Summary

If Jack is going to try to date Bittle, then Bittle deserves to know about Jack's autism.

Notes

1: A million thanks to my beta, happyzimm, who convinced me to write this fic and held my hand every step of the way.

2: Both my beta and I are autistic. That doesn’t mean we know everything about autism, but we do know a lot, so please don’t make ignorant comments about the way autism is portrayed in this fic.

3. This is definitely a canon-divergent fic, because Jack and Bitty get together before Jack graduates. Jack's autism isn't the element that's meant to be canon-divergent. Certainly canon doesn't state outright that Jack is autistic, but he has a lot of autistic traits. I'm trying to write a Jack that's true both to canon and to my headcanons here.
Chapter 1

Jack tries to keep his breathing even as he walks with Bittle to Annie’s. He’s not going to hyperventilate over this. He’s not. He’s been thinking about this for weeks. He knows he has feelings for Bittle, and, even though he has trouble reading people and doesn’t often have the first clue what people think of him, Shitty thinks Bittle likes him back, and Jack generally trusts Shitty with this kind of thing. The whole coffee-at-Annie’s thing feels distinctly date-like, even though Jack has been told that romantic relationships and even dates can only happen when both people are knowingly on board. Jack knows he and Bittle aren’t a couple yet, but it’s starting to feel like that’s a possibility for the future, even with graduation looming ever closer. And if Jack is going to try to date Bittle, then Bittle deserves to know about Jack’s autism. Friends don’t need to know—he’s never felt the urge to tell Ransom or Holster, or even Lardo—but once people pass into a category closer than “friend” then it’s necessary information. Jack told Shitty about his autism diagnosis during their frog year because best friends aren’t the same as just plain friends; he could tell even then that Shitty was special. Shitty’s the most recent person he’s told, though, and that means it’s been over three years since Jack told a new person, and even though he trusts Bittle his breath is still coming a little short.

Bittle’s chirping him, which helps Jack keep from hyperventilating. Jack has gotten so comfortable with Bittle lately that he can chirp back almost on autopilot, which is how they wind up going after each other’s study habits for most of the walk to Annie’s and in line for coffee as well. Jack chirps Bittle for always being on his phone, or baking, or both, and Bittle gives as good as he gets and teases Jack for never looking up from his textbooks unless it’s for hockey. When they sit down, though, Jack stares at his coffee cup and tries to gather his courage. Maybe Bittle senses a change in Jack’s mood, because he quiets down and watches Jack rather than continuing his chirping.

Jack turns his coffee cup around in his hands. He longs for one of those fidget toys his parents bought him right after he got diagnosed, but he's never taken them out of his dorm. He doesn't need word getting out about this. So he settles for playing with his coffee cup. He knows he's been quiet for too long—this is probably the longest silence he and Bittle have had at Annie’s in all the times they’ve come here together this semester—so he forces himself to say, “Bittle, Can I tell you a thing?” He's still staring at the table, but he's pretty sure he literally can't look at Bittle at the moment, and by now he knows when not to try.

"Of course, Jack," says Bittle.

Jack exhales. "Okay, so," he starts, "my parents know about this, but the only person I've actually told is Shitty. Well, other than my therapists. But you deserve to know, so I'm telling you now. I want you to let me talk for a while, though, because I don't know what your background is with this and I'm not sure either of us wants your first reaction to leave your head. Um, no offense. Anyway, I just want you to remember that I'm still the person you've known for the past couple years. Can you do that for me?"

Bittle nods, and Jack forces himself to look up to see it. He has trouble reading facial expressions, but he needs whatever feedback he can cobble together if he’s going to keep his nerve and do this.

"Cool," says Jack. "Thanks. So, what I'm trying to tell you is that I'm autistic."

Bittle’s eyes get huge and some of the color drains out of his face. Jack isn’t pleased, but he tries to ignore it.

“I don't really like functioning labels or measures of, like, how ‘severe’ someone's autism is, but, I
mean, obviously I'm verbal and can sort of hide my autism. Although 'robot' is a pretty common insult against people on the spectrum, so I think people sort of pick up on the fact that there's something going on with me even if they can't guess what.

"Anyway, I want you to know that I mostly like being autistic. Something that comes with autism is having really intense hobbies called special interests. Mine are hockey and American history. I mean, obviously. I can plan plays or read about the Civil War and resurface like four hours later with no idea where the time went, and hockey and my major both make me so happy. There's also sensory stuff. I don't do well with really loud noises, which is one of the reasons I avoid kegsters, and most foods are literally painful to eat, which is why I always default to chicken tenders, but I'm hyposensitive in my proprioceptive and vestibular senses, which basically means I like really intense exercise and physical contact, so hockey is great."

Bittle smiles a little at that, though he's still pale.

"On the other hand, it's definitely not all sunshine and rainbows. Autism puts me at greater risk for anxiety and depression, and, well, we all know how that turned out."

