

AROUND THE WORLD



SOFIA SURVIVES THE BORDER



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WELCOME TO COLOMBIA



Caribbean Sea

Panama

Bogotá

Colombia

Ecuador

Peru

Venezuela


Brazil

Guyana

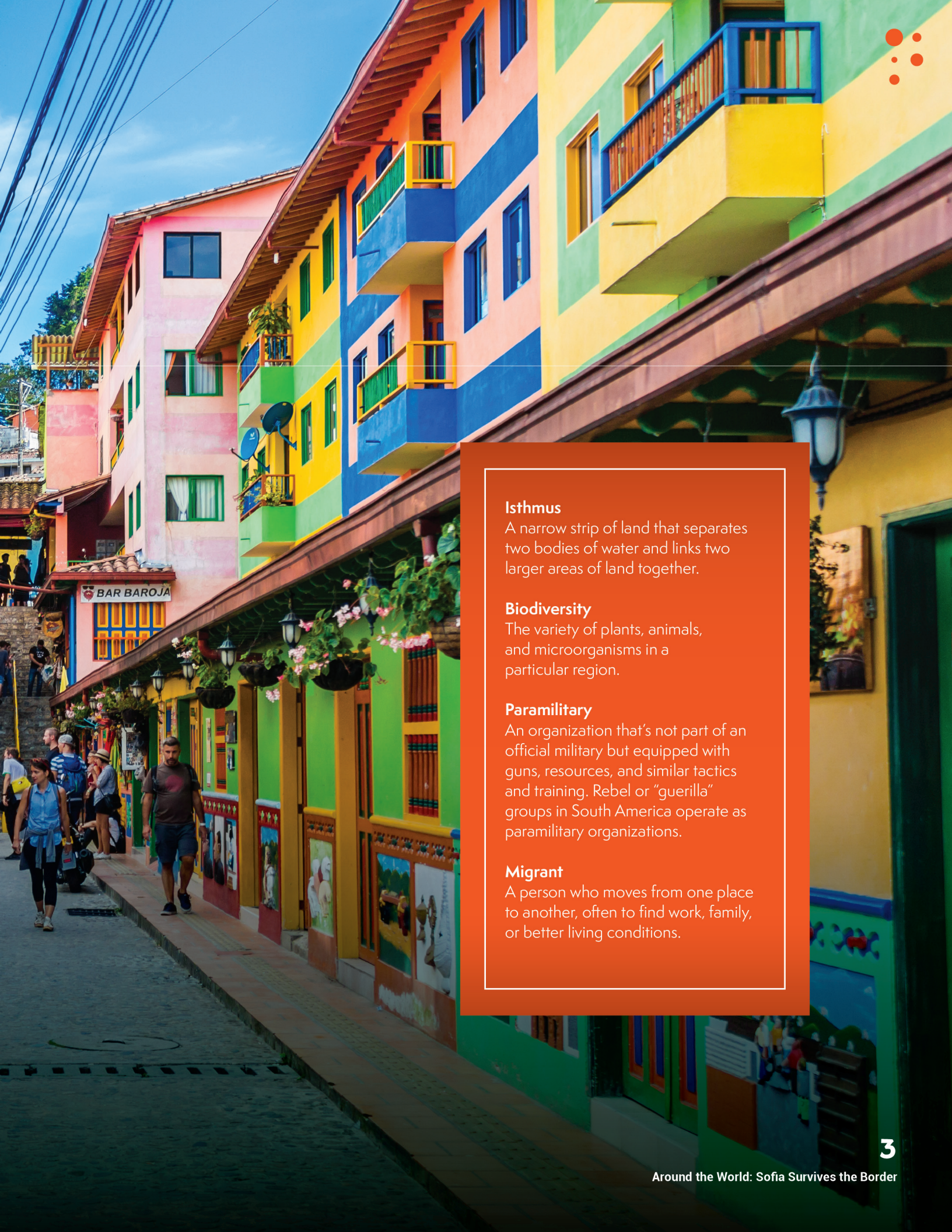


Welcome to Colombia, a land of towering mountains, lush forests, and friendly, spirited people. Colombia sits on the northwest corner of South America.

Its borders pass through rugged, uninhabited areas, touching Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, and poverty-stricken Venezuela. Colombia also connects to Central America (and beyond that, North America) through the narrow Panama **isthmus**. With the warm Caribbean Sea on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other, this land bridge gives Colombia its nickname: "The Gateway to South America."



Despite the challenge of illegal activity, Colombia's leaders see a bright future. With a growing economy based on agriculture, tourism, natural resources, and dynamic cities like Bogotá and Medellín, they hope to modernize the country while protecting its rich **biodiversity**. Promises to build better infrastructure and to reform healthcare and the labor market sound good, but many in Colombia's lawless border regions don't believe them. In these far-off areas, where jungle and mountains make the border hard to secure, criminal gangs and **paramilitary** groups run the show. Fueled by a stream of **migrants** coming through Colombia on their way to Mexico and the United States, smuggling, robberies, and increasing violence make life at the border dangerous and unpredictable.



Isthmus

A narrow strip of land that separates two bodies of water and links two larger areas of land together.

Biodiversity

The variety of plants, animals, and microorganisms in a particular region.

Paramilitary

An organization that's not part of an official military but equipped with guns, resources, and similar tactics and training. Rebel or "guerilla" groups in South America operate as paramilitary organizations.

Migrant

A person who moves from one place to another, often to find work, family, or better living conditions.

Colombia

POPULATION SIZE: AROUND 52 MILLION



SIZE: 400,000 SQUARE MILES

COLOMBIA IS VERY CLOSE TO THE EQUATOR, WHICH MAKES FOR A VARIETY OF CLIMATES, LANDSCAPES, CROPS, AND VEGETATION.



