



## Twice Upon a Time (Half Upon a Time)

By James Riley

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**Pirates and mermaids face off in this fractured-fairy tale sequel to *Half Upon a Time*!**

Jack and May are back for another adventure in the world of fairy tales with a twist. Now that they know about May's grandmother's real intentions, they're on the hunt to learn May's true identity. The search for answers leads Jack and May to the world of the Sea King, where they land right in the center of a battle between mermaids and the Pirate Bluebeard. The laughter and action are nonstop in this book from author James Riley—the second in a trilogy!

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

James Riley lives in Virginia. He is the author of *Half Upon a Time*, *Twice Upon a Time*, and *Once Upon the End* as well as the Story Thieves series.

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Twice Upon a Time

## CHAPTER 1

Once upon a time, Jack knew better than to do certain things. You didn't waste time trying to find the perfect temperature of porridge in a bear's house. You didn't point out to your suddenly extremely furry grandmother how big her fangs were. And you definitely didn't walk through a creepy fog while music from magical pipes drifted in eerily. These weren't even questions, you just didn't do them—not if you wanted to stay uneaten by three bears, disguised wolves, or scary old musicians.

Except here he was—fog, magical pipe music and all, and he just wanted to find the stupid Piper and get on with things.

Unfortunately, not everyone was so goal oriented.

“Does anyone else want to follow him?” May asked, shivering in her oversize blue cloak as her head bobbed to the music. She shifted a backpack full of food—a gift from Phillip's mother—higher on her shoulder as she moved with the melody.

“I hope you are joking, Princess,” Phillip said, shooting her a worried glance. “Remember, we are not to go into his cave. That is where the children from the village went, and they never returned.”

As if to reinforce the creepiness, a blackbird crowed loudly, then took to the air from some tree hidden in the fog. Jack shivered, thinking the bird almost sounded like it was calling his name.

“I know, I know, no cave,” May said, rolling her eyes before swaying to the music again.

Jack sighed and stopped her. “Maybe you should wait a little distance away.... You don't seem to be handling this all that well.”

“The rhythm isn't going to get me,” May said absently. “Besides, what's the worst it could do? Tell me my grandmother is a horrible tyrant who tried to take over half the world? 'Cause, too late.”

Jack and Phillip glanced at each other, and Jack could see his own concern reflected in the prince's eyes. May caught their look, and shoved them apart. “What did I say about doing that!” she shouted a bit too loudly for Jack's taste. “I'm fine! It's been three months. I'm over it!” She glared at Jack. “Either that or I'm quietly going crazy and I'll hand you both over to the next giant we come across. Care to bet on which way it's gonna go if you keep giving Phillip those stupid emo worry looks?!”

“Seems like crazy’s taking the early lead,” Jack said, then quickly turned and continued on ahead, trying to ignore the glare she had just thrown at him.

“If this is too much for you, we could find another way—,” Phillip began, but May shushed him.

“It took us this long just to find the Piper,” she said. “I want to know who I am already! And besides, I for one am tired of rescuing you from various invisible gnomes.”

Phillip smiled. “I thought you said that we would never speak of that again.”

“Yet someone keeps bringing it up,” May said, her face expressionless.

“Can we concentrate?” Jack said, dragging May forward and away from Phillip. “The sooner we pay the Piper, the sooner we get to the Fairy Homelands and find Merriweather, so that—”

“So that we can find out for sure that I’m completely alone,” May said.

Jack sighed. “I was going to say ‘so that we can find your family... and I can finally go home.’”

Phillip grabbed Jack by the shoulders and shook him gently. “Go home? Why would you ever want that? Look at where you are! We stand in the middle of a dark, fog-drenched field. Off in the distance a figure waits, known only to us in tales told to frighten children. Enemy or ally, we will not know until it is too late, yet press on we must!” The prince shook with excitement at the idea, while Jack just sighed and waited for him to finish. “What is the point of life without adventures like this?!”