Bittle’s smile drops off and his face gets a pinched look.

“I don’t really communicate with facial expressions, and I have trouble reading other people’s facial expressions and body language, too. I have a lot of trouble making eye contact, and when I force myself to do it it’s physically painful. I’m pretty literal and direct, and I tend not to understand sarcasm and jokes, and sometimes I have a hard time cushioning what I say to make it nicer. I tend to assume that other people have the same thoughts, values, and priorities that I do, and when I find out that’s not true I can’t really picture how other people think. All this adds up to having a pretty hard time making friends, which is probably not a surprise to you by now. There’s also something called splinter skills that basically means that both my strengths and my weaknesses are more extreme. I know I’m really good at hockey and I’m the best student in the history department, but you’ve seen me in the kitchen."

Bittle smiles again, thinly, and ducks his head a little.

“There’s stuff beyond what I’ve just told you, but I think that’s enough to go on for now.” Jack sits back, not relaxing exactly but at least putting more distance between himself and Bittle, and takes a sip of his coffee. It’s definitely cooler than it was before he started talking. How much did he say? Was it an infodump? Was it too much for Bittle?

After several moments of silence, Bittle says, “Can I talk now?”

Jack nods. “Yeah, I’m done.”

“First of all, I want to tell you that I’m really grateful that you trust me enough to tell me this, and of course I know you’re the same person I’ve known for the past two years. And also I’m really sorry about calling you a robot. I should’ve realized that wasn’t nice, even without an explanation.”

"Bittle, it’s fine."

Bittle looks pinched again. “I don’t think it is fine. I think it’s like if y’all made jokes about my baking and clothes and all that, if you didn’t know about me being gay. Not knowing doesn’t make it okay.”

Jack feels like the conversation is getting derailed, and part of him is happy about that because he
doesn’t really want to talk about his autism, but part of his is pretty sure there’s more to discuss. He replies to what Bittle said anyway: “But we do make jokes about your baking.”

Bittle rolls his eyes. “Yeah, but in a friendly way. It’s different.” Then he cocks his head. “Wait, can you not tell the difference?”

Jack shrugs. “Chirping is a part of hockey. I know what slurs are and I react when people use them, but nuance and tone? Not really my thing.”

Bittle raises his hands as if he’s going to stick his face in them, but, if that’s what he was going to do, he changes his mind, because he winds up just grabbing his coffee cup and taking a sip while laying his other hand on the table. Then he says, “That must be hard. Not reading tone, I mean.”

Jack shrugs again. “I guess. I mean, it’s been like this my whole life, so it’s not like I know anything different.”

“When did you . . . um, find out?” Bittle asks. “Can I ask that?”

Jack nods. “Yeah. I got diagnosed while I was in rehab. I was really, really glad we managed to keep it under wraps. There’s a lot of ignorance and stigma out there, you know? I think it’s common for boys to get diagnosed younger, but there are still a lot of stereotypes in the medical field about what autism looks like. It’s worse for girls, but like, there are definitely still people out there who think that all autistic people are obsessed with trains and road signs and maps and stuff. My first special interest was hockey, and I guess from the outside that didn’t look like an autistic thing, so nobody noticed that I hated eye contact and didn’t like a whole ton of foods and had trouble making friends and took things literally and all that.” He scowls. “It feels like a lot to not notice, and sometimes I get mad at my parents and my first few psychologists for not realizing, but I don’t think that’s fair to my parents, at least. Like, I try to bear in mind that they didn’t get a manual when I was born about all the things that could possibly go wrong with me.”

Bittle scowls back. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Jack.”

Jack takes a second to just feel warm inside and then says, “That’s not what you said when I got you up at four a.m. for checking practice.”

Bittle claps a hand over his mouth, eyes huge. “Oh, God, Jack—”

Jack smiles. “I’m chirping you. It’s fine.”

Bittle laughs. “We’re having a serious conversation and you’re chirping me?”

“Thought I should lighten the mood.”

“You don’t have to,” says Bittle. “I may not be good at studying, but I can have a serious conversation.”

“I know,” says Jack, trying to match Bittle’s tone. He thinks it’s serious, but he doesn’t trust himself to be right about that. “I wouldn’t have told you if I didn’t think you could handle it.”

“Um, why did you tell me?” Bittle asks. “I mean, if even Lardo and Rans and Holster don’t know, why me?”

Jack absolutely cannot look at Bittle while he says this. He lowers his voice to just above a whisper and says, “I, um. I like you, Bittle.”
Bittle laughs a little. “What, and you hate our teammates?”

Jack sighs. Still nearly whispering, he clarifies, “No, I mean I like you.”

Bittle’s hand reaches toward Jack’s across the table and stops just short of touching Jack’s fingers. At the same volume Jack’s been using, he says, “Jack, are you . . . not straight?”