PETROLEUM MAKES UP NEARLY HALF OF COLOMBIA'S EXPORTS. COFFEE, CACAO BEANS (FOR CHOCOLATE), BANANAS, PLANTAINS, FLOWERS, SUGARCANE, GOLD, AND EMERALDS ARE ALSO TOP EXPORTS.



★
CAPITAL CITY:
BOGOTÁ



COLOMBIA IS NAMED AFTER EXPLORER CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

COLOMBIAN NOVELIST GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ WON WORLDWIDE FAME AND A PULITZER PRIZE FOR HIS WRITING. WHEN HE DIED IN 2014, PRESIDENT JUAN MANUEL SANTOS CALLED HIM "THE GREATEST COLOMBIAN WHO EVER LIVED."

COLOMBIA HAS MORE SPANISH SPEAKERS THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY IN SOUTH AMERICA (BRAZIL HAS MORE PEOPLE, BUT THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IS PORTUGUESE).

COLOMBIA HAS THE FIFTH LARGEST ECONOMY IN SOUTH AMERICA.





Meet Sofia

Hola, amigos! Meet Sofia. She's 15 and loves making new friends. Sofia lives with her papá, Pablo, her mamá, Juanita, and her older brother Fernando. They live on a small plot of land with plantain trees in Colombia's Chocó region. Their plantain grove sits on the edge of a rainforest that goes all the way to the unmarked Colombia-Panama border. The nearest town, Acandí, is three miles away by dirt road. The nearest big city is well over a hundred miles away... but that's perfect for Sofia! Earthy smells, colorful insects, and the sound of rain pelting a tin roof put her right at home.

Sofia is an avid explorer. She knows the region so well that hiking trails through the dense rainforest feel like her own backyard. Sometimes, she joins Papá when he takes tourists out on his river canoe. From coming on these trips and chatting with visitors, she's learned different Spanish **dialects** and bits of languages like French and English.

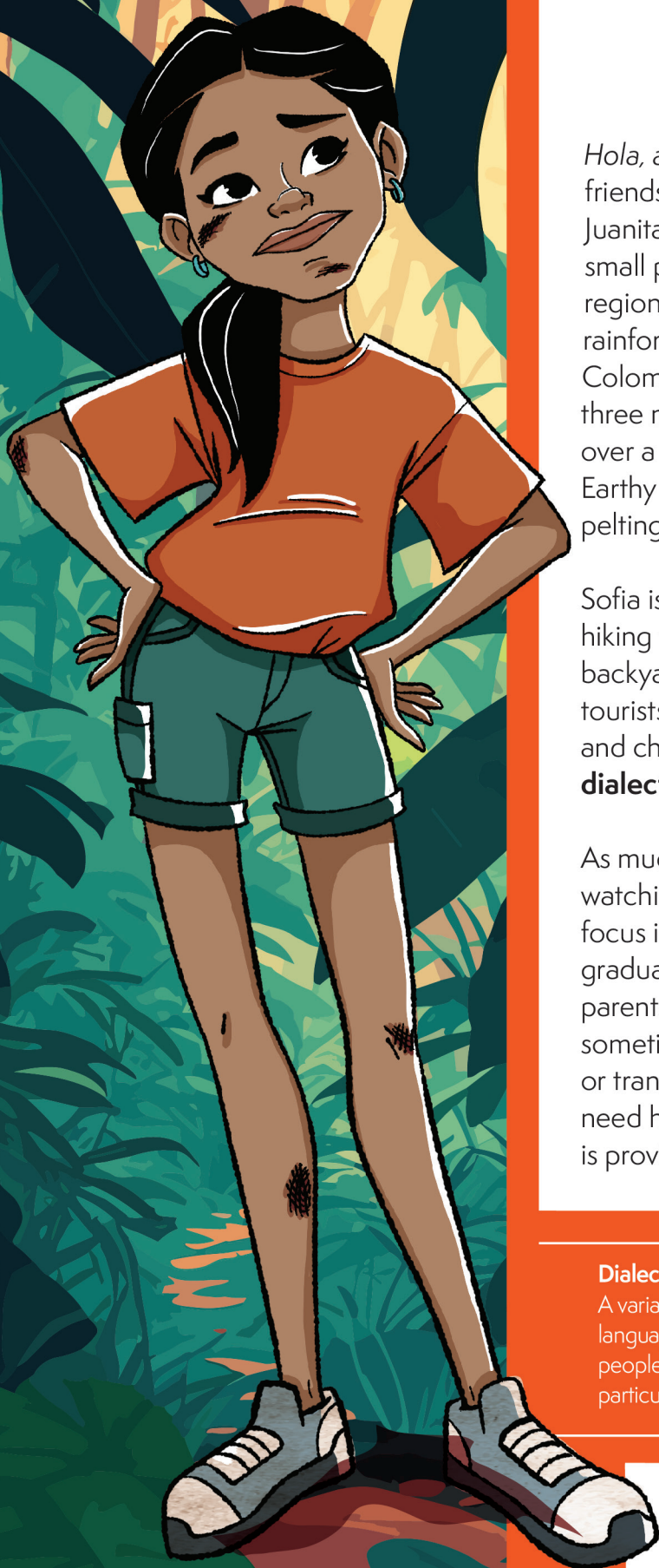
As much as Sofia loves people, the outdoors, and watching the area's seasonal **fiestas** come to life, her main focus is school. She works hard, and her goal is to graduate. But the schoolhouse is far away, and her parents don't own a car. With heavy rain and floods that sometimes ruin the plantain harvest, money for supplies or transportation is scarce. On top of that, Sofia's parents need help running the family business, so finishing school is proving more of a challenge than she imagined.

