

My name is Matthew Mehfoud, but everyone calls me Matt. I'm a second year student at the University of Virginia, majoring in computer science. When I'm not buried in a book or typing code, I can be found frequenting UVA sporting events (basketball games especially), or in the language commons, where I work for the University. Before moving to Charlottesville, I'd spent my entire life living in the small city of Colonial Heights, Virginia, just twenty miles south of Richmond. That is where my essay *arguably* takes place, although some might claim otherwise.

My time at UVA has only fostered my love for the world around me. Saying that I am a computer science major can be deceiving, because I have also taken many environmental science and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) courses, and even a course about the global ethics of climate change. My goals after UVA involve using both GIS and computer science to work for an environmental engineering firm. I want to stay close to home because of my relationships with my parents and brothers, but I will forever view the world as a kingdom of my own, always there for whenever I am ready to shape it.

A Kingdom of our Own

When my best friend and I met in third grade, we never imagined that our houses were by any means “connected.” It was a scorching summer day when we discovered that both of our backyards bordered the same large expanse of wooded and swampy land that we dubbed “The Woods.” The two of us spent years exploring the vast area, conquering places and naming them, as we built a kingdom of our own. Here, our woodland adventures are divided into three tales.

A Tale of Two Swords

The Woods was our escape from our everyday, mundane lives. It was a world for our controlling, for our creating. Toward my friend’s end of The Woods, thick, green stocks of bamboo towered above our heads in The Bamboo Forest. We felled one and sliced it into halves—the Two Swords—and carved them into smooth sticks. Thus, our adventures were ready to begin, and all had been prepared. For the rest of the summer, we island-hopped on my end of The Woods, in the Dagobah System, named after the swamp planet from *Star Wars*. We used long-fallen trees as bridges when our boots weren’t tall enough to wade through the water. We claimed islands for ourselves, giving them pretentious names and decorating them with what could be found scattered in our lands. We’d shout back and forth to one another from our islands, waving our swords high in the air. “Should we go on?” we’d debate, and of course we would, for only after our boots were soaked and caked in mud would we ever consider stopping. It always seemed like there were more things to discover, both in The Woods and between the two of us.

A Tale of Two Thrones

We had islands in Dagobah and small huts in The Bamboo Forest, but the kingdom was still missing something. It was a brisk, fall day when we uncovered a reclusive, natural palace,

one that lay in the most protected area of The Woods. It was guarded by the Thorn Gates, a massive bush of briars, but if carefully pulled apart by two people in very precise places, it was passable. After a short walk up a stream, we came to a hill that ended in a precipice, where slipping surely meant falling. But there stood our palace, a giant tree, whose thick roots—the Two Thrones—juttied out of the side of the cliff, making perfect nooks for sitting and climbing. Over the years, my friend and I stored away mason jars and black planters that had been discarded in The Woods. We filled the jars and planters with yellow wildflowers that grew in a field just beyond the Thorn Gates. “What of our heirs?” we’d wonder, but we both knew that there would be no Princes or Princesses of The Woods, for our reign was to last forever.

A Tale of Two Kings

My friend and I were closer than brothers and twice as thick as thieves; there was never one without the other. By the time winter hit and the temperatures fell and the days were shorter, heart attacks and cancer had struck our families. We faced horrors very young in the real world. We feared loss and uncertainty, but in our world, in our kingdom, we were fearless. There was only one place in The Woods we could not claim to have ventured: the other side of The Swamp. With the season’s first snowfall, The Swamp had frozen solid, a thick sheet of brown, opaque glass. “Do we dare?” we’d query, for we both knew the path ahead was treacherous. Ice cracked and sank beneath our feet, we slipped and became unbalanced, but neither let the other fall. We pushed onward until Interstate 95 laid before us and The Swamp behind us. We—the Two Kings—were the first and last to cross it, and in that moment, our kingdom had finally reached completion.

Those long days spent in The Woods were some of the happiest of my life. The Woods was where our friendship grew and flourished—Two Swords, Two Thrones, Two Kings. And as the two of us strived to survive and carve out paths in the real world, it became apparent that maybe the world was just another kingdom ripe for our taking. So long as we could create and imagine, we would always have the power to shape and mold the world around us. There wasn't anything we couldn't accomplish in The Woods, so neither would there be anything that could stop us in the real world.

The Woods

