



Van Helsing Season 3 Episode 2 Review: Super Unknown

Van Helsing takes the sisters on a journey into the past, and they recover the first of the Elders' totems.



Dave Vitagliano Oct 12, 2018

Van Helsing Season 3 Episode 2

“I’m trying to stop an apocalypse, so I’m not really dating right now.”

For much of its run, *Van Helsing* has operated as a traditional post-apocalyptic tale so prevalent in contemporary television and film. Tonight that changes a bit, and we experience much of what makes classic horror fiction so compelling. “Super Unknown” finds Vanessa facing the opening leg of her most arduous ordeal yet as she prepares to knock out the Elders one by one, ridding the world, once and for all, of the vampire scourge. However, friction between the sisters bubbles to

the surface, and even Vanessa finally admits that she has changed, and not necessarily for the better.

Putting some of the traditional doomsday trappings momentarily aside, *Van Helsing* skillfully employs classic horror tale elements to explore the darkness of the human psyche as it relates to physical and emotional survival. It's painful to observe Vanessa descend into a world in which she seems to have lost the ability and desire to connect with those around her. Scarlett doesn't understand why her sister suddenly erects a wall between them and wonders whether Vanessa is annoyed because of her developing relationship with Axel. He attempts to lighten the mood calling on the long standing epithet "Sleeping Beauty," but this is a Vanessa that hasn't existed for a very long time. Did the Elder's bite push her further into herself, or is her present state of mind simply a product of the blows she's absorbed the past four years? Regardless, it's impossible to ignore the red eyes that seem to appear when she finds herself in demanding situations, a clear indication that this is a new Vanessa.

While "Super Unknown" examines the changes both sisters continue to undergo, the story also takes us deeper into the Van Helsing family mythos and provides further evidence of its involvement with the blood of The Dark One. Writer/showrunner Neil LaBute takes advantage of the innate terror the late Victorian period exudes, skipping several generations to lay the groundwork for Vanessa's recovery of Elder Susan's totem. With an amusing nod to Dracula's lunatic minion, the totem's trail leads the group to Renfield House, the asylum to which Edward Hawkins committed his wife Lillian Van Helsing in 1906. The specifics of the couple's plan remain a bit fuzzy, but we see her give Edward the vial in case she doesn't return from this endeavor, not unlike Scarlett's decision to entrust Doc with a few drops of the blood. We're treated to a brief, tightly crafted fight scene as Lillian works her way towards a later encounter with the psychic vampire. "What are you?" she asks it, and like the twins, we learn that Lillian too kicks ass when necessary.

Hilary Jardine as the Elder continues to make this character her own with subtle gestures and vocal patterns that rather than detract from the innate evil residing within, breathe new life into the being that holds the key to Vanessa's success in obtaining the totems. Though pledged to assist the Van Helsing's, she doesn't make things easy telling them simply "when you see it, you'll know." When they finally locate Lillian's crypt and the totem, the Elder channels its best Gollum when faced with the reality of the prize slipping from its grasp.

Do all of the Elders house their totems in exquisitely crafted jewelry boxes? For that matter, is each totem individually linked to its being, and if so, what's the significance of the bracelet? However, it's the sheathed dagger that Lillian holds underneath crossed arms that garners the most attention. Clearly, the Elder knows more than it reveals but seems spooked by the dagger and pleads with Vanessa to return it to its resting place. Yeah, right. Of course, we know that's not going to happen, but the Elder recognizes blood stains from another Elder on the blade and introduces another obstacle to the *Van Helsing* narrative. "The B'ah is one of the great Elders you will face," the sisters are told, and Vanessa is reminded that her anger nearly got her killed.

Whether Scarlett's verbal confrontation as the sisters dig in the graveyard is the catalyst that moves Vanessa down off her solo perch can't be known for certain, but as the body count

mounts and more artifacts enter the picture, Vanessa does seem to soften by episode's end. In fact, when the Elder tells her she's not ready to face The B'ah, Vanessa takes an unlikely stance. "Then teach me." It's here, at the end of "Super Unknown," that we are treated to another peek into the past via the Elder's mind-meld with Vanessa. Will it teach her what she needs to know through this psychic virtual reality, and if so, are we looking at an extended stay in another turn of the century realm?

