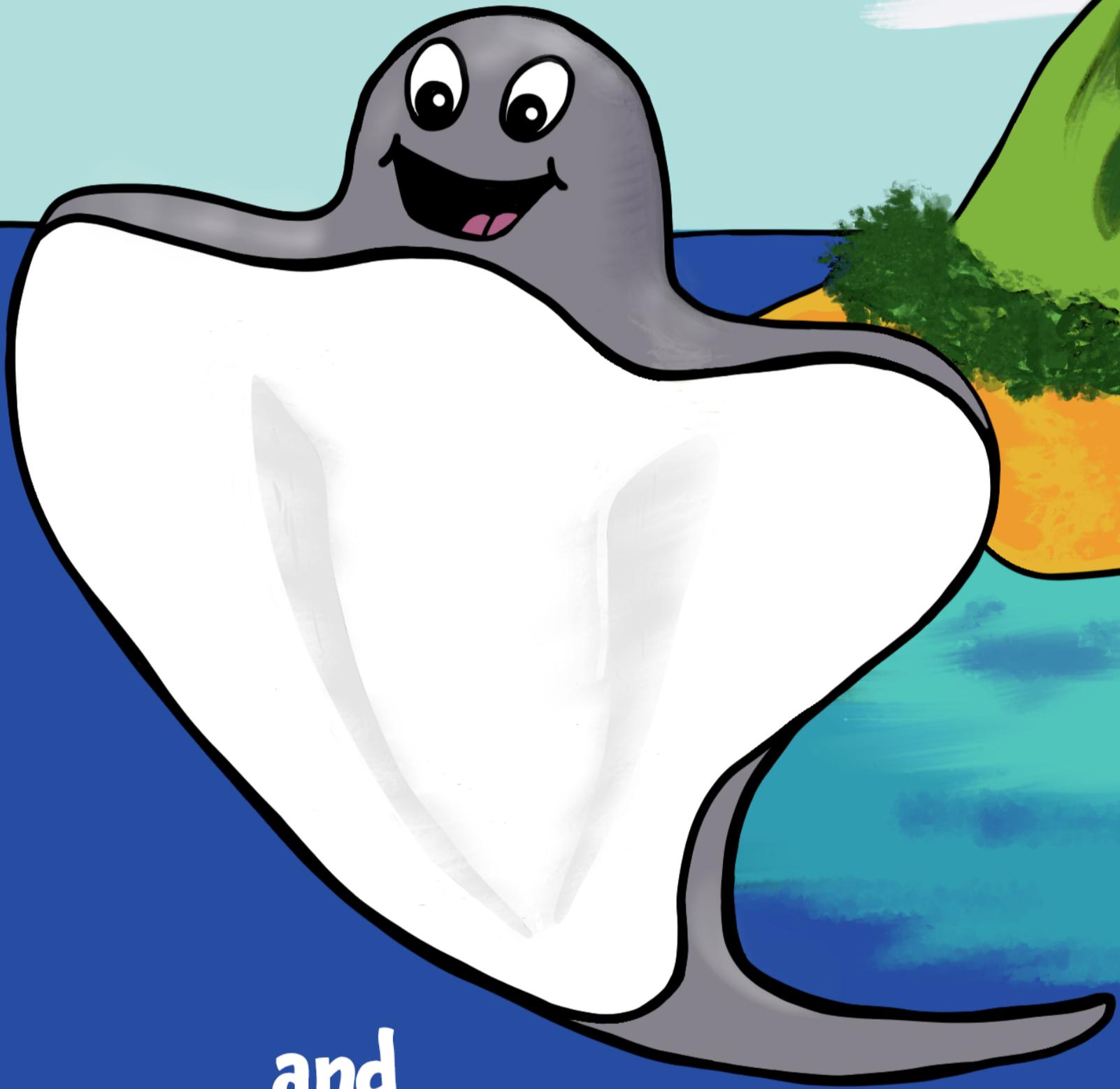


SANDY THE STINGRAY



and

The Big Reef Rescue

NAOMI SHIBLES

Alex Ting gazed at the aquamarine sea lapping at the island's bustling beach outside of the hotel.

“Welcome to St. Croix,” said the manager with a bright smile. He handed Alex's parents coconuts with striped paper straws sticking out. Alex received a fresh, pink mango that released its sugary aroma in his hand.

While his parents checked into the hotel, Alex stepped outside and ran his fingers along the rough, stone walls. He could imagine the characters in *Pirates of the Caribbean* scampering over the cobblestone streets and slipping through the wide, masonry archways that stitched the tiny town together.