Dialect

A variation of language used by people in a particular region.

Fiesta

A Spanish word for "feast" or "party." In Spanish-speaking areas like Colombia, it also means "religious celebration." Each region celebrates annual fiestas with music, dancing, and food.





Border Problems

Colombia's incredible geography comes with challenges. Securing a long border that crosses plains, mountains, and the Amazon rainforest is certainly one of them. With chronic **border insecurity**, Colombia struggles to keep its land, economy, and outlying population centers secure. On top of that challenge, poor infrastructure, corruption, and minimal **customs** or security make the border regions a breeding ground for lawlessness. The 1,376-mile boundary with Venezuela is fraught with crime and illegal crossings, all due to border insecurity. Each day, Venezuela's crippling poverty sends more people over the Colombian border as **refugees**. As of 2022, nearly 3 million Venezuelan migrants were living in Colombia.

Border Insecurity

An unstable environment that occurs when a country is unwilling or unable to control its borders.

Customs

The place at a country's border where government officials check what people and goods are entering or leaving the country.

Refugee

Someone fleeing their country because of war, violence, or persecution and seeking safety in another country.



Border insecurity also gives Colombia's ruthless **cartels** space to operate. Fueled by the illegal drug trade that grew in the 1970s, Colombian cartels grew powerful enough to challenge their own government. Cooperation with the United States helped Colombia's leaders regain control, but cartels still operate in the country's porous border regions. Near the Panama border, they oversee smuggling routes for drugs, food, commercial goods, and, worst of all, **human trafficking**.

Cartel

A cooperative arrangement between groups typically involved in organized crime, especially drug trafficking.

Human Trafficking

The illegal trade of people, usually for forced labor or other forms of abuse.



Heading for El Norte

Sofia knows why the border region has become so busy—it's on the road to **El Norte**, the United States, over 2,600 miles away. For years now, poor enforcement and high crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border have turned the undeveloped region between northern Colombia and Panama into an immigration magnet. For migrants, the first leg of their long journey is the rugged, infamous **Darién Gap**: 60 miles of mountainous rainforest with no roads or settlements. Those who make it across have six more countries to pass through before reaching the United States border.


Small coastal towns like Acandí are a starting point for the migrant route that passes right through Sofia's backyard. Every week, people from Cuba, Venezuela, Haiti, and many other countries arrive in small boats. Onshore, they meet up with dangerous **coyotes**, paid guides who illegally take them along the dirt road by Sofia's plantain grove and then up to **La Bandera**, a trail stop that marks the Panama border with Colombian flags. Sofia knows the trail to this spot very well. She's made the tough hike with her Papá many times, but not recently.

El Norte

Spanish for "The North." In Mexico and Central America, "El Norte" can be slang for the United States.

Darién Gap

A remote, roadless, and densely forested region of Central America that stretches between Panama and Colombia. With no border security, hundreds of thousands of migrants cross the gap on their long journey to the U.S.-Mexico border every year. This area is controlled by dangerous cartels.



A year ago, a pair of teenagers hiked to the border and never returned. Since then, Sofia's parents have told her and her brother Fernando to avoid the area. All the same, the vans and motorbikes that rumble by remind her of people making the mad rush north. At least once a day, a large group of exhausted-looking migrants—those who could not pay for a ride to the trail—passes on foot.

Sofia hates the coyotes. Once they lead migrants over the border, they leave them to make the rest of the journey on their own. The walk through the Darién is long, steep, and dangerous. Some coyotes hide this fact from clueless migrants who don't know the area. As a result, few of them come prepared for the risks and dangers that lay ahead. *Do they know what they're in for?* Sofia wonders, thinking of the chilling stories about people not surviving the journey. *Do they know that coyotes lie or that the cartels they work for only see people as dollar signs?* Every time another migrant group walks by their home, Papá shakes his head, and Sofia feels a heaviness in her stomach.

Is there anything she can do to help?

Coyotes

Guides that smuggle individuals or groups of migrants over a border illegally for money. They are often involved in drug and human trafficking.

La Bandera

Spanish for "The Flag."



Fernando's Opportunity

The high volume of people passing through town and making their way to the Darién has given Fernando an opportunity—a chance to join his friend Andres, a young, tough-looking coyote, as a paid guide for a migrant group. Fernando grants that it's risky, but with the family needing money and his sister wanting to finish school, why shouldn't he turn his knowledge of the area into a handsome profit? After all, he could make good money leading migrants to La Bandera, a place he's hiked to many times.

When Fernando asked Sofia to take the job with him, she refused. *How could he think of doing that?*

Their parents warned them against having anything to do with coyotes, the border, or cartels. But the more she thinks about it, the more Fernando's plan makes sense. They all need money, and she'd make a great guide—a much better one than the coyotes who charge hundreds or even thousands of dollars per person while lying about the journey's harsh conditions.