“See, I like to think the point of life is to be happy,” Jack said with a shrug. “Also maybe not almost dying every two minutes. But I can see how we’ll have to agree to disagree here.”

“Maybe we can agree to go talk to the man?” May said, and pushed on ahead of the two boys. As she approached the figure in the distance, the music began to slow, eventually coming to a halt just as they were finally able to make out a thin, stooped figure leaning against a gnarled, blackened tree stump. The man wore a tunic of dull red, belted by a green rope with several heavy-looking pouches hanging from it. And though the music had stopped, the pipes remained at the old man’s lips, his eyes closed as if he were still playing.

“Good evening, sir,” Phillip said.

The man didn’t move.

“Um, we heard you could maybe help us,” May said.

The man didn’t move.

“See, typically this would be the moment most people respond,” Jack said. Nothing. “This is creepy,” he whispered to May and Phillip. “Maybe he wants his payment—”

“Payment?” the old man said, lowering his pipes and opening his eyes.

“I think he heard you,” May whispered to Jack.

“I’m so glad you’re here to point these things out,” Jack whispered back.

The old man sighed. “Ah. You three. It’s about time.”

May cleared her throat. “You were… waiting for us?”

The old man snorted. “For longer than I’d care to admit. You think I have nothing better to do than leave my cave in one place while I sit here, playing my pipes? The longer my cave and I stay here, the more likely it is that the Queen will find me.” He glared at May. “Thanks to you three, she probably will. And now you want my help.”

Jack winced, trying not to make the mention of her grandmother a bigger deal by looking at May. Thankfully, Phillip stepped forward, taking a large bag from Jack’s hand. “We seek passage to the Fairy Homelands, sir,” the prince said.

“Of course you do,” the Piper said, eyeing the bag. “And I see you’ve brought payment?”

“Sounds like you’re not a man to let bills go unpaid,” Jack said quietly, his eyes on the pipes.

The Piper smiled. “If I’m owed something, then I will collect. The Piper will be paid, children, one way or another.”

“Yeah, we visited the last town who didn’t pay,” May said. “The youngest person there was like sixty.”

“They promised payment if I removed their rats,” the Piper said, absently sticking his pinkie into one of the pipes as if he were cleaning it out. “I delivered, yet they did not. So I took… another form of payment.”

“Their children,” Jack said, shivering from more than the fog’s chill.

“None were harmed,” the Piper said, standing up to grab the bag almost indignantly from Phillip. He looked inside, and his face lit up, a smile harmonizing with the sparkle in his eyes. “Yes, yes, whispering reeds from the Swamp of All’s End! Which of you harvested…?”

“I did,” Jack said, glaring at the bag. “And I’ve still got the burns. No one ever told us they whisper fire.”

“They will do nicely,” the Piper said, ignoring him. “Now you’ve paid, and royally so. Speak your wish, and I will do what I can.”

May stepped forward, a bit nervously. “We, uh, wish to travel to the Fairy Homelands. Please. Thank you. Please.”

The Piper looked at her for a moment, then, almost faster than Jack could see, he raised his pipes to his lips, blew one note, and lowered the pipes. Like magic (appropriately enough), May instantly relaxed at the sound, letting out a huge breath she’d apparently been holding in.

“That’s better,” the Piper said. “You have nothing to fear, children. Not from me, not anymore.”

“I would if I were afraid of cryptic statements,” Jack murmured. The Piper glared at him, and began to raise his pipes to his lips again, so Jack quickly added, “But of course I’m not, who would be, and we have

nothing but the utmost respect for you. Sir. Your Highness.”

“The Fairy Homelands,” the Piper said. “Not the easiest destination.”

Jack snorted. “Not exactly, no. We’ve been searching for a way to them for the past three months. And from what we’ve found, there is no natural way to get there. We need magic. And a very specific kind of magic.”