Once again there's a lot going on here, not the least of which are Vanessa's red glowing eyes and Scarlett now exhibiting the same ability to bite and bring back. And who are these vampires we find in the Renfield House? The powerful psychic vampire appears to be the leader, but once Vanessa learns that headshots will bring them down, it doesn't take long for the terrible trio to clean house. As if it's not enough that the Daywalkers roam the countryside and present a new problem for the vampire hunters, this variation "bleeds" white or whatever that substance is. Nevertheless, Scarlett bites the leader returning him to his human state. You have to love that LaBute names him Dr. Karloff, a nod to the classic horror actor, and at first, it appears he's willing to help. However, this doesn't turn out to be the case which ultimately leads to his gruesome death, a detail that's become a much anticipated staple of *Van Helsing*.

Even though Doctor Karloff's signature appears on Lillian's death certificate, we quickly learn that this man is a patient pretending to be the doctor. Nonetheless, Karloff (Brent Stait/*Andromeda*) serves as this week's sacrificial lamb, and you have to hand it to *Van Helsing*, the show knows how to serve up just the right amount of gory carnage. Karloff has Axel restrained and prepares to perform a lobotomy just for the fun of it, but watching Axel drive one of the chair legs through Karloff's skull is a fitting reward for a man determined to keep Vanessa's team from discovering the artifact and stands as one of the episode's visual highlights. "Not so smart anymore, are you, doc?" Classic.

All that aside, the final scene opens a door to myriad possibilities for the tale to explore. The Elder begins Vanessa's education by performing another mind-meld that sends her back to a turn of the century setting where we find her wearing expensive night clothes while gazing at the docks and ships moored outside the house in which she finds herself. So what's the deal? Clearly, the Elder can control these virtual realities as we see earlier when the sisters meet with their dying mother, but now we've traveled into the past. Can the Elder actually send Vanessa through time and space to perhaps alter outcomes, or is this merely a scenario set up to begin the lesson and perhaps more truths about the Van Helsing family?

The first step of the journey to collect the totems appears to have succeeded, but along with Axel and Scarlett, we have to wonder whether Vanessa is becoming that which she seeks to stop. Her admitted craving for blood and the fact that we know both sisters were engineered to possess certain vampire characteristics, leaves it open that she is, in fact, losing control of herself. Vanessa has retreated into her own world; will Scarlett and Axel be able to pull her back to the real world, dark as it is?

As a simple, classic horror story, "Super Unknown" takes visual advantage and rather than present situations strictly for effect, each detail performs multiple functions by playing to our fears and sensibilities. As Vanessa marches to the mausoleum to find Lillian, she once again is

flanked by her sister and Axel, a reminder that she clearly remains the leader. The Elder comes to Vanessa's rescue, kills the psychic vampire, rips out its throat, and in a delightfully disgusting moment, holds it aloft. And even though Scarlett feels more at home digging up bodies in a cemetery than her sister, the eerie feeling this archetypal setting provides blends in perfectly with the episode's sinister tone.

However, it's not all doom and gloom as the charming, playful banter between Axel and Scarlett reminds us that hope for a brighter future still exists. Big bad marine afraid of the dark. How great is that? And then there's Scarlett's growing impatience with the Elder and its vague and sometimes mysterious assistance. Finally, I don't know about you, but I'm stocking up on Kit Kat bars.

Occasionally, genre shows become too narratively ambitious, and while that's something to consider with *Van Helsing*, most of what we've been presented continues to hold relevance to the overall arc. Delving deeper into the Van Helsing family history should help the sisters deal with the emotional toll this lifestyle has taken, but what's fascinating for the viewer is the manner in which the tale is told. Will the Elder's virtual education provide the key for Vanessa to succeed in her quest to defeat the monsters? Where are Sam and Dean when you need them?