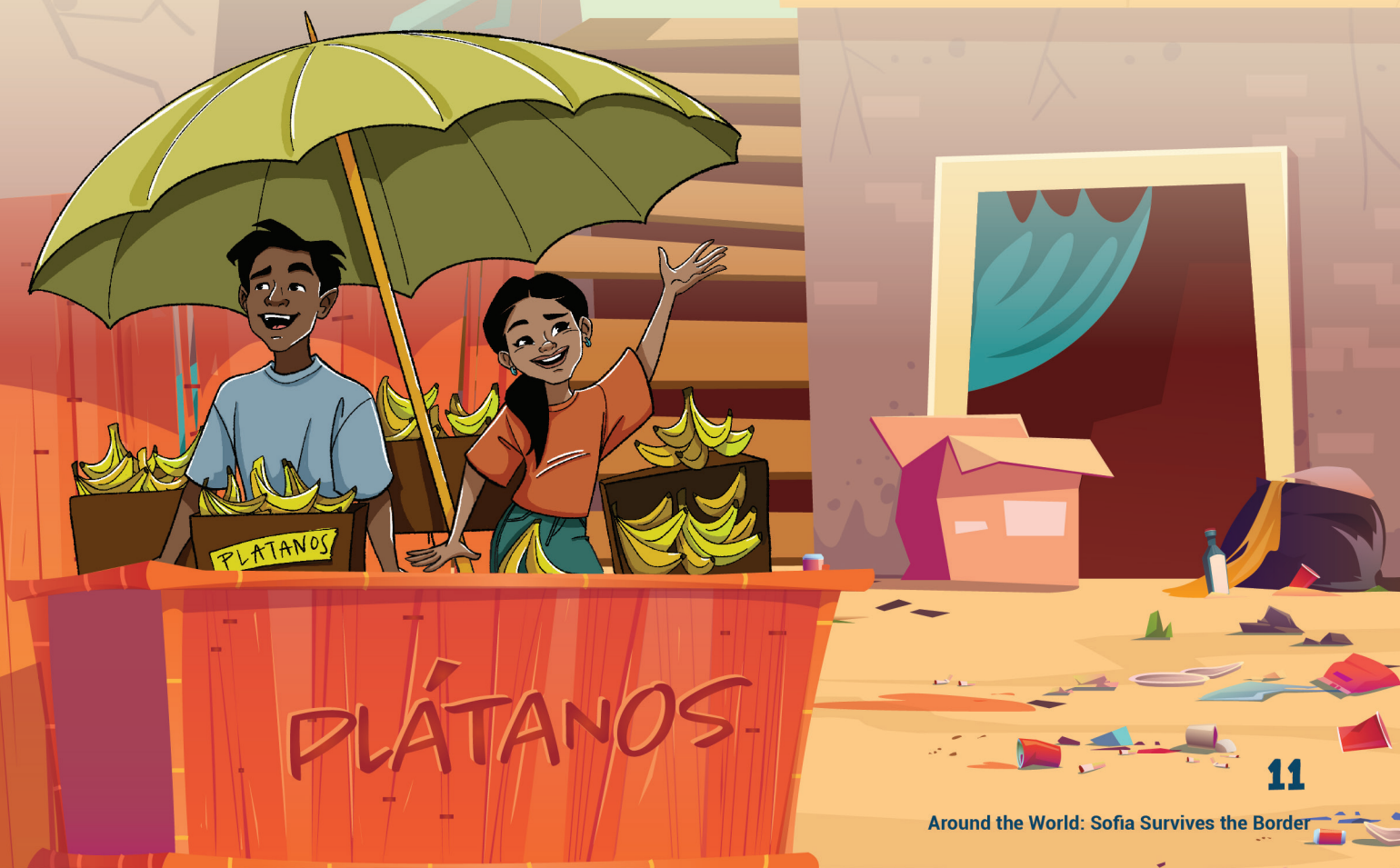




Changes in Town

Every month, Sofia and Fernando sell ripe plantains at the town square in Acandí. Over the last few months, the growing migrant population has changed the town before their eyes. At first, hearing the new Spanish dialects was exciting. Sofia and Fernando set up their stall at the usual spot, and they even saw a bump in plantain sales. But now, the consequences of so many newcomers are not all positive. Trash litters the sidewalk. The gorgeous beach is filled with tents, garbage, ash from cooking fires, abandoned toys, and clothes. More than once, they've had fruit stolen. Stores, benches, alleys, bathrooms—every foot of space is filled with people.

Sofia hears that other coastal towns have the same problem. With an open border, and hundreds sharing videos of their journey through the Darién on social media, the whole region is simply overwhelmed. Every week, groups with children, elderly, and even babies arrive. However, most of the migrants are healthy young men with no families, and some of the larger groups remind Sofia of the army units she sees on TV. Once in town, they wait outside for days or sometimes weeks to meet up with a coyote and start their trip.



New Friends

Abuelita

Spanish for “grandmother.”

Socialist Regime

A type of government, typically an authoritarian one, where the state has control over industries and businesses, with the goal of distributing wealth and resources equally among the people. Unfortunately, this type of government fails to reach that goal and usually turns oppressive.

Arepas de Huevo

A popular fried corn cake sold as street food. It usually has ground beef and an egg inside.

It’s another day at the market. Sofia is at the family’s plantain stall, but she’s not working much. Instead, she’s chatting with her new friend Alejandra, a migrant her age from Venezuela. Alejandra came up to Sofia’s stall after they both watched a dainty tourist buy a plantain, take a bite, and immediately spit it out. After sharing a laugh, the two girls started talking about different Spanish words that describe the same thing.

“*Gomela*,” Sofia says, trying to teach her new friend the word Colombians use for “stuck-up.”

“No, no, no,” Alejandra replies. “*Es sifrina*.”

They laugh. Comparing dialects and talking about the ridiculous things tourists do is too much fun.

Later on, Sofia is talking with Alejandra’s **abuelita** and learning all about their sad story. Back in Venezuela, Alejandra’s parents were arrested by the **socialist regime** for running a business the government did not approve of. They will likely never be seen again, and without them, Alejandra and Abuelita cannot make enough money to survive. With nothing but crime and violence in their hometown, they decided to try the long, dangerous migrant route to the United States. Sofia notices that her new friends have little money and no hiking or camping gear and that Abuelita walks slowly, with a sharp pain in her knee. Thinking of her climbing a muddy trail or wading through streams in her worn-out sandals makes Sofia shudder.