The hotel manager booked Alex's family on a sailing cruise to an island park called Buck Island. When they arrived at the pier, the captain of the sailboat swept his arm toward his vessel and said in a booming voice: “Welcome to the *Waterblade!*” The man was as wide as the sky, with hoop earrings and a beard so full that it lived up to his name, Bushy Beard.

“Captain Bushy Beard looks like a pirate,” Alex whispered to his dad, who grinned.

His mom *shushed* them and continued listening with the other charter guests.

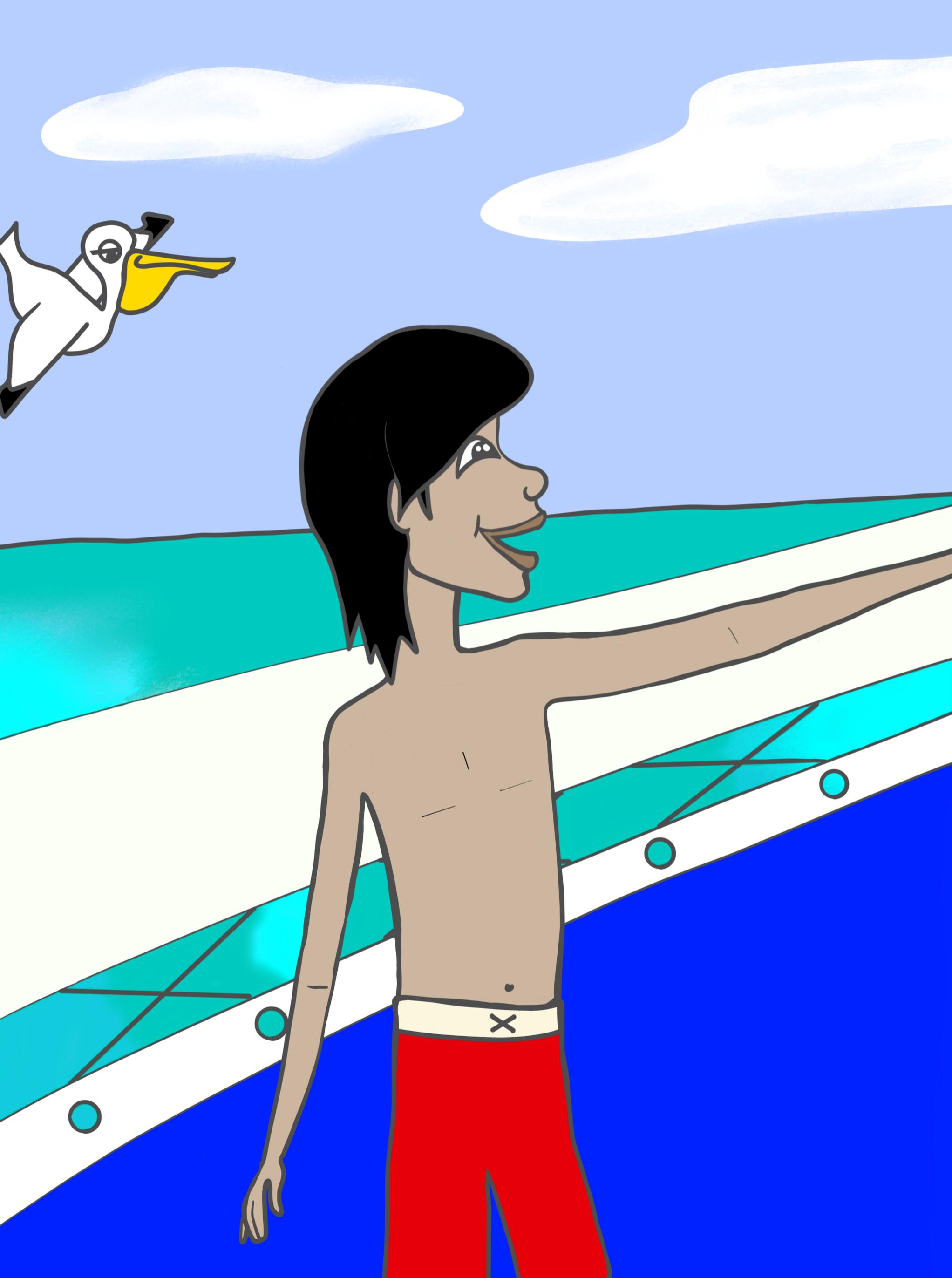
“The *Waterblade* is a catamaran,” said Bushy Beard. “That means that it has two hulls, or bottoms, instead of one, which makes it more stable than a typical sailboat.”