Jack smiles and finds himself able to sort of look at Bittle as he says, “Bisexual. I thought you knew? I mean, when Kent showed up at Epikegester . . .”

Bittle’s eyes go wide yet again. “Oh. He’s your . . . ex?”

Jack nods.

“So wait,” says Bittle. “You like me? Are you”—he lowers his voice even further, to barely a breath—“are you asking me out, Mr. Zimmermann?”

Jack nods but doesn’t take the hand of Bittle’s that’s almost on his. “We can’t be very public,” he says. “Like, I know doing this in Annie’s is a risk, but it’s busy and no one’s paying attention, so it’s probably fine. But PDA is basically off the table, and I know I’m graduating soon, and long-distance is hard, and I don’t want you to feel like you have to say yes. I just—if you say yes, and if we do this, you deserve to know the important things about me.”

Bittle gets an odd expression on his face and says, “Wait, is this why you told Shitty? I thought he was straight!”

Jack shakes his head. “He’s straight, and I never asked him out. I maybe liked him for a couple months our frog year, but it wasn’t an intense crush and I knew it was pointless. I just wanted someone other than my therapist to know, and I was pretty sure we were best friends, so I told him.” It’s quiet for a few moments, and then Jack says, “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Oh!” says Bittle.

“I mean, you don’t have to,” says Jack. “If you want to think about it, or to just walk away or whatever—”

“Jack, no, of course not,” says Bittle. “Of course I’m saying yes, Jack, Lord. Who could say no to you?”

“Given everything I’ve just told you?” Jack asks.

Bittle looks pinched again. “If you think that’s going to put me off, you’ve got another think coming, mister.”

“I just want to make sure you understand—”

“Jack,” says Bittle firmly. “I know you. I’ve known you for two years now. Yes, I’ve noticed there are things you have trouble with, and no, I probably don’t understand the half of it. But I know enough to know that I’d rather face the future with you than without you. Is that enough for you?”

Jack nods, hard and fast. “Yes. Yes, absolutely.”

“I have more questions,” Bittle admits, “and now’s probably not the time for them. Do you want me to come to you first, or Google things, or go to Shitty?”

“Probably Google if it feels like it’s really basic or could be offensive, but come to me if the
question is specific to me. Everyone’s autism is different, and there are going to be things I need to
answer myself. If you’re not sure if a question is offensive, maybe run it by Shitty first? He
definitely doesn’t know as much as I do, but I think he knows enough to make a pretty good screen.
Oh, and if you Google things, don’t read anything by Autism Speaks. They’re a bunch of fuckwads
who won’t listen to anyone who’s actually autistic.”

Bittle nods. “Okay, got it.”

“Well, that was exhausting,” Jack says, and then he checks his watch. “I have a little time before
my next class. Can you just talk at me? About baking or something?”

Bittle grins. “So the difference between jam and jelly is . . .”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Eric debriefs with Shitty.

Chapter Notes

1: This chapter is from Bitty’s perspective. That’s why he’s referred to as “Eric” rather than “Bittle.” I’m pretty sure he thinks of himself with his first name, not his hockey nickname. I hope the switch doesn’t throw anyone. I did tag the fic “POV Alternating” for this very reason.

2: Just a reminder that my beta, happyzimm, and I are both autistic. We know what we’re talking about, so please don’t leave ignorant comments!

3. On the topic of happyzimm, they are wonderful and this fic exists thanks to them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eric’s mind reels as he leaves Annie’s. He’s pretty sure he put on a good front for Jack—his boyfriend now, good Lord—but he can’t quite wrap his head around the news that Jack is autistic. All he knows about autism—well, all he knew before an hour ago—is that it’s the word his mama whispered to him to explain why the boy a few doors down didn’t talk and tended to flap his arms like he was trying to fly. But Jack does talk, and he has excellent control over his limbs or he wouldn’t be such a great hockey player, and Eric doesn’t know what to think. He’s pretty sure he needs a good debrief session with Shitty. Eric thinks he’s probably going to say something wrong and Shitty’s going to chew him out for it, but Shitty’s pretty good at doing no harm while taking no shit, and anyway Eric would rather get chewed out than hurt Jack.

He has class first, so he goes and sits through a lecture that he mentally misses entirely thanks to his churning thoughts, and when he comes back to himself at the end of the hour he realizes he’s doodled a rather decent picture of himself and Jack kissing, rather than taking any notes. He’s pretty sure that the PowerPoint for today will be on the class website, so he figures he’ll glance at it the night before the test and he’ll be fine. There are more important things than his grades in gen eds, anyway. Namely, finding out more about autism.

He texts Shitty on his way back to the Haus and asks if he’ll be free to talk. Then he realizes that he and Jack never discussed whether they were going to tell anyone about them getting together, so he texts Jack to ask if he’s free to tell Shitty the news.

Shitty Knight: sure brah. u ok?