After buying her new friends some tasty **arepas de huevo**, Sofia asks if she can pray for them. Alejandra and Abuelita smile and agree. A little later, Fernando arrives to help her pack up the plantain stall.



One Time

On the walk home, Fernando and Sofia are talking. When Fernando mentions that Alejandra and Abuelita are in the group he's leading with Andres in a few days, Sofia stops. When she speaks, she cannot believe it; the words coming out sound like someone else's.

"All right, *hermano*. I'll go with you."

Fernando smiles. "You sure?"

"Sí," she replies. "One time. Just to the border."

Fernando is delighted, but Sofia feels a lump in her throat. As they walk home, Fernando boasts about how easy it will be and how much money they will make with one trip—but all Sofia can think about is their parents. Realizing that Papá and Mamá would never approve and that she and Fernando will have to tell them some kind of lie, she holds back tears.

Later that night, Sofia is wide awake. She could still change her mind... but what would happen to Alejandra? One way or another, she'll be heading for the U.S. border—and if that border is wide open, why not?

Aren't open borders a good thing for people fleeing poverty and violence? Who determines borders in the first place?

Thinking that borders are pointless and that it's cruel to keep people out of countries that would make their lives better, Sofia feels better about her decision. Being a guide is the best thing she could do to help migrants and her family, even if it's dangerous. Finally, she feels herself drifting off to sleep.



Hermano
Spanish for "brother."



The Darién Gap

With no roads or navigable rivers, the walk through the Darién Gap to settlements in Panama is around 66 miles. That means a week or two of hiking through the jungle and camping at night. Unlike the trails Papá shows to tourists, the terrain is difficult, especially for those with children or the elderly. Constant foot traffic churns the ground into thick, sticky mud. Steep cliffs hide behind leaves and vines. Small rivers swell and flood when it rains. Few people bring enough food, water, or camping gear—and those who do bring them are often robbed by criminal gangs. As a result, migrants drink river water, which makes them sick.

Hunger, illness, and dehydration make the journey even more risky. Anyone who becomes injured or sick can become stranded and left behind. With so many migrants making the hike, horrific tales of people drowning, disappearing, or getting robbed or assaulted are becoming common. Despite these dangers, the number of migrant crossings is spiking—around 250,000 people crossed the gap in 2022, and around 520,000 in 2023. It is estimated that between 16-20% of those trying to cross are children.

With the U.S. border beckoning, more and more people are deciding to brave these risks. From meeting migrants and hearing their stories, Sofia is realizing that desperate people who come to cross illegally don't always know what they've signed up for. Those who know the risks often think they have little to lose. For many, a better life in El Norte is worth the life-or-death gamble.



The Hike Begins

It's the morning of the hike, and everyone's energized. The refugees from Venezuela seem like a solid group—and Sofia is surprised to see young men from China, the Middle East, and Africa. *How far are people coming to make this journey?* In Spanish and as much English as she knows, Sofia coaches the group about pacing themselves and watching out for poisonous snakes. While she talks, she sees Alejandra smiling at her from the back of the line. Hours later, the trip is going well. Fernando is out front, leading the group uphill. With each turn, they climb further into the Darién. Sofia walks near the back, where she can chat with Alejandra and help those like Abuelita who have to move slowly. The trail is steep, but for now, the air is moist and cool. Everyone is chatting; spirits are high. Even Fernando's friend Andres, whom Sofia doesn't know, seems friendly. When Sofia noticed the gun and holster at his hip, her heart skipped a beat. But she took a deep breath and reminded herself that even this "easy" part of the trail can be dangerous. Having some security is probably a good thing.



Border Breakdown



Around the world, and in places like the United States and Europe, some believe that borders are unjust, arbitrary, and even a violation of human rights. A few go as far as arguing that sovereign countries like the U.S. sit on stolen land and have no right to enforce their border at all. But poorly secured borders can easily create a **humanitarian crisis** or even armed conflict. Countries try to take advantage of the violence and lawlessness from weak borders and end up fighting for the same territory. Meanwhile, people like Alejandra continue to risk their lives for an illegal crossing.



Strong borders between countries uphold the safety of their citizens and their property, ensure law and order, and allow countries to function. Most importantly, strong borders maintain national **sovereignty**, making other countries around the world recognize a country's laws and government.

Here are some facts about what happens when borders fall apart.

In Colombia:



According to the International Organization for Migration, over 80,000 people crossed into Panama from Colombia in August of 2022, just *one month*.



In 2021, the small Colombian town of Necoclí saw between 1,000 and 1,500 migrants arrive each day to cross into the Darién. Today, that surge of people to border communities continues, reshaping the economy, and bringing pollution, trash, and sanitation problems.



Colombia's border with Venezuela is a source of conflict and international tension. The two countries almost went to war over a border dispute in 1987 and again in 2008.





For four decades, the left-wing paramilitary group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), has caused problems near Colombia's border with Venezuela, destabilizing the region and making kidnapping and drug trafficking common. Colombian officials accused former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez of supporting the group as a way to cause trouble.



In the United States:



In 2021, U.S. Border Patrol agents **detained** migrants from more than 100 different countries.



In just the first nine months of 2023, Border Patrol agents encountered close to 3 million people crossing the border illegally. This is a number greater than the population of 17 states.



The Migration Policy Institute estimates that 75% of these migrant encounters end with the migrant making it across the U.S. border.



In the first nine months of 2023, Border Patrol encountered 151 migrants on the **Terrorist Watchlist**. It is unknown how many people on that list have crossed into the U.S. without getting caught.