Alex looked doubtfully at the boat’s canvas tarp stretched between two pontoons but, halfway to Buck Island, a grin stretched across his face as *Waterblade*’s hulls cut through the Caribbean Sea, shattering its glass-like illusion. The trade winds that pushed the boat’s sails whipped his hair so that it flew into his mouth. Tourists sharing the catamaran’s trampoline gasped and laughed as saltwater sprayed their faces.

Ahead, a green mound peeked from the placid sea. As the spit of land loomed closer, sweat trickled down the inside of Alex’s tee shirt, squeezed from his skin by the tropical heat. When they reached Buck Island, he jumped over the side of the boat after his parents and plunged into the refreshing water.

The salt-infused sea lifted Alex onto its shoulders and brandished him on its gentle waves. It revealed seashells littering the golden sand beneath it. Alex spotted cone-like conch shells baring their pink bellies as they lounged on the seabed.

Alex’s mom and dad covered their eyes and noses with glass masks and pulled rubber fins onto their feet. “We’re going to swim along the snorkeling trail,” said his dad, wheeling his arms for balance as he waddled in the sand. The long fins made walking awkward, but gave swimmers the power of a dolphin’s tail.



Alex laughed as his dad fell backward and moved to help him up. “What’s on the snorkeling trail?”

His mom attached a long, rubber snorkel to her mask. She tested the snorkel in the shallows, letting it fill and then blowing water out of the top of the tube. They would breath through their snorkel tubes while they discovered the colorful wonders below the water’s surface. “There is a coral reef and tropical fishes. There is even a barracuda.”

Alex shuddered. “I don’t want to see barracuda fangs.”

His mom laughed. “They don’t have fangs, but they do have sharp teeth. We’ll be sure not to bother it.”

“Why is there a trail for snorkeling?” asked Alex. “Isn’t the reef all around the island?”

“Coral reefs are important, but delicate, ecosystems,” she said.

“Reefs must be respected. Each reef provides a home for thousands of sea creatures,” said his dad. “It’s important not to touch anything or we could ruin their home. If we follow the trail, we can see the reef without risk of knocking into it.”

Alex’s mom gave him a quick hug. “Swim around right here and we’ll be back for lunch. Stay close to the group.”

If Alex crossed his eyes, the ice-blue water and snowy sand looked cold, but the dazzling sun heated it like a bath that caressed his skin. He let pennies float to the sand beneath and dove down to reclaim them. His heart raced as he marveled at a school of flying fish skimming the water's surface. Along the sandy trail to the top of the island, he found a caterpillar as big as his index finger that was black and furry with red spots.

No other kids had come on the sailing trip and Alex began to feel lonely. He wondered what was taking his parents so long as he floated on his back along the shore. A chill rippled through the water beneath him.

What was that?

Alex flipped around and looked through the bright water. A shadow passed under him like an inkblot. And it had a tail.

No. It had a *stinger*.

It was a stingray! Alex had learned about stingrays at school in California and knew that they could be dangerous. He tried to swim away but before he could, the stingray cruised beneath him and lifted him smoothly onto its back.

"Don't worry. I won't hurt you," it said.

Alex shivered and gripped the stingray's slick wings that extended out from its round, gray head like a cape—a cape that was tipped with a deadly stinger! The creature propelled him through the iridescent sea that framed the island's white sand and single, lush hill. Orange and blue and yellow flashed beneath him as fish dove for cover.

“Where are we going?” asked Alex. He felt like he was flying on a magic carpet as the stingray skimmed the surface of the sea. Muscles rippled in its wings that stretched five feet across as they beat through the water.

