



Van Helsing Season 3 Episode 1 Review: Fresh Tendrils

Scarlett and Vanessa accept help from an Elder as they set out to bring down The Dark One on the return of Van Helsing.



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Van Helsing Season 3 Episode 1

“You want a monster? I’ll give you a monster.”

Van Helsing returns and “Fresh Tendrils” seamlessly picks up where the season two finale leaves off. Vanessa wakes to find herself face to face with the Elder sent by Scarlett, and a new breed of vampire roams the countryside. There’s a lot going on here, but Neil LaBute deftly handles all the moving plot parts making it easy for viewers to comfortably slide back into the third installment of this rapidly changing world.

Whether it's a flashback or a childhood memory, the peek into 1986 provides another view of Vanessa's early life and the abandonment issues that fuel her present desire to operate as a lone wolf as much as she's able. That Scarlett was chosen by the Harkers instead of her doesn't appear to have negatively impacted the sisters' relationship, but the major takeaway from the accident scene in which the two adults are killed leaving Vanessa alone and destined for the foster system, has to be the shadowy figure that takes her hand as she awaits an EMT response. Is this an accurate memory that she's previously blocked or an implanted one courtesy of the Elder who's pledged to assist her? Either way, it complicates the new quest that's been laid at Vanessa's feet.

As the story arcs of *Van Helsing* continue to evolve, Abigail's plea that her daughters put an end to The Dark One's threat to humanity becomes the central focus of the story. On the one hand, it often feels as if Vanessa's team is playing vampire whack-a-mole, but her mother's warning to "never face The Dark One unless there's no other way," seems to motivate Vanessa (Kelly Overton) regardless of any potential consequences. With their team virtually intact and ostensibly immune to further infection, Vanessa and Scarlett now have a clear cut mission on which to act. Track down all of the Elders and destroy the totem each of them possesses. But this knowledge doesn't come without cost, and watching Scarlett cradle her dying mother's body drives home the reality that family reunions on *Van Helsing* rarely end well.

Vanessa's unsentimental approach to survival reaches a new level, and even though the skepticism surrounding the Elder's pronouncement that "I did what I was bound to do" can only be seen as prudent, she seems to have lost even more of her humanity. She's always been somewhat cold and clinical, and after changing from a white hospital gown into black military garb, it's clear she's descended further into this dark realm. Even after the Elder initiates the mind meld with Scarlett, she's still resistant to the help he offers. "There are others that guard the path to The Dark One," he explains just before she demands the token he claims was confiscated during his imprisonment. The decision to have the Elder take on the more comforting appearance of Susan (Hilary Jardine) works narratively and seems to momentarily abate Vanessa's misgivings. She's going to need his help which makes this aspect of the story so compelling. Will he continue to hold to his obligation to help Vanessa and Scarlett?

LaBute's script skillfully sets up the long anticipated homecoming as Axel (Jonathan Scarfe), Doc (Rukiya Bernard), and Julius (Aleks Paunovic) remain holed up, hiding from Dr. Harrison's helicopters that continue to patrol the area searching for Scarlett. Scarfe's direction immediately sets up discord within the larger group, and when little Callie picks up a handgun, we have to wonder whether or not we're being misdirected. Nope. More on that later.

While it may not be the episode's most pivotal scene, Scarlett and Axel's arrival at Crooked Falls brings the situation to a head. See what I did there? Even though there are still obstacles to overcome, "Fresh Tendrils" gives the characters a chance to re-establish themselves and put, in some cases, their vampire pasts behind them. Watching Axel struggle to retain his humanity remains indelibly etched in our brains, and despite the bleak future staring her in the face, Doc always stands tall. To see them here in full control of their faculties not only changes the dynamic of the team moving forward, but opens up new story opportunities.

The black helicopters finally land and Harrison (John Reardon) makes it painfully clear that he wants Scarlett and will stop at nothing to achieve this goal. It's one thing to put Julius and Flesh in the torture chair, but when Harrison replaces the former fighter with one of the women, he commits a fundamental blunder. He believes he's in control. In arguably one of the series' finest action sequences, Scarlett takes over and makes a decision that will forever define her and the mission she and the others have undertaken. Clearly outnumbered, Axel and the others stand ready, waiting to take a cue from her, and just when it appears she may be about to reason with Harrison, the fun begins. Executing a wicked 360 degree spin Scarlett lops Harrison's head clean off, stunning not only the doctor's men but Axel as well. Presented in slow motion much of the time, director Scarfe calls on some Matrix-esque visuals as the bullets and blood fly making for a scene that shouldn't be as much fun to watch as it turns out to be.