Since 2020, drug smuggling near the U.S.-Mexico border has skyrocketed. Federal Agents have confiscated around 11,000 pounds of the deadly drug **fentanyl**. Each pound can kill over 200,000 people.



Since 2020, Border Patrol agents have found hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied children trying to cross the border.

Humanitarian Crisis

A situation in which a large group of people faces immediate health and safety risks, leading to widespread suffering, even death, and the need for emergency assistance.

Sovereignty

The right and power of a country to govern itself without interference from others and defend its territory.

Detain

To stop someone and keep them in official custody.

Terrorist Watchlist

A list of names that the FBI and other agencies use to identify those with ties to hostile countries or terrorist organizations.

Fentanyl

A powerful drug used in pain medication but often mixed with other substances and sold illegally on the streets. Illegal fentanyl is extremely dangerous and can be consumed without someone knowing it, leading to accidental overdoses and death.

La Bandera

It's late afternoon, and the sun is beating down. With the humid air and the thick vegetation on either side, the trail feels like a sauna. Finally, Sofia sees the landmark—yellow, blue, and red shards of a tattered Colombian flag. She sits with Abuelita to take a rest at the Panama-Colombia border. Fernando and a few migrants sit nearby, but she sees that Andres and the others have already gone ahead.

Sofia breathes a sigh of relief. Finally, her stretch of the journey is over. With any luck, she and Fernando can get paid and then make it home before dark. But as she looks around, that feeling of relief evaporates. Just like the beaches, there's trash everywhere. The smell of rotting food curls her nostrils. Beneath the sign reading "**Frontera**," a wooden post holds necklaces, more flags, and pieces of ragged clothing. Pictures of people have the word "**desaparecido**" written on them. *Missing*? How many people have ventured through here only to meet an awful end? Did people disappear?

Come to think of it, Sofia hasn't seen Alejandra for several hours. Earlier, when a pregnant woman fell on the trail, Alejandra rushed ahead to help. Since then, Sofia hasn't had contact; she's been at the very back, helping Abuelita make it up the trail.

When Fernando offers her water, she takes a long drink.

"Listen," he says, sounding worried. "Some people in the group are really sick. Andres wants us to continue on so we can keep them moving. He'll pay double."

Even though it's baking hot, Sofia feels a shiver. With night coming, going ahead means camping out—with no tent or sleeping bag. She knows that pushing ahead is a huge risk. From here, the trail gets difficult, and the thick jungle provides cover for all kinds of dangers, from wild animals to criminal groups who prey on migrants. Should something happen, there's no police, no first aid, and no communication with either country. Looking around, she remembers that these migrants are entering illegally, which means they don't want the attention of authorities.

But before she can refuse, Abuelita grunts in pain.

"Okay," she says, nodding to her brother. "But she needs our help."



Frontera
Spanish for "border."

Desaparecido
Spanish for "missing."



Deep in the Darién

It's night in the rainforest. Insects chirp. A monkey howls. The thick darkness surrounding the cluster of tents and lanterns is filled with the jungle's spooky orchestra. Everyone is exhausted except Sofia. For the past hour, she's been worried about Alejandra, who never showed up at camp. After promising Abuelita she'd look for her, Sofia's back on the trail, retracing their steps. With the trail so dark, it's difficult to go fast, and the sounds around her are so loud she can barely think. If her friend is injured or something worse...

Rescue

When she hears voices in the trees, Sofia freezes. One voice is Andres, but the other one is unfamiliar. She clicks off the flashlight and waits for her eyes to adjust—and when they do, the flashlight ovals floating through the trees become clear. Both voices are laughing, coming closer. Hidden in the foliage beyond the trail, Sofia waits for them to pass. When the voices are gone, she clicks her flashlight on and keeps going. *Where did they come from?* She wonders. *What was Andres doing back here?*

When the muddy path splits in two, she sees another, smaller path through the trampled plants. Soon, the new path leads to more tents. Another migrant group? But as she walks around, the new camp is quiet: so quiet it could even be abandoned. Something's wrong. Sofia feels her heart racing—but she has to look everywhere.

"Excuse me," she says, unzipping one of the tents. "I'm sorry, but—"

Sofia freezes.

Inside, she sees Alejandra lying on her side with a red gash on her head. She is moving, but she can't speak. Her hands and ankles are tied behind her.

Sofia's mind races, and then she feels the panic sinking in. *Human traffickers? A cartel? Who is Andres working with?* She wants to scream, but there's no time for that. The voices out on the trail are laughing again, growing closer.

When Alejandra groans, Sofia puts a finger to her lips. "Hold on," she whispers, reaching for her pocket knife. "I'm going to get you out of here."





Back Home

Pablo and Juanita are worried sick. When Sofia did not arrive home from the school trip she told them about, something seemed strange. But when Fernando never showed up to work at a friend's plantain grove a few miles away, they made the connection. It's been more than twelve hours since they've seen either one of them. Pablo and Juanita fear the worst. Since the rise in migrant crossings at the border, crimes, disappearances, and kidnappings have all been on the rise.

They rush into town to the tiny police station and enlist the help of Officer Cruz, a detective who specializes in human trafficking on the Colombian side of the border. He reveals that he received a tip about a brother and sister leading a migrant group into the Darién, and this news makes Pablo and Juanita hopeful and frightened at the same time. The slow-moving group might be easy to find, but with so much ground to cover and no outposts or border patrol for hundreds of miles, Cruz and his team are on their own. When cartels and criminals, not governments, are in charge of the border region, dangerous things happen all the time. As Cruz and his team set out, everyone is praying.



