

# The Other Human Species 1: The Source of Magic

*First Novel of the Urban Fantasy Series*

*By Clare Solomon*



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# Chapter One

ELLIOT RIVERS awoke and felt a familiar pull on his senses. He smiled. A magical vision felt like a lucky start to such a big day in his life.

As the room around him faded, he no longer saw through his own eyes but those of another, seeing the memory like an out-of-focus scene from a film. He recognised the fury in the mind he was experiencing at once – it was his mother. She was speaking in the House of Lords to a roomful of MPs, most of them middle-aged and wearing suits. All of them were talking amongst themselves or fidgeting as his mother spoke and it was this lack of interest that was increasing her anger by the second.

“Neans are dangerous,” she shouted. “We’ve contained that danger by keeping them under our control but, if this proposed Freedom Act is accepted, our entire society will be in jeopardy.”

The black-haired man on the opposite side of the room stood up. He was younger than Mum and Elliot knew from her mind that he was clever: a rising star amongst those present. Benches of people rose behind him as he smiled in a way that invited others to join in with his humour. “My honourable colleague, MP Rivers, has a lively imagination, doesn’t she?”

There was laughter at his words, from both his side of the room and hers, and the knowledge that her own political party was laughing at her made Nicola Rivers seethe.

The other MP grew serious as he continued, “Neans have never caused any kind of trouble. They’re pacifists and for a modern society like ours to still force half its people to be slaves is evil.”

“Here, here,” someone behind the man shouted and there were sounds of agreement around the room.

“Neans make up half the population of the world,” Nicola shouted, “and they are more devious than you understand. They have ways of protecting themselves...”

“An invisible weapon?” the other MP scoffed, cutting across her carefully prepared speech, “like this invisible threat from them?”

There was more laughter and, before Nicola could get back her last chance to change their minds, the Leader called for the proposed Act to be voted upon. As Nicola watched helplessly, one MP after another voted to pass the Act. It was the worst day of her life.

Elliot felt her dread at what this would mean for everyone, then the magic faded away and his bedroom came back into focus like waking from a dream, but without the sleepy fuzziness. He started at the realisation that there was someone in his room with him. “Mum?”

He turned his head and a dark shadow, human shaped, vanished from sight.

Elliot sat up in bed, staring, his chest pounding. What was that? He looked around his room: clothes folded neatly over a chair, the bookcase that took up nearly an entire wall, wardrobe, desk cleared of papers for the first time, the chest of drawers by his bed on which sat a lamp and two teetering piles of books. The three suitcases by his chair, briefcase, laptop case and unplugged TV/DVD set were also just where he had put them last night. Nothing looked changed or out-of-place.

Of course it didn’t. He rubbed his eyes, letting his head fall back against the pillows. It must have been part of a dream. His magic must have occurred while he was still asleep so, when it ended, he continued to dream for a few seconds. It had never happened to him before

but there was no other logical explanation for what he had thought he saw.

He lay back down, thinking about the events of the vision. His mother was the strongest person he knew, so it felt peculiar to pity her, but seeing her being humiliated made his chest ache with grief. Time had proved her wrong, though, as the Nean race had been free for ten years now in Britain and there had been no catastrophe. They had no hidden power. They were just another type of human beings, probably not all that different from the Sapiens race, not that Elliot had had any contact with them since their own slave, Garnia, had been set free so many years ago.

As a child, Elliot had believed his mother's comments that Garnia was happy to be a slave and that all Neans were better off enslaved, but now it made him feel sick to think he had ever supported such ideas. It was one of several subjects that he and his mother would never again agree on, the other main one being her belief that Elliot was a born leader who would change the world. In bleak moments it made him wonder if she knew him at all.

He switched on his lamp and got up to take a shower, before dressing and going downstairs, looking around as he did so and committing things to memory that he had seen a thousand times. Everything he did felt meaningful as these were his last few hours living here before beginning a new life.

There was no sign of Jasper, who had come home late last night, drunk by the sound of it, but his mum and dad were already in the dining room eating. Dad was wearing a charcoal suit, ready to go and bark out orders at his company, while Mum wore an expensive but conservative navy dress. Elliot had inherited his father's silky brown hair and his mother's striking blue eyes but it increasingly felt as if his personality was nothing like either of theirs and the more he tried to be what they wanted, the less like himself he felt.