Jack Zimmermann: Well, and I’m going to tell my therapist and my parents, probably.
Jack Zimmermann: And I mean, I’d be fine with you telling your parents, but I’m guessing you might want to wait on that?

Eric to Shitty: yeah be there in 5

Eric to Jack: yeah i need time with my parents. youre out to yours?

Jack Zimmermann: My parents walked in on Kent and me the summer we were together. So yes.

Eric bursts out laughing, earning him startled looks from the people around him, which he ignores.

Eric to Jack: hahahaha that’s hilarious and i need the whole story sometime

Eric to Jack: but not now because i just got to the haus and im gonna talk to shitty now

Eric puts his phone in his pocket and bounds up the Haus steps. Shitty’s waiting in the hall, lounging against the wall but clearly on alert. “Can we go up to your room? Or mine? I don’t care, just—somewhere private?” Eric asks.

“Sure,” says Shitty, starting up the stairs. He glances at Eric. “You sure you’re okay?”

“My brain is trying to digest some big new facts, and not the kind you learn in class,” says Eric. “But nothing’s wrong.”

“If you say so,” says Shitty, opening the door to his own room and letting Eric step in first.

After Shitty shuts the door and comes over to sit on the bed, Eric takes a seat on Shitty’s desk chair and says, “So, there are two big pieces of news—well, one of them won’t be news to you, but it’ll be news that I know it. Anyway, first I’m going to tell you the one that I don’t have questions about, because that’ll be quick, and then I have questions about the other one.”

Shitty chuckles. “Jesus, you really have never learned to get to the point.”

Eric mock-glares at him. “Hush, you. So, the first thing is that Jack and I are dating now.”

“You beautiful motherfucker!” Shitty screams, leaping up from the bed and hugging Eric hard.

When Shitty finally lets go of him, Eric says dryly, “Glad you approve.”

“You know it,” says Shitty, settling back on the bed.

Eric can’t help but smile. “So that was the first piece of news. The other thing is that Jack told me he’s autistic. And he explained some of what that means for him, but it’s so different from what little I heard about autism growing up and I just can’t quite wrap my head around it. And I know Google is a thing and I’m going to use it, but I wanted to, like, process with you and stuff. First. If that’s all right.”

Shitty looks thoughtful. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. What did you hear about autism growing up?”

“That it had something to do with not talking and flapping your arms a lot?” Eric winces as he finishes the sentence.

“Okay, so we are starting from square zero with you,” says Shitty. “Got it. So, okay, what did Jack tell you?”
"Um, he said that he has—I think he called it special interests? Something like that. Anyway, he said that autism is part of the reason he likes hockey and history so much, because it makes hobbies more intense. He also said hockey is good for some of his senses or something? But a lot of foods and loud noises aren’t good for his senses. And then he said a lot of stuff about communication, and it seems like he mostly just communicates with words and what they literally mean, and not, like, body language or facial expressions or sarcasm or subtlety. And that makes it hard for him to navigate people and make friends. Oh, and he said that autism puts him at higher risk for anxiety and depression.”

Shitty nods. “Well, that’s all true, so good job remembering it correctly. And yeah, they are called special interests. What do you still want to know?”

Eric frowns. “How is it the same—condition? Disorder? Whatever the word is—that makes Jack, like, enjoy hockey and have trouble with people, and also made my neighbor not talk?”

Shitty sighs deeply. “Okay. So. There’s something called the sundae bar model of autism. Basically, the analogy is that each symptom is like a topping. Some people have nothing but sprinkles on their sundaes. Some people have gummy bears and Oreo bits but no sprinkles. Some people have gummy bears, Oreo bits, sprinkles, and cherries. You know? So Jack doesn’t have the nonverbal topping, but he has a lot of the other toppings that have to do with communication difficulties, like taking things literally and not using or reading body language. And he doesn’t have the arm-flapping topping, but he does have a lot of the other repetition toppings, like his pregame rituals or his hygiene routines. Did you know he brushes his teeth before he washes his face, every single day? He can’t reverse the order. It would totally mess with him.”

"Wait," says Eric. "So the PB&J Jack eats before every game is an autism thing?"

Shitty shrugs. "Kind of. A lot of hockey players have their superstitions. But you remember the panic attack Jack had that time a couple months ago when the Murder Stop and Shop only had chunky peanut butter? That was definitely an autism thing."

"And so is not coming to parties, right? With the loud noises?"

Shitty nods. "That, and the people."

Eric nods back. "Right. Is repetition the reason he likes to run practice in the same order every day?"

Shitty squints and tilts his head. "You didn't mention routine in your list of ways autism affects Jack, did you? Did he not tell you that part?"

"No," says Eric. "He did say there was more, but he wasn't going to go over it all at once."

"Okay, that makes sense. Anyway, yes, needing routines and hating change are a big part of autism."

"Oh Lord, graduation must be terrifying him."

