The following excerpt is a chapter from a novel I am currently working on, currently titled *Neon*. The story follows a red fox named Bryce Bolton, an aspiring musician who has the incredible ability to teleport. He takes on the persona of the superhero Neon to fight crime. However this alter-ego is a secret to everyone, including his boyfriend, Simon.

So far in the story, Bryce a.k.a. Neon joined forces with a superhero group called the Paragon Alliance to prevent a cataclysmic, world ending disaster (chapter 1). He traveled back home to Sidewinder City (Chapter 2), and then the audience is introduced to Bryce’s boyfriend, Simon Church (Chapter 3). We see a glimpse of their domestic life and learn that Simon has a 9 to 5 office job, while Bryce is attempting to become a successful musician on YouTube. We also learn that Bryce is forgetful when it comes to household chores. Bryce scrambles to hide his superhero uniform from Simon in order to keep his alter-ego a secret.

Chapter 4 of *Neon*

“I’m fired.” The statement felt unreal on Bryce’s tongue. Like he was floating and needed a moment for gravity to catch up with him. “You’re firing me?”

The tiny office at the back of the record store was cramped, with the bulk of the space taken up by, predictably, stacks of records. It was late enough in the afternoon that the sun had already sunk behind Sidewinder’s mighty skyline, and any light that had managed to penetrate the office’s single window had long since dissipated to be replaced with the ambient glow of electric bulbs.

Bryce sat in one of two old chairs around a table that was closer in construction to pressed paper rather than actual wood. In the other chair sat Elroy the alpaca, Bryce’s boss.

Elroy looked supremely uncomfortable. It was an unusual look for him. The man was usually so laid back he may as well have been on the floor. Normally he bopped around the store, wool in his eyes, more concerned with the exact vibe of the music in the store than selling anything to customers. Not that he needed to. Elroy had the uncanny ability to unwind and relax even the most hesitant customer simply by espousing the virtues (”glorious aesthetic” he called it) of whatever singer, band, or sound he was currently obsessed with.

The alpaca scrunched up his face in discomfort, and slowly nodded. “I’m so sorry man.”

Elroy spoke with one of those broad, west coast accents that sounded like an extra ‘h’ had been dropped into the middle of every other vowel. To Bryce, it sounded like: “I’m so-ho sorry ma-han.”

“It is totally nothing personal,” said Elroy. “You’re a super rad dude. I love your stuff online. You got talent.” He paused and inhaled loudly through his teeth. It made him look like he’d just sucked on half a lemon. “But you are super unreliable. Like, wow.”

Bryce stared down at his knees, ears falling flat against his skull. They say truth hurts, and right now Bryce was stinging all over.

Elroy flicked aside some wool that threatened to cover his eyes. “I don’t want to harsh anyone’s groove, and I am the last person to be all boss-like and enforce an oppressive regime. But, like, you’re never here on time, or you’re running out on me way too early. Sometimes, you don’t even turn up at all. You’re my backup, man. You’re my bass, my harmony, I can’t do this solo. We’re supposed to be running this show together, but it’s not gonna work if you’re not gonna step up, dude.”

A flush of heat built up around Bryce’s neck, and his ears lay dead flat against his skull. Elroy was completely right, and Bryce didn’t know if there was anything he could truthfully say to defend himself or at least let himself out gracefully.

His silence was interrupted by a wide-eyed raccoon who suddenly poked his head around the office door.

“Hey Elroy. I'm looking for Emotional Wreckage by Forever Fiction. Can you help a guy out?"

"Yeah, Forever Fiction should be in the F section, my dude," said Elroy.

"F section? Where's that?"

"Right next to the E section, dude."

"Of course! Thanks a billion, Elroy."

The raccoon retreated, and Elroy turned his attention back to Bryce. “Sorry ‘bout that. What was I saying?”

Bryce crawled out of the chair. “I was just leaving.”

Elroy sighed. “You got stuff going on, dude, I can tell. If you can get it sorted out, gimme a buzz.”

“Thanks Elroy, I appreciate that,” he said truthfully.

By the time Bryce had walked from the record store to his street, a chill had settled into the night. He kicked a loose piece of concrete pavement and watched it tumble into the gutter of the road. How was he going to explain this to Simon? He was just fired for constantly disappearing from work, which, in all fairness, was true. But he was only ditching work to help people in trouble. To save lives. Like the old caribou lady he’d pulled from her apartment when it went up in smoke. Or the construction wolf he’d teleported to the hospital when his leg had almost been sheared completely off when a crane had collapsed. Or even that billy goat kid whose pet parrot had escaped; Bryce had run, leaped and teleported from building to building for almost the entire length of Eighth Avenue before he’d caught the damn bird.

They weren’t exactly reasons he could tell Simon. The rabbit would think he was crazy. No, Bryce would need to come up with something.

He had his key to the building’s front door practically inside the lock when he heard the cry. Bryce stepped back, his black-tipped ears flicked around searching for the source. He pushed aside the noise of the city, the churning traffic and distant babbling of a hundred thousand voices, just as he pushed aside all other thoughts.

