



Van Helsing Season 2 Episode 3 Review: Love Bites

Julius comes to Vanessa's side, but can she forgive herself?

Review: Dave Vitagliano



Van Helsing Season 2 Episode 3

“Do not underestimate the cost of being a monster.”

It's often said no greater love exists than a son's for his mother, and for the third week in a row, *Van Helsing* catches viewers totally off guard drawing on a narrative device used only sparingly to this point. In an episode examining the depths to which desperation can

push a human being, “Love Bites” takes viewers on an emotional rollercoaster ride that could potentially send Vanessa down a dark path she’s thus far managed to avoid.

Following last week’s tale of redemption, tonight *Van Helsing* considers the circumstances that drive an individual to commit those unspeakable acts that normal, well-adjusted people attempt to bury far below the surface. After the jarring final scene in which Vanessa experiences a mother’s worst nightmare, her world and ours have been irrevocably changed. There is no going back, and herein lies perhaps the writing team’s greatest challenge. How dark is too dark? How far down the black pit are we willing and able to go with Vanessa?

The importance of the poignant 1936 flashback cannot be overstated. Until now, even though Julius’ multi-layered role has been fairly straightforward, to learn the genesis of his present situation forces us to consider that each vampire has a story to tell. Do we condemn a man filled with despair for allowing Dmitri to turn him and then in turn using his newly acquired power to save his dying mother? Regardless, we see him in a new light and gain a better understanding of how he reached this point. Whether Vanessa will be able to absolve herself in Dylan’s death, and then summon the strength and will to go on figures to play a prominent role moving forward. Can she find renewed motivation to lead those who look to her for direction and hope? More than likely it’s going to require those around her to pull her back from the abyss, and who better to do that than Julius.

Once we learn that small-time prize fighter Julius Romanski held off as long as humanly possible before agreeing throw a fight to fund his mother’s hospital stay, his progression to vampire becomes not only understandable but predictable. In fact, Mother Agatha tells him “there’s always something,” that can be done to obtain what you need or desire. Adding insult to injury, the gambler who owes him for throwing the fight, stabs him in an alley setting the stage for Dmitri to step in and turn the man who will eventually lead his own vampire army. Adding to the intrigue is the fact that we know Julius’ relationship with his sire has been difficult at best, and it will be interesting to see whether Julius pursues revenge or redemption.

Despite their history, Julius may be the only one able to prevent Vanessa from descending into a personal hell, though the possibility exists that his past with Dmitri might first fuel a desire in Vanessa to take down the man responsible for her daughter’s death. Julius’ wish to now protect Vanessa rings true, but he’ll have a lot of explaining to do if and when Axel returns to her side. Regardless, Dylan’s death is on Dmitri’s hands alone, and whether or not Vanessa can learn to accept this will be the key to her own survival.

Even though it doesn’t take up that much screen time, Dylan’s distress sets Vanessa down a path we knew she’d have to travel sooner rather than later. Feeling she has no other option, Vanessa risks everything to bring her daughter back. But is that true? Are there other options available to her? Like Axel, she refuses to kill to survive, but this is her child’s survival at stake, and there can be no greater anguish than she experiences making this decision with little time to consider the consequences. Julius tells Vanessa that as a “young elite” Dylan needs fresh human blood or she will die, presenting Vanessa with an unthinkable ultimatum. Though there is truth to her claim that Daniel’s

death is an accident, her measured decision doesn't work out the way she hoped. Ultimately, she feels she has no other choice but to attempt to turn Dylan herself and hope for the best, and at first it appears she is successful.

Director Michael Nankin employs a touching monochromatic scene to great effect as Vanessa, Dylan, and Julius (Aleks Paunovic) enjoy a much deserved moment of joy as they engage in a playful snowball fight, not unlike a family celebrating the onset of the holiday season. After all she's been through, to witness Vanessa relish even a tiny shred of happiness provides the audience a welcome measure of catharsis, albeit short lived. And then to have it all ripped away in the blink of an eye, necessarily alters the way we view Vanessa and the show itself. This is not now, nor is it likely to be anytime in the near future, a world in which events and decisions can be seen in black and white terms. That's not a bad thing; it's just that those around her, including viewers, need to prepare for a drastically changed Vanessa. As she removes the red ribbon Rebecca placed around Dylan's neck, Vanessa symbolically cuts ties with Dmitri's world, and the horrific outcome forces us to consider that Sholomenko was telling the truth about his experiments on the girl.