Meeting up

Sofia and Alejandra hike through the darkness after their narrow escape from the traffickers' camp. Alejandra has a headache. She's dizzy, but with some torn clothing wrapped around the ugly gash, she's managing to walk. As Sofia shoves another vine out of the way, she can only think about how lucky her friend is to have escaped—in the Darién, many migrants are taken advantage of in terrible ways. Others are kidnapped and never seen again.

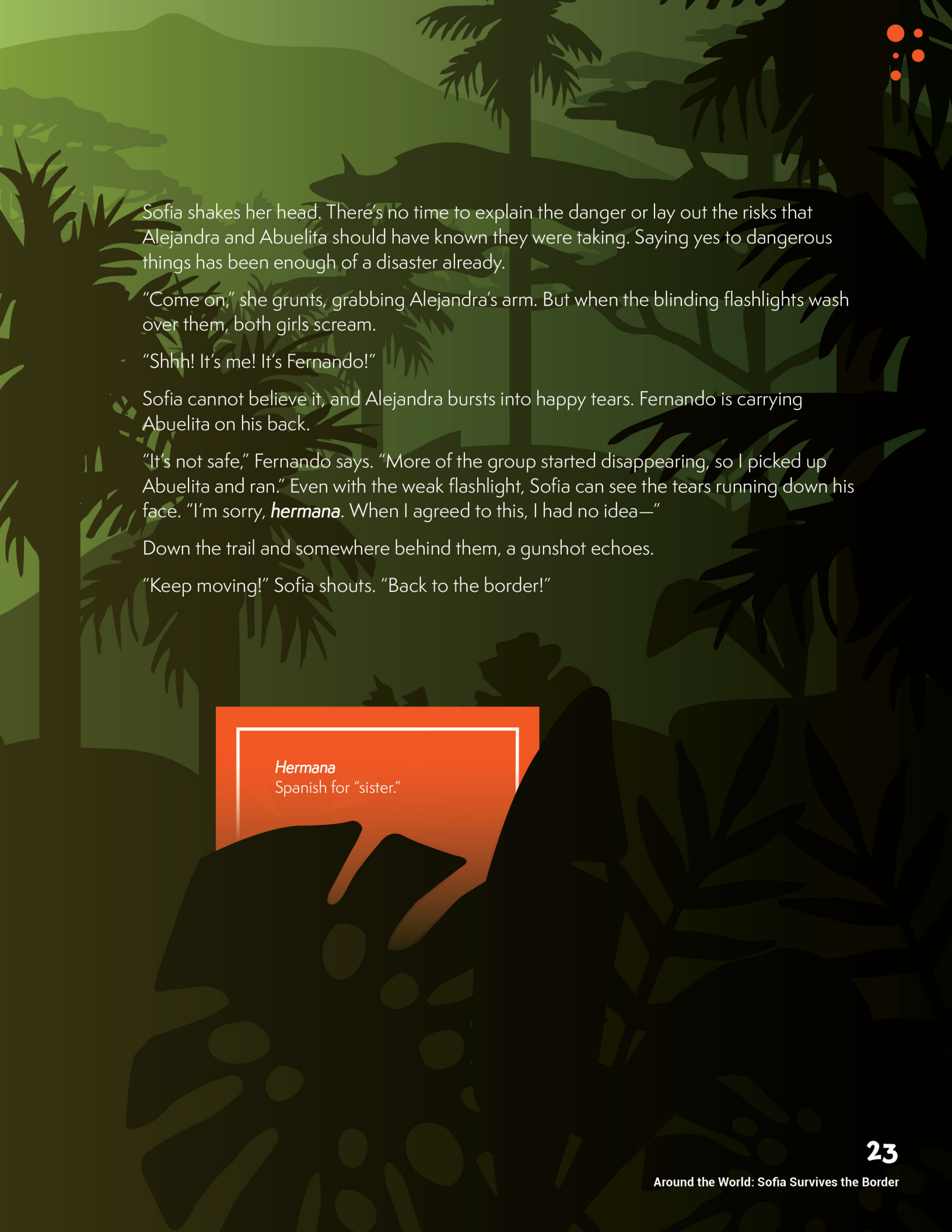
When they reach the main trail, Sofia reaches out and grabs Alejandra's arm. "No, not *that way!* We need to head back to the border."

"I'm not leaving my Abuelita!"

Sofia's stomach fills with dread. If they go back toward the group, it's nothing but more jungle, more rivers, and more space where criminals operate. And with someone who moves slowly, they could be sitting ducks for Andres and his friends.

"Please," Alejandra begs. "We have to try."





Sofia shakes her head. There's no time to explain the danger or lay out the risks that Alejandra and Abuelita should have known they were taking. Saying yes to dangerous things has been enough of a disaster already.

"Come on," she grunts, grabbing Alejandra's arm. But when the blinding flashlights wash over them, both girls scream.

"Shhh! It's me! It's Fernando!"

Sofia cannot believe it, and Alejandra bursts into happy tears. Fernando is carrying Abuelita on his back.

"It's not safe," Fernando says. "More of the group started disappearing, so I picked up Abuelita and ran." Even with the weak flashlight, Sofia can see the tears running down his face. "I'm sorry, *hermana*. When I agreed to this, I had no idea—"

Down the trail and somewhere behind them, a gunshot echoes.

"Keep moving!" Sofia shouts. "Back to the border!"

Hermana
Spanish for "sister."



On Through Morning

It's almost dawn. Through the trees, the sky is light purple, almost blue. Sofia is exhausted, but somehow she's still walking. Her legs are so sore she wonders if they'll fall off. She was so relieved when they crossed the border and met a group they did not expect to see—Cruz and his search party. Now, Abuelita is lying on a stretcher carried by two policemen. When Cruz explains how fortunate they are and how much danger she and Fernando put themselves in, all she can do is hang her head. But when their conversation turns to Colombia's border, he sounds sad and frustrated.