"No, Elliot," his mother said, frowning, when she saw him. "You can't wear jeans today – do you really want the first impression the university staff and other students have of you to be of a scruffy child?"

He swallowed down his irritation and didn't point out that he had worn casual clothes deliberately because he would spend most of the day driving and carrying his belongings to his new room at the university and didn't want to get good clothes dirty and crumpled. He disliked arguing with his mother, though, and it was the last thing he wanted to do today, when he wouldn't see his family again for six weeks. "I'll get changed after breakfast."

"Good boy. I only want the best possible future for you."

"I know," he said. His parents had given him a lot of opportunities and made him focus on his studies so that he achieved 'A's in every subject in his summer exams. He ignored the selfish part of him that said they pushed him in directions where he didn't want to go.

Tina, their cook, a thin shy woman, brought him a plate of cooked breakfast and said in a quiet voice, "The best of luck with your studies, Elliot. I hope you'll be happy at university."

He stood up and hugged her, a lump in his throat. She had been like family to him for most of his life, someone there to talk to even more than his own parents had been and, unlike them, always able to see his point of view. "Thanks, Tina. I'll miss you."

She patted his shoulder, looking at him with a fond expression and then turned and left them.

"Do you have everything packed?" Dad swallowed his piece of toast before speaking as there was nothing Mum hated more than people talking through a mouthful of food.

"I just have last-minute things to add and then I'll be ready to go."

"I wish I had time to travel to Harroton with you," Mum said, frowning. "If you have any problem with the registration or there's anything wrong with your room call me at once and I'll sort it out."

"I have my acceptance letter and all the paperwork the Uni sent me in my briefcase," Elliot said, "so I know where to go and what information they'll need." He had checked and

double-checked that he had what he needed last night, nerves and excitement mingling until it was almost impossible to sleep.

“And make friends with the right people while you’re there,” she told him, cutting up her food into small neat portions. “The contacts you make over the next three years could help your future political career immeasurably.”

He dropped his eyes and stared at his plate. “I haven’t agreed to go into politics, Mum.”

“Not yet.” She caught his sigh and leaned over the table to put her hand round his neck, thumb on his cheek. “You have to fight for your future, Elliot. I can’t make things happen for you without you playing your part.”

He moved back, freeing himself from her touch, and smiled at her. “Mum, I promise that when I know what I want, I’ll fight for it.”

She sighed. “I wish you could see the world as I see it and then you would understand.”

He thought about his earlier vision about her and knew that the last thing he wanted was to get any deeper knowledge of how she saw the world. As much as he loved her he wondered, with a twinge of unease and not for the first time, if she was completely sane.

## Chapter Two

“NEAN SCUM – you don’t belong here!”

Elliot dropped his keys and looked round, startled, by the shout from a boy opposite him. He followed the teenager’s stare and saw two Neans further down the corridor, recognisable by the distinctive heavy brow ridges that hung over their deep-set eyes. They were shorter than Sapiens males too and had lower foreheads. This was the first year they were allowed to attend Sapiens schools, colleges and universities in Britain, something that had caused endless angry comments in his home.

He caught the gaze of one of the Neans, brown eyes full of fire and danger. Elliot’s breath caught. The Nean teenager glared at him and then looked away, getting his door unlocked.

The two boys had rooms next to each other a few doors down from his and, as he surreptitiously watched them, Elliot thought they were probably related, both sharing wavy blond hair and square faces. They wore brightly coloured clothes and make-up, along with necklaces, rings and bracelets that made them stand out even more.

“You belong in cages, not studying with us!” It was the same boy, still shouting out insults and Elliot saw one of the Neans – not the one who’d looked at him just now – wince and hunch over.

Elliot turned towards the Sapiens kid. “That’s enough.”

“What’s wrong with you?” the teenager snarled.

He tried to present a reasoned argument as his mother had taught him. “We’re all here together, so why not try to get along?”

“It’s because of idiots like you that they aren’t slaves any more.”

“Good,” he said and the boy gaped at him, then glowered and marched into his room, slamming the door behind him.