The finality of Dylan's death leaves no room for even a contrived resurrection, and while the shock continues to reverberate with mother and audience, the hero must go on. Though the notion has been raised before, the morality surrounding society's reaction to "the cleansed" takes on added significance as Flesh, Axel, and Doc make their way to Vanessa. We've already witnessed the reaction to Flesh's past both at the hospital and later at Triage, and while it's understandable on one level, the fact that these victims did not choose their fates seems to be overlooked. An entire class is being formed; the outsiders who now simply want to resume the lives they enjoyed before being turned are looked on with fear and a certain amount of loathing. And while their problems will likely continue, Vanessa's are just beginning.

It's one thing to be considered an outsider; people know who you are and what you're about. Vanessa's tragic loss now exacerbates the belief that while Doc, Axel, Flesh, and Julius have become outsiders, she is truly the Other. There is no one like her, and how she's perceived going forward, will impact her state of mind and whether or not she's able to recover from Dylan's death and ultimately prevent the the human race from being overrun. As admirable a character as he's been, Flesh (Vincent Gale) is no leader, and assuming that Vanessa cleanses Axel, he may not be physically prepared to take on an expanded role. Which leaves Julius; the wild card. Can he gain the trust of those around him and help Vanessa work through her pain? Can he assume the role Axel played so well or is there simply too much history to make that possible? Can he be forgiven?

And what of the cleansed? As Vanessa's primal scream at the moment of Dylan's dusting resonates with Doc and Flesh, we now have to consider whether or not Vanessa's "cure" is permanent, or does sunlight force the former vampires back into the shadows. Of course, what happened with Dylan may well be specific to her, and the others will be fine. Time will tell.

So as Vanessa mourns her daughter's death, two groups of her former comrades continue their journeys to find the woman they feel represents their best hope to survive this

onslaught, and while each has a story to tell, the woman they expect to find no longer exists. Axel assumes Vanessa awaits perfectly willing to return him, but that may not be the case. In fact, there's no guarantee that Vanessa will remain with the others and could strike out on her own. And then there's Sam.

We knew it was only a matter of time before Sam (Christopher Heyerdahl) resurfaced, and even with the knowledge that he killed Susan and a number of others, his past and now present remain somewhat of a mystery. It's one thing to kill someone, human or vampire, with a gun, but the number of times we've seen Sam use his baseball bat to bash in the skull of an adversary speaks to the state of mind of the man wielding the weapon. He enjoys the proximity his bat necessarily requires. His affection for Mohamad, though it appeared genuine, raised red flags, and in the end, Vanessa and Mohamad did what they needed to do by leaving him for dead.

But Sam doesn't die, and we can only assume that he's focused on finding Vanessa and Mohamad to exact his promised revenge, opting to remain vampire and exploit his newfound strength rather than ask Vanessa to cleanse him. Looking more frightening than ever, he stumbles upon a group of several dozen juveniles who apparently had been incarcerated at a detention facility when *The Rising* took place. Now in charge of themselves, they've wisely held up in the digs that they know, and when Sam arrives, he finds a scene straight out of *Lord of the Flies*. Nevertheless, we've been down this road before and allowed him to fool us with his father-like connection to Mohamad. Now it appears the opportunity to do the same has presented itself again. The boys clearly have experience fighting off ferals and feeders, but this is different as Sam keeps coming at them no matter how many bullets hit him.

Having taken Felix (Bzhaun Rhoden) under his wing, Sam begins to train the boy who tells him "I'll do whatever you want," reinforcing the thematic center of the episode. Previously, Sam was able to keep his violent urges either hidden or within the context of fighting off vampires, but here it's clear that he's reached a new level of depravity. Forcing the boy to brutally kill his tormentor, coupled with what we already know about his past, Sam sets up as a potential counterpoint to Dmitri in the vampire world, but more importantly, an adversary for Vanessa who literally has nothing to lose in his desire to get even. Will Sam assemble an army of his own?

"Love Bites" thoughtfully examines the choices we face as life impedes our hopes and dreams, and in the apocalyptic reality of *Van Helsing*, the question of whether or not acceptable levels of morality should change given the dire circumstances remains a primary focus. In the end, whether or not the characters can forgive each other for choices they've made pales in comparison to whether or not they can forgive themselves.

4.5/5