"Well, yes and no," says Shitty. "Foreseen change is a lot easier for him to handle than unforeseen change. So I don't think graduation will throw him nearly as much as, like, rehab did. But even so, yeah, I think graduating and leaving the Haus and Samwell will be really hard on him, and the more we can remain constants in his life, the better."

Eric's eyes go wide. "Wait. If change is hard, will starting this relationship be a bad thing? Because it's new?"
Shitty does Eric the kindness of thinking for a moment before answering. "It's not that change is necessarily bad for Jack. I mean, there are bad changes—losing people you love is a bad change for anyone, for example—but not all changes are bad, for Jack or anyone else. It's just harder and scarier for him than for the rest of us. Yeah, he'll probably have a panic attack sometime this week about whether he can be good enough for you and give you what you want and need in a relationship. But I'll get him through it, and he'll get back to being happy to be with you."

Eric’s eyes are so wide now that his eyebrows have practically migrated to his hairline. “You think he’s going to have a panic attack because of me?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time, Bits. It’s just a thing that happens sometimes, and it’s not your fault. Though you should probably learn some strategies for getting him through them if you’re going to date him.”

Eric nods. “Yeah, for sure. Whatever you can tell me.”

Shitty nods. “Breathing with him and counting for the inhale and exhale is usually step one. He sometimes loses some of his motor control during panic attacks, and he sometimes overheats, so guiding him somewhere, helping him sit down, and taking off his coat or sweater can be helpful. Once you’ve got him sitting down, though, he doesn’t always like to be touched, and he can usually nod or shake his head, so ask if you can touch him and then wait for his answer. Sometimes he likes having a hand to hold when he freaks out, but he has definitely held my hand hard enough to bruise before, so feel free to say no to that—he can calm down without it, and it’s not your job to hurt in order to help him. Giving him something else to hold onto and squish is good if you don’t want him to hold your hand. You might want to carry a stress ball, or else give him your pencil case or something. Another thing that helps is going through the five senses—have him name or at least think of five things he can see, four things he can hear, three things he can touch, two things he can smell, and one thing he can taste. That helps bring him back to the present. And remember that you’re allowed to call in extra help. Just because you’re becoming a really important person in his life doesn’t mean you have to handle him at his worst all on your own. You can call me, for sure, and you should ask Jack if it would be okay if you called his parents, if I’m not available. That’s an option he gave me our frog year, and I used it a couple times. His mom is very nice.”

“I hear you not saying anything about his dad.”

“That’s not mine to tell,” says Shitty. “I do think it’s getting better, though.”

Eric nods. “So other than getting Jack through panic attacks, do you have other advice on how to be the best partner I can be to him?”

“It says good things about you that you’re asking this kind of question,” says Shitty slowly. “This is certainly not a conversation I had with Camilla or Samantha or Kate. I mean, I’m not surprised that you’re going to be better for Jack than any of them were, but I’m impressed. You’re not a frog anymore, Bits.”

Eric smiles and then says, “So, are you going to answer the question?”

Shitty chuckles. “Right. I’d say—a lot of communication is going to be on you. Something about autism is that people often have trouble with something called theory of mind. Well, actually, that’s kind of a controversial statement and there are people who argue that actually everybody has trouble with theory of mind. Anyway, theory of mind is the understanding that other people have different knowledge and thoughts and opinions and stuff than you do. You’ve probably seen Jack just not get it when people don’t take hockey or school as seriously as he does, but this goes for other things too. Like, sometimes Jack forgets to tell me things that matter because he just assumes
I knows them. He knows, logically, that I can’t read his mind, but sometimes he forgets to remember that. And sometimes he projects his own thoughts onto other people and thinks they must be thinking what he’s thinking, which doesn’t pair well with his anxiety, as you can probably imagine. The point of all of this is that next year you might need to ask Jack when he’s going to be home versus when he’s going to be on a roadie, and you might need to tell him regularly that you’re not mad at him and you still want to be with him, though you should probably work out the details of what kind of reassurance he wants and needs with him, not with me. Just remember that he might be subconsciously assuming he can read your mind, for better and for worse.”

“Thanks, Shitty,” says Eric. “That’s really helpful. Do you have anything else?”

Shitty makes a thinking face for a moment and then says, “I guess, just, with the physical side of things, take it slow? Like, I know I’ve been kind of all over Jack the entire time you’ve known us, but that was a slow build over our frog year, especially after he told me about his diagnosis, and I definitely figured out some things he doesn’t like via trial and error. He generally likes intense physical sensations, but there are limits and exceptions to that, so just make sure to check in often and pay attention to how he’s reacting.”

Eric nods. “I can do that. Anything else?”