He heard it again. Coming from somewhere to his left. He quickly moved and looked down the side of his building. The dark alley behind Simon and Bryce’s apartment was more putrid than it was threatening, although the smell could get pretty scary in the middle of summer. Otherwise, it was empty.

Maybe the next building over? He hastened his pace then peeked around the side of the rough brick into another alleyway.

A rat man was being slapped around by a large canine, a doberman. It was late and dark, with no one around to help. No one except Bryce.

Bryce pulled a large, yellow bandanna out of his hoodie pocket and wrapped it around his muzzle. He carried it around with him just in case he didn’t have time to change into his ‘uniform’. He pulled the hood tight over his and head and stepped into the opening of the alley.

“Hey you!” Bryce called out.

The dog twisted his head around and snarled. “Piss off, skinny.”

“No.” Bryce’s voice was strong and confident. “Let him go. Now.”

“Oh, you have no idea what you’re walking into.” The dog dropped the gasping rat and faced Bryce, rolling his broad shoulders back and marching at him.

Bryce vanished in a puff of light.

The dog stopped in his tracks. “What the hell?”

“I think you’ll find,” started Bryce, standing right behind him, “That you’re the one who- hey!”

The dog spun and aimed a fist at Bryce’s face.

Bryce dodged the blow, then vanished and reappeared behind him again. Bryce couldn’t help but grin beneath his bandanna. This dog was a basic cliche of a thug. Strong, but slow. No actual fighting style. And stupid enough to keep fighting even when faced with actual superhuman abilities. This would be fun.

Bryce hopped from foot and foot and waited for the dog to come at him again. “I wasn’t finished. I was going to say that you are the one-” Bryce ducked under a punch. “-who doesn’t know-” He grabbed the dog’s arm as a fist flew towards him, and flipped him onto the ground. “-what he’s walked into.”

The dog scrambled up and out of the alley, swearing.

Bryce knelt down and gently held the rat the by the shoulders. “Are you okay?” The rat looked shaken, but Bryce couldn’t see any bruises.

“He… he took my wallet,” the rat mumbled.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.” Bryce ran to the opening of the alley, then vanished.

The rat stared out, mouth agape.

Barely ten seconds later and Bryce reappeared outside the alley. He helped the rat up and handed over the wallet. “Here you go, sir. You’ll be alright now.”

“I’ve seen you before,” the rat croaked.

Bryce’s muzzle tensed up. Did the rat see through the bandanna? It was useful enough to obscure Bryce’s face in a pinch, but maybe all it took was a little scrutiny for the disguise to fall away. Bryce couldn’t recall seeing the rat around his apartment building, but that didn’t count out the newsstand, the cafes, even just around on the street. If the rat had seen him before, maskless, muzzle naked and bare to the world, perhaps buying a coffee or lost to the music in his headphones, all it could take was a little spark of connection. The facade could come crashing down.

“On the television. You’re Neon!” said the rat, breaking into a smile.

Bryce breathed a silent breath of relief. “That’s me!” he said cheerfully. He walked the rat to the street.

“You look different on TV.”

Bryce looked down at his gray hoodie and jeans, and chuckled. “I didn’t have time to change. Let me help you home. Where do you live?”

“Just by the intersection.” He pointed down the street. Bryce knew the building. It was only a ten minute walk, but what sort of hero would he be if he ran off now?

“Close your eyes please, sir. This might feel a little strange.”

The man did as he was told. A second later, he opened his eyes and found himself staring at the front door of his building.

“How can I ever thank you?”

Bryce couldn’t help but smile. He must have heard those exact words nearly a thousand times by now. It never got old.

“Just stay safe, sir. And try to enjoy the rest of your night.” He teleported away to a dark corner of the street, leaving the old man alone, but safe. He shoved the bandanna into a pocket, and stepped back into the street to head home, a satisfied smile on his muzzle.

With a flinch he suddenly remembered that he needed to explain to Simon that he’d been fired from the record store. His tail drooped down as the wind of triumph vanished from his sails completely.

He had about five minutes to think of a good excuse.

Bryce sighed. He’d have to settle for a bad excuse instead.

Not to diminish the importance of the story, but this was *so cute*. Bryce is a super endearing character, even from just this snippet. I can't help but feel for him as he's getting fired, and his thoughts and internal dialogue really adds to the story. All of the characterization is really strong. I loved how unique Elroy's speaking style was (including the incredibly accurate description of those added 'h's.

One thing that I think will help the text out is maintaining a somewhat clearer sense of the progression of time. I wasn't sure when the conversation between Bryce and Elroy was happening, so I got tripped up by the 'By the time...had walked'. The perfect tense gave me pause. Knowing what time of day it is can really help both there and with the walk home/alley fight. I'm assuming it's the end of Bryce's shift? One minor nitpick that's maybe more a Maddy thing than a general rule, but 'said X' as a construction rankles, and I'm not sure why. Dated, maybe?

I'm really excited to hear more about these characters, especially more about Bryce's personality and I really want to meet Simon, now! Thank you for sharing.