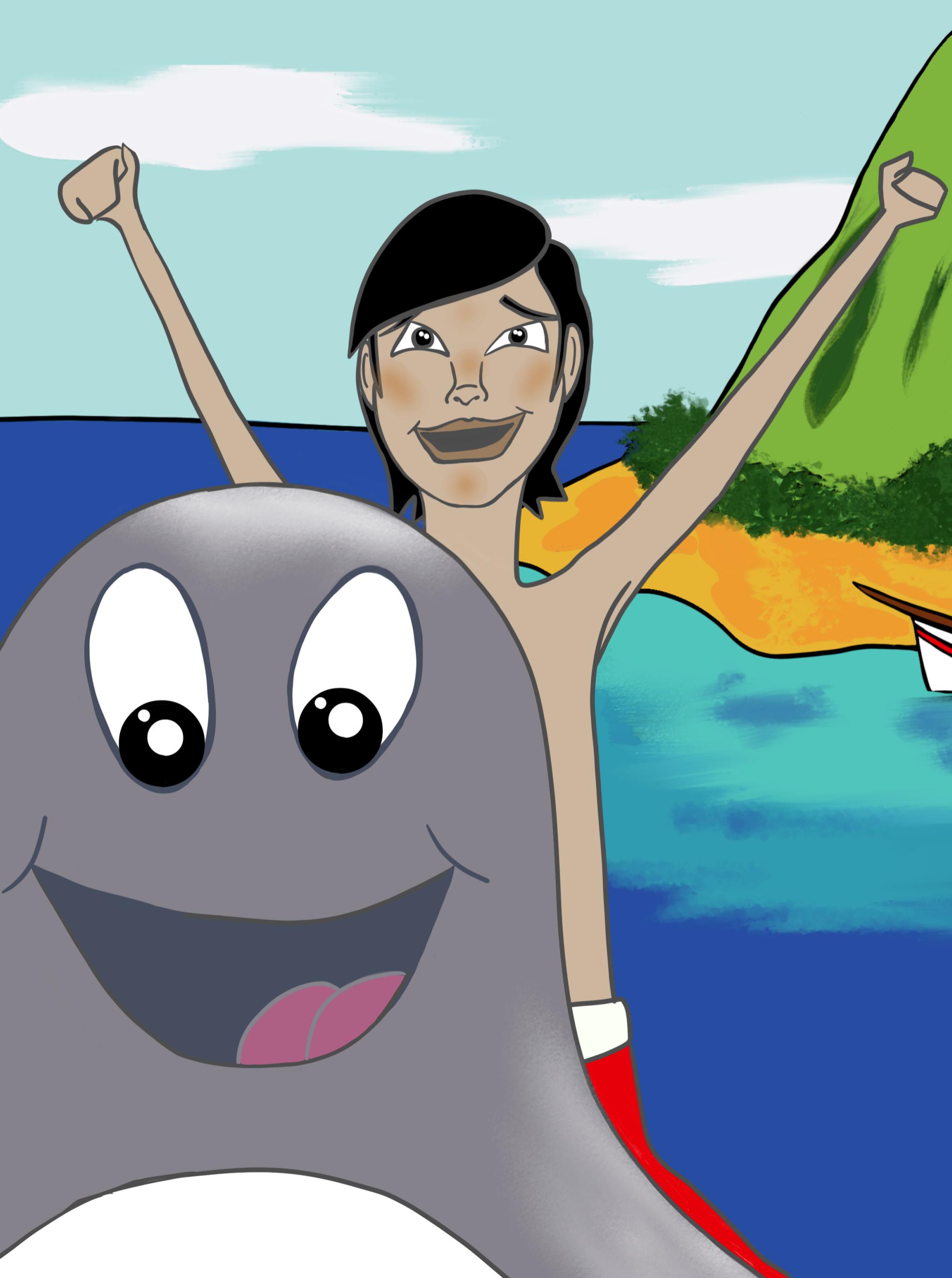
“My name is Sandy,” said the stingray, breathless. “Your parents are in trouble. We have to hurry!”

“I'm Alex. What's happening with my parents?”

“There is a barracuda that lives near the snorkeling trail. He's a mean fish who will attack anyone who wanders too close to his lair. I saw your parents swim in his direction.”

A jolt of fear ricocheted through Alex's body. “Holy guacamole! The barracuda is attacking my parents?”

“Not yet,” said Sandy. “But, he has them trapped. They need our help!”



They rounded the curve of the island and Alex saw his mom and dad half-submerged in the water, backed against the base of a small cliff. They could not climb up. A streak of silver whipped back and forth in front of them, preventing them from swimming to safety.

Alex saw the fear on their faces and dread settled over him like a moldy cloak. “What should we do?” he asked. His urgent voice cracked.

Sandy pulled up to the shallow water so that Alex could hop off of his back. “I have a plan to save your mom and dad. Here comes help.”

Dozens of bright colors swirled between Alex’s ankles as schools of tropical fish swarmed around them.



These are my friends,” said Sandy. He swept his wing to indicate the miniature schools of fish darting in all directions. “They are swift and brave, and small enough to hide in the tiny crevices of the coral reef.”