“That’s all I can think of specifically about Jack for now,” says Shitty, “but I have one more thing to say for you, which is that all relationships have conflict. You and Jack are going to disagree about something or misunderstand each other at some point. It’s inevitable and it doesn’t make either of you bad people. It’ll be important to remember, when this happens, that there are some things that are going to be harder for Jack than they are for you, and you need to have patience with him around that. At the same time, this doesn’t mean nothing can ever be his fault or that he’s not responsible for his mistakes or that you can’t be mad at him. You can be mad at him. That doesn’t automatically make you ableist or a bad person. What you’re mad about and what you decide to do about it are the things that matter. And if you need a third party who loves you both, for feedback or venting or mediation of whatever, I’m your guy.”

“Really?” asks Eric. “I mean—isn’t Jack your priority?”

Shitty shakes his head. “Jack is my best friend, but you were my frog. I love you both a lot, okay?”

Eric grins and goes over to hug Shitty. “Thanks, Shitty. That means a lot.”

“Got your back,” says Shitty, before giving Eric a bristly kiss on the cheek.

Eric laughs. “Thanks,” he says, and then he heads for his room.

Chapter End Notes

I am blown away by the attention chapter one of this fic has already gotten. Thank you to everyone who commented from the bottom of my heart! Chapter three should hopefully go up tomorrow.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Jack and Bitty cuddle, Jack begins to suspect Bitty might have ADHD, and Bitty tries out some of Jack’s stim toys.

Chapter Notes

1: This chapter has a perspective shift within the actual chapter. There’s a break, and Bitty goes from being referred to as “Bittle” (because we start in Jack’s head) to being referred to as “Eric” (because we switch to Bitty’s head). I hope this isn’t too confusing.

2: Just a reminder that my beta, happyzimm, and I are both autistic. We know what we’re talking about, so please don’t leave ignorant comments! However, I do NOT have ADHD. If you do, feel free to leave gentle corrections if I’ve misrepresented something.

3: On the topic of happyzimm, they are wonderful and this fic exists thanks to them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack texts Bittle on his way back to the Haus. Jack’s been in class all day and he’s even more wrung out from the morning than he realized. He half-hopes Bittle has baked something today, even though that would be bad news for his diet plan because he definitely won’t have the strength to resist eating some of whatever it is if Bittle has, just because there’s something so, well, comforting about comfort food. (Well, some of the time. Sometimes it makes him want to gag. But that’s most food, so.)

Jack to Bittle: Are you at the Haus?

Eric Bittle: yeah im in my room why?

Jack to Bittle: Can I come to your room?

Eric Bittle: oh my, that was forward!

Jack takes a minute, frowning at his phone, to understand what Bittle apparently thinks he’s saying. When it hits him, he sighs even as heat rushes to his face.

Jack to Bittle: We’ve discussed how literal I am. I just want to see you. And maybe cuddle?

Eric Bittle: oh right sorry. yeah you can come to my room.

Jack texts back a smiley face and then puts his phone away for the remainder of the walk to the Haus. If he speedwalks a little, well, sue him; he wants to see his newly minted boyfriend. He’s not out of breath when he arrives back at the Haus, of course—he’s in peak shape and it’s not like he
was sprinting—and then he takes the stairs two at a time and knocks on Bittle’s door.

Bittle answers the door. He’s still in the smart-casual outfit he changed into after practice—he’s not like Shitty, who usually sheds his clothes at the door of the Haus, or Holster, who tends to lounge in sweatpants whenever he can get away with it—but, even though Jack’s used to Bittle being well dressed, he takes a moment to savor it anyway. Bittle’s hair, however, is not as carefully arranged as it was when Jack saw him earlier; it looks like he’s been running his hands through it, or maybe pulling on it.

For a few seconds, Bittle and Jack just stare at each other, smiling faintly, and then Bittle steps out of the doorway and says, “Well, I’m pretty sure you wanted to come inside.”

“Yeah,” says Jack quietly. He crosses the threshold and Bittle closes the door behind him. “Can I kiss you?” Jack asks when the door is shut.

“Yeah,” Bittle breathes, and then he steps closer to Jack and Jack leans down to close the distance between their mouths. Jack isn’t sure what kissing is like for other people, but he’s pretty sure it’s different for him because he’s never connected with most of the written descriptions he’s read. His nerve endings don’t feel alight and there aren’t fireworks in his brain or his stomach. Instead, his mind goes mostly blank, the way it does when the puck drops, and he just melts. No pyrotechnics—just calm.

It’s blissful.

When Bittle pulls away, Jack rests his forehead on Bittle’s and says, “Okay?”

“Yeah,” says Bittle.

Jack goes in for another kiss. When this one breaks, Bittle says, “I thought you said you just wanted to see me and maybe cuddle.”

“Oh, sorry? I did ask before I kissed you.”

"Jack, it's fine," says Bittle. "I was just a little surprised. Would you like to cuddle now, though?"

"Okay," says Jack.

They move to the bed. Jack puts his arm around Bittle, and Bittle tucks himself into Jack’s side. Jack tightens his grip on Bittle and then says, "Let me know if you want me to loosen my hold on you. Like I said, I like intense pressure, but I don't want to hurt you or make you uncomfortable."