The Piper smiled, then held up his pipes. “Music,” he said. “It’s true. The fairies don’t think in words or pictures like you and I do. They think and talk in music... so that’s how they perform their magic as well. That’s why most humans can’t understand the little ones, though the fairy queens are able to speak our language easily enough.”

Jack glanced over at the golden fairy in May’s hair, and the fairy winked at him. “He’s right, stupid human,” she said. “If your kind were smart enough to understand music, you might have fewer problems.”

“We might have had fewer problems if you’d known where the Fairy Homelands were!” Jack whispered back at her.

“NO fairy knows!” the golden fairy shouted. “We’re sent away at birth! But if we live by the code and spread more good than ill, we might eventually be allowed back in! YOU are the ones trying to take shortcuts!”

“So that humming is her talking?” May said, then turned to Jack. “And would you stop yelling at her? It’s not like she can understand you.”

“Yeah, stupid human. It’s not like I can understand you!” the golden fairy shouted, sticking out her tongue.

“I hate you,” Jack said to her, turning away. “So, so, so much.”

“Regardless,” the Piper said. “My music can take you to the Fairy Homelands.”

“And bring us back, right?” Jack added quickly.

The Piper’s eyes twinkled. “If you wish. For that you’ll need something more.” The Piper reached into a pocket and produced a wooden whistle, which he handed to Phillip.

“Nice catch,” May whispered to Jack.

“I’m sure the fairy queens are nice and all, but I’m not spending the rest of my life stuck in a whole city of these things,” Jack whispered back, glaring at the golden fairy, who made a face at him.

“Blow into this whistle when you are finished,” the Piper continued, “and you’ll return right to this spot.”

“Return to this spot?” Jack asked. “Are we leaving soon—”

The Piper brought his pipes to his lips and blew a melody so quick and intricate that it sounded like three or four Pipers playing all at once. The mist began swirling around faster and faster as the music sped up, creating a whirlwind of fog that quickly obscured the Piper, the cave, and everything else from view. The music grew louder, filling Jack’s head, obliterating his thoughts, taking over his mind, not letting him even

think—

Only to stop abruptly, dropping them onto grass much brighter than it had any right to be, on ground that was both softer and harder than any Jack had ever felt. He groaned, then pushed himself up, noticing a glowing paved stone roadway beginning just a few feet away from the spot where he'd landed. Whereas behind him...

Behind him was only mist.

"I think we're here," May said, matching his groan a little just to Jack's right.

"There does seem to be something... different about this place," Phillip said, then gasped.

Jack quickly followed Phillip's gaze, up the paved road to a gate that seemed to be made of silver latticework circles, then past that to...

"Uh-oh," Jack said.

"No uh-ohs!" May said, glaring at him. "NO! Not after everything we've been through! No more uh-ohs!"

"I do not think we have a choice, Princess," Phillip said.

May started to reply, then finally saw what the other two were staring at. "Uh-oh," she said.

On the other side of the gate, enormous tree-trunk-size vines blocked out all view of what lay beyond as the vines circled and intertwined with one another. Between that and the fist-size thorns growing out of them every foot or so, the overall effect was definitely "Uh-oh."

"Look," Phillip said, his voice choking a bit as he pointed. Just past the gate something lay crumpled over one of the vines. Jack stepped closer, and realized with a start that it wasn't something so much as someone.

"NO!" the golden fairy yelled. "My queen!" She leapt into the air and quickly flew at the tangle of vines, reaching out desperately for what appeared to be the body of a fairy queen.

Jack immediately launched himself out to grab her, knowing that it was too late but not being willing to just let the fairy fly headfirst into whatever curse had turned the Fairy Homelands into this overgrown... whatever it was.

Unfortunately, Jack was right. He was too late.

The golden fairy passed the silver gate and immediately dropped to the ground, landing hard on a vine, her body unmoving.

And a second later, unable to stop, Jack's momentum sent him tumbling past the gate as well, and into oblivion.

## Users Review

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