They streaked back and forth with pride, seeming to dance around each other in an underwater ballet.

“But, what will they do?” asked Alex. How could such minuscule creatures help against a vicious beast?

“They are going to distract the barracuda and make him chase them,” said Sandy. “Your job is to get your parents’ attention.”

“What if the barracuda hurts my mom and dad?” Alex’s forehead creased with worry.

Sandy did an underwater flip. “That’s why we have to hurry!”

The colorful fishes quickly made formations, like a miniature army. Sandy the Stingray cruised in front of them, a general pacing before the troops, and announced his plan: The siege would begin with the flamboyant, blue Mandarin dragonet fish approaching the barracuda from the west.

“What about us?” asked the purple and yellow royal gramma fish.

“You go next. Swim in front of him from the east to confuse him.” Sandy nodded to the bright orange and white clown fish. “Then, you all sweep in from

below, tempting him in a third direction. Instead of yucky-tasting people, the barracuda will go after succulent, little fishes to eat. But, we know that you can out-swim him this close to the reef.”

Sandy drilled them again on the plan. The tropical fishes were excited and ready!

“What about me?” asked Alex, kneeling in the sand.

Sandy floated close to the boy. “Your job is very important, Alex. When the barracuda chases the fish, I’ll quickly pull your parents to safety. You have to get their attention and convince them that it is safe to grab onto my wings.”

“That’s it?” Alex’s breath was shallow as he watched the barracuda snake from side to side.

“They’ll be afraid of me until you assure them that it is safe to trust me. You have to holler loudly enough for them to hear you over the waves breaking on the beach and the motorboat engines.”

Alex nodded and dug his toes into the soupy sand at the tide’s edge. He watched the battalion of Mandarin dragonets advance on the barracuda as it leered at his parents. When he saw the well-meaning but excitable royal grammas rush out too early, Alex waded closer.

“Stay back!” said Sandy, rearing out of the water.



Alex jumped back to the shallows and wrung his hands as the flustered royal grammas teased the barracuda and said that he swam like a conch snail.

The barracuda eyed his small antagonists and snarled.

The clown fish panicked and surrounded him, putting themselves in great danger to nibble on his fins. The Mandarin dragonets tried to lure the barracuda away but he didn't notice, too busy swatting and snapping at the clown fish. The royal grammas lost their bearings and collided with the Mandarin dragonets, sending them spinning in all directions.

Sandy groaned when he saw his plan dissolve into chaos. The barracuda still had Alex's parents trapped and his friends were in danger! He dove deep underwater and used his supersonic marine creature powers to give the valiant fishes an urgent order: "SWIM AWAY!"

In the moment between glints of sunlight on the surface of the sea, all three schools of fish flitted to their hiding spots in the reef.

"I'll be back for you two." The barracuda growled at Alex's parents as they pressed their backs against the rock. The beast thrashed up foam and swam after the retreating fishes, bumping into coral formations and knocking over sea fans with his tail.

Now it was Alex's turn. He knew that he only had a moment to get his parents' attention before the barracuda returned. As Alex filled his lungs, his mom caught sight of Sandy the Stingray and screamed.

Just as his dad swatted at the water around Sandy's head, Alex yelled so loudly that his face turned purple: "MOM, DAD, GRAB ONTO THE STINGRAY'S WINGS!"

His parents did not move, and Alex's heart sank.

His parents gaped, trying to understand where the yelling was coming from, but they remained backed against the stone in the barracuda's cove.

Alex's stomach dropped when he saw the silvery glints of the barracuda swimming back toward them. It would eat his mom and dad. He would be an orphan, forced to work for the pirate, Bushy Beard, to earn food and shelter.