The Neans were gone too so Elliot bent down and grabbed his keys off the floor, unlocking his door. It was still only midday, the drive here from his home just having taken a couple of hours. He opened the door and froze, eyes taking in the ugliest room he’d ever beheld. The curtains were orange with brown and cream flowers and the large wardrobe, chest of drawers and bed were in a heavy, dark wood that made the room feel cramped before it even had any of Elliot’s belongings in it. He could buy new curtains but the rest he would just have to live with. It would be good for him to not have everything around him perfect; most people didn’t. He put the two suitcases he had brought in on the bed and went back out to get the rest of his things.

It took another ten minutes to get everything inside, where the bags, boxes and other items used up every bit of floor space and covered every surface. He had no idea how he’d get everything to fit – he hadn’t expected the room to be so small or he would have tried to pack less, although it felt as if he’d left too much behind already. This would be his home for three years, after all.

He had registered when he got his room keys, everything going smoothly despite his and his mother’s worries, and the knowledge that he was now an official student at Harroton University felt good.

Deciding to ignore the chaos in his room for an hour, he drove back to the campus and got a notebook and pen out of his briefcase, drawing a rough map as he walked around. There

would be a talk by the Vice Chancellor tomorrow and, the day after that, his classes would begin. He needed to be prepared.

The campus looked older but more attractive than their halls of residence, built with cream stone, and inside everything was fairly modern. The lecture theatres were all locked up but, for the sake of the students who'd got here early, a lot of the other rooms were open. The library was laid out over two floors and there was a computer room off it where students could type up their assignments and access the internet. There were a few other students wandering about and, when he said hello to them, they returned the greeting cheerfully.

He then drove to the shops he'd seen on the way here, buying groceries since there was a shared kitchen for the boys on his floor of the halls of residence. The girls, given the floor above, had their own kitchen and bathroom. Elliot's parents had suggested he go out to restaurants for meals every day and he'd smiled and nodded while making plans to cook for himself and use the student canteens. He would need to be able to cook later in life so he may as well learn now and he wanted to spend time with the other students.

As he left the store he saw two teenage Nean girls walking towards him, a group of Sapiens boys behind them shouting crude sexual comments and racist insults. The girls were staring at the ground, red-faced and clearly unnerved. They ducked into the shop Elliot had just left and the boys headed away, probably to find another Nean to harass. The laws that had set Neans free didn't seem to do anything to protect them, although they would have been in far more danger if his mother had got her way and they had remained slaves. He didn't understand how she could hate Neans so much that she wanted them to have the most wretched lives imaginable.

He got back to the ugly Victorian Halls of Residence and took his bag of food to the kitchen. A boy was there and, as he looked round, Elliot recognised him from earlier as the other Nean; the one who hadn't glared at him. He was around 5'4" with broad shoulders encased in a red and orange T-shirt, tatty jeans and sneakers. He was wearing eyeliner, eyeshadow and a pale lipstick that looked good on him in a strange way to Elliot who'd never seen a boy wearing full make-up before, only a few Goth kids wearing eyeliner or black nail varnish.

"Hello," Elliot said, trying not to stare. He had only spoken to Neans a handful of times since they became free but, after all the insults he had heard today, he wanted to make it clear he wasn't like the people who might harass them. "I saw you when I was moving in."

"Yeah, I heard you tell that boy to stop hassling us. I'm Barve." The Nean's smile was warm and a touch shy and he had a working-class Essex accent.

Elliot introduced himself, just as the second Nean from earlier came in. He wore less make-up than the smaller boy but dark brown eyeliner made his deep-set eyes more intense and he had a streak of green in his wavy blond hair. The brow ridges gave him a permanent frown but it was the fierce look in his eyes that suggested trouble.

"This is my brother, Farlden," Barve said.

The other boy looked no happier than he had before and made no move to greet Elliot. "We'll come back later." He gestured towards the door and Barve frowned at him.

"I was going to make ham sandwiches for lunch," Elliot said, emptying his groceries onto one of the counters. "You're both welcome to share them."

He got out the loaf of bread, ignoring the glaring session between the brothers.

"We're vegetarians," Farlden said shortly, still standing by the door in a manner that made it plain he wanted to leave.

"I have plenty of salad and eggs, if you want to make egg mayonnaise," Elliot commented. He realised how arrogant he'd been to assume the Neans would be grateful to meet a Sapiens who was willing to be friendly towards them. Probably, though, Farlden had good reason to be wary, so Elliot tried not to take his hostility personally.