"It's a shame," he sighs. "You did this because the open border gave you the opportunity. With a secure border, you and your brother wouldn't even have had the chance... and I could do my job better. But with the cartels in charge, it's chaos."

His tone changes as they walk. "A secure border would help a lot. It would let us process migrants legally, stop criminals, and even offer medical help. The cartels wouldn't vanish overnight, but with fewer people trying to cross, they'd lose most of their business."

Sofia agrees with Cruz. Having seen the dangers that a nonexistent border creates firsthand, she sees the whole problem—and realizes how mistaken she was. A strong border that keeps illegal immigrants out may seem **inhumane**, especially to people fleeing poverty or violence for a safer country. But borders are *more* humane to people, like her family, living in those countries. Weak borders attract predators looking to take advantage of vulnerable people and governmental systems alike. With a strong border, far fewer people would risk their lives in places like the Darién Gap—and detectives like Cruz would be better equipped to rescue people and put human traffickers out of business.

Inhumane

Actions or treatments that are cruel and do not show the kindness or care appropriate for human beings.

Hugs, Home, and a Fiesta!

It's less than a mile home, and Sofia feels guilty. She knows how much her parents must have worried. By lying to them, even for something that could have potentially brought them money they could use, she and Fernando have broken their trust. With a heavy feeling in her stomach, Sofia expects them to be angry and ready to punish her. But when Papá sees her, he drops his tools and runs—before Sofia knows it, he's thrown his arms around her. "I'm sorry, Papá," she cries, hugging him hard. Before she can say anything else, Mamá and Fernando are there too.

That night it's a *fiesta!* With food and music, the whole family is celebrating Sofia and Fernando being found. Their tiny house is overflowing with conversation. Cruz and his team members are enjoying rice, cooked plantains (of course), and some of Sofia's favorite dishes. Alejandra and Abuelita are also there. As they all talk about what happened, Cruz teaches everyone about the need for a strong, secure border—one that will allow their country to know who is coming in, which is vital to protecting the population from all kinds of crimes, diseases, and even **terrorism**. A country with a secure border can also make humanitarian decisions, like increasing **legal immigration** or arranging for migrants from dangerous places to have **asylum** and stay for a time.

Terrorism

The use of violence or threats of violence by individuals or groups to create fear in order to achieve their political, ideological, or religious objectives.

Legal Immigration

The process of moving to another country to work, study, or live with permission from that country's government.

Asylum

A legal status some countries give to refugees who fled war or political persecution in their home country. Asylum lets refugees live in a new country with that country's protection.





Leaving Again

When Sofia's parents insisted that Alejandra and Abuelita stay with them, they gladly accepted. While it's a long process, Cruz offered to use his connections to help the two ask Colombia's government for temporary asylum. With help from an immigration lawyer he knows, they could even apply for **citizenship**, which means they would not have to go back to Venezuela. Who knows? If they are patient and take things step by step, moving to the United States legally might be possible. But unfortunately, requests for legal immigration move very slowly and can take years or decades. Huge numbers of people entering a country illegally and straining resources make the process even slower.

After a few days, Alejandra seemed upset and impatient. One night, she thanked everyone for their kindness and went to bed early, which gave Sofia a strange feeling. Sure enough, Alejandra and Abuelita were gone the next morning. With the migrant route and eager guides passing by all the time, they simply could not wait for the small chance of getting a legal visa to enter the United States.

Citizenship

The legal status granted by a country to an individual, allowing them permanent residency and full civil rights.



Back to School

It's almost time for another plantain harvest. Pablo and Juanita are busy—and this time, they insisted that Sofia and Fernando go to school while they rely on hired help. As the border crossings bring more tragic stories, Sofia is encouraging others to resist the urge to make fast money by getting involved illegally. She hopes her country can muster the will and resources to secure its borders. When that happens—and when the U.S.-Mexico border is once again secure—desperate people like Alejandra will think twice about risking their lives. Over time, countries like Colombia, or even the United States, might be willing to help them come legally. As Cruz pointed out, a strong border means safety, security, and the rule of law—things that everyone, especially migrants, need for a better life.





Baked Plantain Chips

Hungry for a snack?

The sweet plantains from Pablo and Juanita's grove make a crunchy, healthy treat. With your parent's help, follow the instructions to prepare your own plantain chips.

Prep Time: 30 minutes

Ingredients:

1 or 2 green plantains • 1/2 tablespoon avocado or cooking oil • Salt to taste

Instructions:

1. Get ready for baking. Preheat your oven to 350°F.
2. Cut the peel off the plantain. One way to do this (with your parent's help, of course) is to make three or four lengthwise cuts from top to bottom. Cut lightly. When you're done, carefully remove the peel.
3. Slice the plantain into thin, round pieces.
4. In a bowl, coat the plantain slices with your choice of avocado or cooking oil.
5. Spread out the plantain slices on a baking tray lined with one layer of parchment paper. Sprinkle them with salt if you want a salty taste!
6. Bake for 15-20 minutes or until the edges have a golden color.

Once they cool, enjoy! And if you're bringing home-baked plantain chips to a *fiesta*, go ahead and double the recipe.



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An illustration of five diverse cartoon characters standing in front of a world map. From left to right: a man in a military uniform, a boy in a blue and white shirt with a '30' on his chest, a girl with long brown hair in a blue top and yellow skirt, a girl with dark skin in a yellow top and patterned skirt, and a boy in an orange shirt and grey shorts. The background is a blue world map.

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