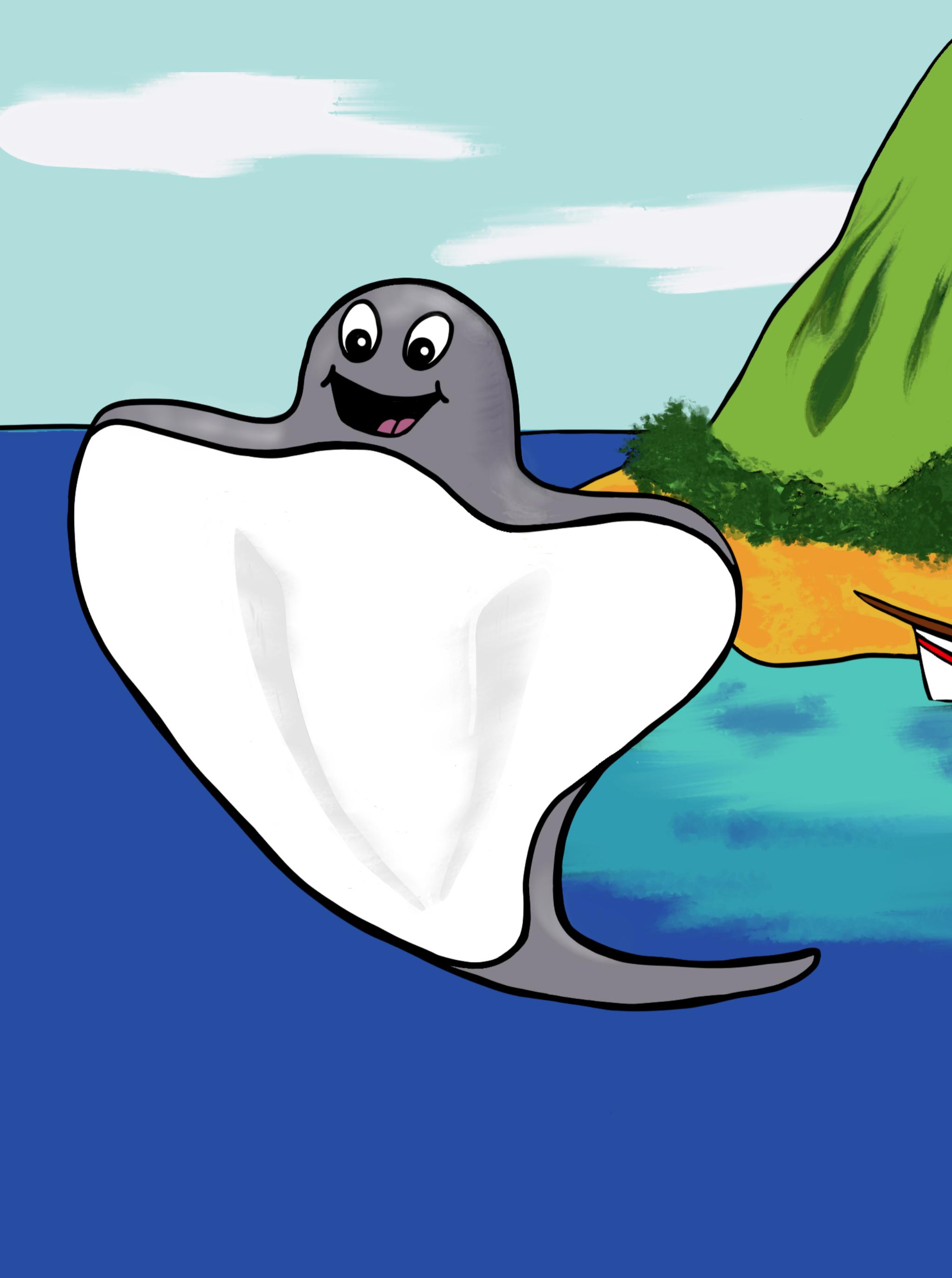
Alex decided that he did not want to become a pirate.

He planted his feet and drew another breath until his lungs squeaked warnings like overfilled balloons. Squatting in the shallow water, he sucked in even more air than he thought possible. As he stood, his voice erupted with the force of panic and love: "GRAB THE STINGRAAAAAY!"

With the last of his breath, Alex fell to his knees in the sand.

His parents started when they recognized their son's voice and threw themselves onto Sandy. The stingray's great, slippery wings beat once and pulled them past the barracuda and around the shoreline to where Alex waited.

His mom rushed onto the beach and screamed for Alex to get out of the water, even though it was only ankle deep where he stood. His dad waddled onto the beach, still in his fins, and fainted in a pile of seaweed.



Alex knew that he was safe from the barracuda in the shallows and waved to his mom. He watched her kneel in the sand next to his dad, and then he turned to Sandy. “Won’t the barracuda come after you? You can’t hide in the reef like the small fish.”

Sandy chuckled. “I’m a nice stingray and mostly just want people to give me sandwiches. But I *do* have a really big stinger, and that dastardly barracuda knows it.”

Alex laughed, too. “Sandy, my friend, what can we do to thank you?”

Sandy did a back flip and soared out of the water with his wings spread wide, Buck Island’s emerald hill behind him. “Do you have any sandwiches?”

THE END