Barve opened one of the cupboards and got out a couple of transparent containers. "We've got oatcakes and biscuits we made at home yesterday."

"That's great." Elliot smiled at him. "Perhaps you can help me figure out how to cook some of this stuff. I can manage an omelette or fried eggs and that's about it."

"Yeah, I'd be glad to." Barve got to work boiling the eggs and, not speaking to either of them, Farlden made a rice salad and chopped up vegetables with an efficiency that impressed Elliot.

When everything was ready, they sat down around the table which had one leg shorter than the others, so it wobbled whenever one of them touched it. Watching the Neans, Elliot wondered how they felt about being here surrounded by Sapiens. How did they feel to be living with the people who had kept them enslaved for centuries?

He finished eating a piece of sandwich before asking, "What are you two studying?"

"History of Art," Barve said.

"English and Art." Farlden spoke through a mouthful of food and didn't look at Elliot.

"I'm taking English too," he said. "My family wants me to do some kind of business or politics degree, but it's not what I'm interested in. I'm not exactly sure what I'll do as a career but at least I have three years to work it out. Do you both want to be artists?"

"That would be great," Barve said, "but we'll probably end up as potters or carpenters like a lot of our family."

"You have other siblings?"

"No, just hundreds of cousins, uncles and aunts who all want to know everything we do and then tell us what we should be doing instead."

"Only about thirty," Farlden corrected him, still focusing on his food in a pointed fashion.

"That's still a lot," Elliot said.

"It's a Nean thing," Barve told him. "A bit like the historical clan ruling system from Scottish history. Families stick together in a little community."

Elliot tried to picture this and realised he knew nothing about how Neans thought, felt or lived. Since slavery ended, the two species largely kept away from each other, or at least they had in the wealthy Surrey town where he'd grown up.

"Nean life is private," Farlden said to Barve with another frown and, seriously, did he ever smile?

Barve rolled his eyes. "We can't attend here for three years without getting to know other students or them getting to know us. The whole point of being here is to have new experiences."

Farlden said something in a language Elliot had never heard of, making strange guttural sounds amid the unknown words, and Elliot listened intently and asked, "Is that a Nean language?"

"Yeah," Barve said.

"I didn't even know Neans had their own language."

"We've got a few, written as well as oral."

"Barve, shut up," Farlden snapped, scraping his chair on the lino floor as he got up and stalked out.

"Spirits," Barve muttered and grimaced. "Sorry about him. He's not trying to be rude but you don't know what our lives are normally like and this is really different. It's just a big change."

"You mean, being away from your family?"

Barve made a sweeping gesture. "Everything. A lot of Neans think we're betraying them by coming here and studying alongside Sapiens."

"But that's crazy." Elliot frowned. "Surely the whole point of Neans no longer being slaves is that you should be able to do whatever you want?"

“That’s what I think. I mean, Nean people held demos and went on marches and sent thousands of letters to Parliament to get us the chance to have a better education and start getting other rights.”

“And Farlden doesn’t want to be here?”

“No, he does. It’s not that.” Barve struggled for words, face contorted and then he shook his head. “Sorry, it’s impossible to explain.”

“Are your families afraid that you’ll get hurt because of Sapiens prejudice? The university wouldn’t let that happen.”

Barve nodded but in a blank way that suggested he either didn’t believe they were safe or that Elliot’s assumption had been wrong and that Elliot didn’t have a clue what this was really about.

## Chapter Three

“YOU SHOULDN’T have told him anything about us,” Farlden said to Barve when his brother came to his room half an hour later. It was a good thing Fal was here or who knows what Barve would give away that he shouldn’t. Fal sat back down on the bed mattress, where he had been sketching the view from the window, and Barve took the room’s one chair. A large sports bag and several carrier bags held Fal’s belongings but he hadn’t yet bothered to unpack.

“I like him and I didn’t say anything that mattered.”

“You don’t know what’s important and what isn’t.”

Barve hunched over. “I’m not an idiot.”

“I’m sorry - I know you’re not. I didn’t mean it as an insult,” Fal said at once and reached out to put a hand on his brother’s arm, squeezing it before sitting back down. “There’s too much at stake to trust any of them. A lot of Saps would love to have a reason to wipe out our whole race.”