"This is good," says Bittle.

"Cool," says Jack. "What have you been up to?"

“Well, I talked to Shitty,” says Bittle. “He told me about the sundae bar theory. And he also said he loves me, which was nice.”

“Of course he loves you, bud,” says Jack. “What’s not to love?”

Bittle squirms. “Typically the gay part.”

Jack’s heart aches for Bittle. “Bits. I’m so sorry you had to grow up that way, and I hope you know now that there are people who will love you for all of you.”

“Pot, kettle?” says Bittle.
“Huh?” says Jack.

Bittle looks up at him and says, “Earlier, at Annie’s, when I asked who could say no to you, it seemed like you weren’t sure people would love you either.” Then Bittle puts his head in his hands and says, “Lord, I think we just said the L-word.”

“Sorry?” says Jack. “I mean, we’ve known each other for a year and a half, and I love everyone in the Haus, even if it is . . . different with you.”

Bittle puts his hands down. He’s blushing, and it’s cute. “You sure know how to charm a boy, Jack Zimmermann.”

Jack grins. “Thanks.” Then he remembers what he wondered on the way to the Haus and asks, “Have you baked anything today?”

“No,” Bittle says, “but Lord have I been thinking about it. I have this test tomorrow and I’ve been trying to study but I absolutely cannot focus. I just keep messing with my hair and staring out the window.”

Jack realizes something and retracts his arm from around Bittle as he stands.

“Um, Jack?” says Bittle as Jack reaches the door.

Jack stops and turns toward Bittle. Right. He needs to explain himself, because Bittle can’t actually read his mind. “I’m going to my room to get something. I’ll be right back.”

“O . . . kay?” says Bittle.

Jack hurries to his room, opens the top drawer of his desk, and pulls out his favorite three stim toys. The first is a plastic figure eight with pliant rubber stretched over the two circles the eight makes. When you push on the rubber, it goes from being convex to concave and then back again. The second stim toy is a set of interlocking curved pieces of hard plastic that can be twisted into a coil, pulled open into a sort of wavy circle, or otherwise manipulated into a different shape. The third stim toy is a pencil with plastic wings toward the top that can be twisted so that they spin down the pencil and back up it again. With the three toys in hand, Jack hurries back to Bittle’s room.

“Hi,” says Bittle. “What was that about? What are you holding?”

“You know how I usually do my homework in my room, not in the library?” Jack says instead of giving a direct reply.

“Yeah,” says Bittle. “I figured it was hard for you to be around the people in the library.”

“Well, that’s part of it,” says Jack. “But also, I focus better sometimes when I use these.” He dumps the stim toys on Bittle’s bed, next to Bittle, and remains standing. “They’re called stim toys. ‘Stim’ is short for ‘self-stimulation,’ and no, that’s not a euphemism. It just means giving yourself sensory input, because sometimes brains crave more sensory input and can’t focus or calm down without it. That’s especially common for people with autism or ADHD. And I can’t believe I didn’t notice this before, but I think you might have ADHD.”

Bittle picks up the pencil with wings and pushes on the wings experimentally. They spiral down until they hit the end of their track, and then Bittle pushes on them again and they spiral back upward. “This helps you focus?” he asks at last, quietly.

“Yeah,” says Jack. “But I only use one at a time, so we can share them if you want to try them out.
And I’d be happy to get you your own if it turns out you like them.”

Bittle looks up at Jack and says, “You really think I might have ADHD?”

“Yeah,” says Jack. “I mean, I’m not a professional, but when you’re in the neurodivergent community, even secretly, you start to hear things and notice things and come across things that other people might not hear or notice or come across. Since my autism diagnosis, I’ve learned a lot about ADHD and dyslexia and stuff too, not even because I meant to—it just sort of happened. In your case, you definitely get distracted easily, but it’s not just that. It’s the way you can get super focused on something when it really matters to you, like hockey or baking—that’s nicknamed the ‘hyperfocus highway’—and the way you take negative feedback so, so hard, and the way your obsessions with Beyoncé and food might be hyperfixations—that’s kind of the ADHD version of a special interest. And the way you talk a lot sometimes. I’m pretty sure you’ve infodumped about pop music and pastry crusts to me before.”

Bittle rubs his knuckles across his forehead. “I really thought this morning was enough new information for one day.”

“Sorry?” says Jack for the third time in the past 15 minutes. “We don’t have to talk about this right now.”

“No, it’s okay,” says Bittle. “But can we talk about it while cuddling?”

“Sure, bud,” says Jack, clearing away the two stim toys Bittle isn’t holding so that there’s room for him to sit back down on the bed and pull Bittle close again.