Clearly, the star of the show here is Scarlett Harker (Missy Peregrym), and neither she nor Scarfe and LaBute are done yet. No more than half an hour earlier, Harrison and the group at the weather station witness Flesh emerge alive from the grave in which he'd been buried next to Lucky. Dead doesn't always mean dead on *Van Helsing* so we roll with this new development, but even here, watching him furiously dig at Lucky's grave reminds us that this is a man who's experienced an inordinate amount of pain in his life and had love snatched away just as it was in his grasp. So as the combatants continue to engage in this whirlwind of violence, Flesh sits quietly restrained in a chair smack dab in the middle of the fight, duct tape across his mouth. It's difficult to know whether to smile or gasp, but the visual becomes more meaningful as Doc risks her life and takes a bullet to save the woman Harrison restrained.

For a scene that only lasts two minutes, there's still a lot to consider. Given the subtle glances and semi-flirtatious banter, it's difficult to ignore the simmering relationship between Scarlett and Axel, which is interesting since there was a time when it appeared Vanessa might hook up with the marine. During the course of the fire-fight it appears that Scarlett takes a few bullets to the torso but continues none the worse for wear, a result not all that surprising given the new capabilities she possesses. In fact, getting shot seems to invigorate both sisters. However, when Scarlett takes a bullet to the throat, even Axel takes a step back. She gathers herself and then coughs out the bullet. "Now you're just showing off," he tells her. Great line, but it also leaves them and the viewer momentarily off balance setting up little Callie for the kill-shot-save with the gun she takes earlier.

To this point it's been Vanessa who never backs away from engaging in the horrific if she deems it necessary, so to see Scarlett take that same step draws her closer in spirit to her sister. Whether that's a good thing remains to be seen, but to this point it's been Vanessa who appears in more danger of losing her humanity once and for all. It feels as if every time we turn around we find ourselves in the midst of a reunion of some sort, and when Scarlett and her team track down her sister at BlackTek, Vanessa has only one thing on her mind. Send everyone to Denver and begin tracking down the Elders and their totems. It may be up to Scarlett to prevent her sister from going over the edge, but in the end, Axel may be the one to save them both.

Elder Susan tells them they won't like what's next, but at this stage, nothing will deter the sisters. Vanessa lays down the gauntlet in the episode's final sequence. "Let's go kill some vampires," she orders, a line of dialogue that takes on new meaning and sets up another great visual as she

marches out of the facility flanked by Axel and Scarlett. Susan trails ominously behind leaving us to wonder whether they're all being led into a trap.

Nevertheless, this is a season premiere, and some fascinating mini-arcs float on the periphery waiting to reintegrate into the larger picture. One critical piece of information gleaned from Axel's experience is that, to a certain extent, by sheer force of will, the urge to go full on feeder can be overcome. Watching Sam (Christopher Heyerdahl) attack a group of survivors doesn't surprise us at all, nor does the pleasure he derives from torturing his victims above and beyond the simple feeding. We know Sam's past; he was a psychopath before he was turned. But then there's that chilling image of a feral Mohamad (Trezzo Mahoro) as Sam's companion and would-be student, and it's almost too disturbing to watch. Sam attempts to convince the young man that torture should be viewed as play, however, Mohamad appears oblivious as he furiously feeds on one of the victims. Sam is a lost cause, but does Mohamad have it in him to resist these urges should he find himself in a different circumstance? Or for that matter, can he be cured like Julius?

While Mohamad and Sam have drifted in and out of Vanessa's story on more than one occasion and appear destined to re-enter once again, the unlikely duo of Scab (Rowland Pidlubny) and Ivory (Jennifer Cheon) presents a fascinating new dynamic. When we revisit their backstories, these two, like Mohamad, possess a basic core of goodness. It's significant that Scab seems to genuinely care that Ivory feeds to keep up her health, but her insistence that she'll only feed on human blood puts a damper on the effort he's made to bring her a freshly killed animal. Is she, like Sam, a lost cause? In all likelihood, Ivory and Scab will ultimately have to contend with Sam and his deranged perspective before anything positive can come out of their situations. Still, these are potentially likable characters facing dark times.

"Fresh Tendrils" does a first-rate job of gathering the troops and providing them with a focused mission. We now have the Daywalkers with which to contend, the Van Helsing family book to decipher, and the knowledge that Denver may be safe and in possession of a BlackTek cure. And though it seems like there's no realistic end in sight for Vanessa's crew, if there's one thing I've learned reviewing *Van Helsing* the past two years, somehow everything will make sense in its time.