“Elliot’s on our side. He’s nice. Look, our parents agreed to let us come here and we have three years of mixing with Sapiens. There isn’t any way to avoid them.”

Fal pressed his narrow lips together. He didn’t think he’d feel safe the entire time he was here – surrounded by people who either hated him or thought he should be serving them – instead of being with his family. The thought of them gave him a pang of homesickness. “Why did I let you convince me to come here?”

“Me?” Barve laughed, his entire appearance brightening. “This was your idea as much as mine. You wanted to experience more of the world – admit it!”

“Maybe. If we stick to ourselves...”

“Bugger that,” Barve said. “We can’t discover more by going back to our old routines. I want to get to know some of the Sapiens and find out how they feel about the world.”

“I can already tell you how they feel about Neans. Didn’t you hear that boy when we arrived?”

“I heard Elliot tell him to get lost. That was pretty heroic of him.”

Fal looked at his brother with disbelief. Fal had been impressed that a Sapiens would defend them but that didn’t mean they could trust him. “Heroic?”

“I like him. I really like him.”

Barve was looking at him in a meaningful way that he didn’t get. “You don’t mean you fancy him?”

“Maybe.”

“Since when have you liked blokes?”

“Always.”

Fal’s eyes widened. “Why would you keep that from me?”

“I never had the chance to meet anyone before.”

“You’ve met loads of boys.”

“Name one that I’m not related to.”

Fal tried to come up with a name and couldn’t. Neans weren’t into big gatherings of people or socialising outside their own group. He hadn’t realised that Barve had found it as restricting as he did. They had been each other’s best friend their entire lives, though, so it

stung to find out Barve had kept this from him. “You’re my brother. There isn’t anything you can’t tell me.”

“Great. Now you know. I want to get to know Elliot better.” Barve gave him a measuring look, silently daring him to get angry.

“Bloody ‘ell,” he complained. He wouldn’t be surprised if the *heroic* Elliot turned nasty when he got Barve alone – it wouldn’t be the first time a Sap had pretended to befriend one of them in order to beat them up or mock them. There could be no good outcome to Barve’s crush, but Fal knew there was no point in his saying so. They both shared a stubborn streak.

Barve vanished next door to his room and Fal made his bed with the sheets and duvet the Uni letter had instructed them to bring. He then put his suitcase on the bed and emptied its contents, only half filling the big wardrobe and chest of drawers. He lay out his art supplies carefully in the top drawer: sketch paper and better quality sheets; watercolour paints; pastels with a pad of special paper for using with them; pencils; pens; rubbers. A lot of this was new, saved for during the last year when he had had a full-time job. He had an easel that his uncle had made him too and propped it against the wardrobe.

Barve was right: Fal had wanted this too. He’d waited a year so he and Barve could begin their studies together and he had no idea now what he’d been thinking. The Saps would make life miserable for them and Barve was way too trusting.

He thought of Elliot with his blue eyes and fine-boned face and his frown returned. How could his brother possibly like him? Elliot was everything that was wrong with the world. His clothes, accent and attitude all made it clear that he wasn’t just a Sap but, worst of all, an upper class, wealthy one. He would never in his life have to work to get anything. What he couldn’t achieve through his parents’ influence, he would win through his handsome face and charming manner.

He would never be picked on for not just being different, but for not even understanding the rules that made Saps like or hate someone. His family would never be harassed. He would never know the futility of working like crazy – harder than anyone else – and not succeeding because of his race.

The bastard would have everything he wanted for the rest of his life and he probably never even realised how lucky he was.

A knock on the door distracted him from his thoughts and he unlocked it to let his brother back in.

“D’you want to have a look round the town before we get dinner?” Barve was almost overflowing with enthusiasm and that, at least, was good to see.

“Okay. There’s a public phone downstairs and you know Mum won’t relax until she hears we haven’t got murdered yet.”

“Then I can’t wait to tell her that I’m happy here and looking forward to everything ahead.”

Fal shook his head as he locked his door and led the way down the stark corridor to the phone.

They would stick together, he promised himself as he began dialling his home number, and that’s how they would get through this. Barve and Elliot couldn’t possibly have anything in common so, in a few days, Barve would get over his liking for the irritatingly charming boy and then they wouldn’t need to have anything more to do with him.

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