Eric is pretty sure he passes his test in the morning. Jack hadn’t stayed long the night before, cuddling for maybe half an hour before standing, kissing Eric on the forehead, and wishing him luck with his studying. And miraculously, with that pencil with the wings that Jack gave him, Eric was able to concentrate more than a little better than usual. In fact, even with thoughts of Jack distracting him, he’d had a pretty successful study session, which was hardly his norm.

Now he’s back in his room trying to get through a reading for a different class. It’s going surprisingly okay, and then some movement in his periphery catches his eye. Huh. He’s been playing with the winged pencil with his left hand without even realizing it.

He doesn’t want to break his concentration, since it’s pretty rare for him to be able to focus like this, so he powers through the rest of the reading, but when he finishes it and gets out homework for a different class he finds himself unable to focus on that, at which point he decides it’s okay to take a break. He gets out his phone and texts Jack:

Eric to Jack: do you have any info on adhd that you could give me? i think you might be right and i want to find out more.

Eric to Jack: or info about autism! i definitely want to learn more about you too.

Jack Zimmermann: Yeah, I have some of both. Should I email it all to you or do you want printouts? I’d have to go to the library for that.

Eric Bittle: email is fine. thanks!

Jack doesn’t respond via text, but two emails hit Eric’s inbox in the next ten minutes: first one with a bunch of links regarding autism, and then another with the same sort of list for ADHD. Eric feels a bit bad, but he ignores the one about autism as soon as he sees the one about ADHD. He opens
the first link and starts reading a bullet-pointed list of things someone with ADHD tends to experience, written by someone with ADHD.

Eric feels like he’s stepping under a hot shower after a game. He’d been a bit—annoyed? Frustrated? Something like that—yesterday when Jack had mentioned ADHD. It’s not like Eric can never focus on things he cares about, or like his head snaps around every time he sees a squirrel. (There are so many squirrels at Samwell that doing so would be a good way to break his neck.) But apparently ADHD isn’t never being able to focus, and it definitely doesn’t have anything to do with squirrels. It’s focusing hard on certain things but not always the right things, and having trouble switching tasks, and talking too much about your passions, and feeling really terrible whenever someone criticizes you even slightly. It’s all the things that Eric thought just made him lazy or weird or immature but were maybe actually his brain just working differently than other people’s brains.

Eric reminds himself not to get ahead of himself. He doesn’t have a diagnosis. Just because this feels right doesn’t mean it’s accurate. But if this is how Jack feels when he reads things about autism, then Eric can see how Jack would be able to talk about the condition without seeming ashamed or embarrassed.

Eric makes it through all the links about ADHD before realizing he’s late for meeting Jack for lunch. He texts Jack an apology and then runs to the dining hall. He gets a bit sweaty, which he’s not happy about, but he’s pretty sure Jack’s seen him in worse shape, so he tries not to worry too much about it. When he finally sits down with his tray, Jack looks up from a textbook and says, “Hey, bud.”

Eric smiles and feels breathless again even though he stopped running a few minutes ago. “Hi.”

“Did you forget about lunch?”

“No,” says Eric. “I think I hit the hyperfocus highway. I read every single article you sent me about ADHD.”

Jack chuckles. “That does sound like the hyperfocus highway.”

“Do you, um, do you know how I would go about trying to get diagnosed? It just—everything I read, it felt like looking in the mirror without a mask for the first time and seeing my actual face, or stepping under a hot shower after a game, or—I don’t know, like really being understood for the first time ever. And I don’t know if, like, medication would help me with school or whatever—I haven’t gotten there yet—but I think I want to know if this is really me, at least. You know?”

“Yeah,” says Jack. “That’s how I felt when I started reading about autism. That was after my diagnosis, so the context was a little different, but it makes sense. I can ask my therapist for recommendations of where to start for an ADHD diagnosis. She specializes in autism and I bet she knows about ADHD diagnoses or at least knows what’s available around here. Otherwise I’m pretty sure Disability Services would have resources.”

Eric lets out a breath. “Thanks. I think I need to just digest this information for a little while. But I want to look into a diagnosis at some point.”

Jack nods and smiles. “Take your time. I’ll buy you some stim toys in the meantime.”

Eric mock-glares. “Jack, you cannot just buy me things—”

“But I’m your boyfriend, and stim toys would improve your life,” Jack points out.
Eric puts his face in his hands to hide the fact that he’s probably blushing. “This boy.”

“That’s me,” says Jack.

Eric lowers his hands and looks up at Jack. “Yeah. It is. It’s always you.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been blown away by the attention this fic has gotten so far. I didn’t start this with the plan of creating a series, but now I’m thinking about it. If you’d be interested in reading more of this, please leave a comment to that effect (and maybe subscribe to me as an author)! Future content might include Bitty going through the ADHD diagnosis process and/or Jack dealing with being autistic in the NHL. But I’m not promising anything (sorry).

End Notes

The next two chapters should be coming over the next few days (they’re already written; I just need to format them), so subscribe for updates!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!