



## **Things You Should Know**

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THE WORD hung between them like a bitter smell, like burnt hair. She wrinkled her nose against it, screwed her eyes and drew her mouth into a pale pink slash as if to minimise those parts of her face that might react to it. The only sound was his breathing, slow and deliberate, perhaps a little heavy.

'Say something,' he said, and suddenly *that* word, the one that had caused her facial paroxysm, was past, was no longer the newest sound in the room. It faded.

'You have... *.what?*' she intoned, her voice like a slab of cold marble.

'I tested first positive, that's all. It doesn't mean I have anything. Just means there has been contact. Second positive means I have it, just *have* it. That's all. It still may not manifest. I get tested in three days. I...'

'Third?' she asked, knowing the answer, but asking anyway.

'There is no third, darling, you know that. Third means the Farm.'

Everyone knew about the Farm. It was in the news almost daily. Numbers of 'clients' growing by the hundreds each week. They made it sound like a holiday camp. Reels and reels of stock footage being shown of the blood donor trucks driving in convoy through the gates. And always building, expanding, growing. When viewed from the air, the clients' night walks filled the fields like a rock festival.

'But it won't come to that.'

'But...'

'You can say the word. It won't change anything. Say it.'

She said nothing and he filled the silence for her.

'Vampirism virus.'

'You are a vampire,' she moaned, her face losing its rigidity, melting into grief. Tears ran, her eyes glistened and she turned away. Her arms wrapped around herself, as if they were the only ones she trusted to provide comfort.

'No. I'm not. I have the virus. I have had contact, that's all this means. The V1 virus is present in or on me, they are not sure yet. I have decontaminant shower gel, mouthwash, anti viral drugs to take.' To emphasise the point, he shook a paper bag at her that was emblazoned with the logo of a local pharmacy. It bulged.

'Three days will destroy the virus if it's only on the skin. If not, well then. We'll take it from there.'

'One in three, they said. Worst case scenario. I just never thought...'

'No-one ever does. You might want to read this.'

He handed her a pamphlet. The cover showed a man in semi darkness, the twin pearl-white juts of his canines the only real colour.

## **THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW – V1 Vampirism virus – PROTECT YOURSELF!**

exclaimed the title in lurid red. He wished it didn't look so much like a cheap horror novel. She read it. She looked up at him from time to time, her gaze becoming progressively more distant.

'Can I read the doctor's note?' she asked, some trace of her former softness creeping back in.

He almost laughed. That something so devastating could be passed off as a note. He fished it from his jeans pocket and passed it to her. Her voice fed the scribbled text with life.

*'... shows significant traces of V1 on skin swabs, also mouth and multiple mucous membrane swabs. Blood is positive for V1, although too early to tell whether this is surface contamination or deeper viral combination. Prescribed anti virals and decontaminant hygiene products, and will reassess at visit in three (3) days. Suggest further treatment with anti virals if necessary and advise caution when dealing with or coming into close personal contact with others...'*

He was saddened but not overly surprised at her next words.

'Does this mean I will need to get tested?'

'You probably should,' he answered, 'although the doctor stressed that contact with a first positive is almost sure to be safe. He advised caution, that's all. We don't have to... '

'I'll stay in the spare room. Just till the... ..three days.'

He began to protest but knew her well enough to know it would make no difference. Let her do what she needed. She could deal with her abandonment guilt later far more easily than he could live with himself if he infected her. He wanted to kiss her, but didn't. She moved slowly away from him, watching his eyes.

'You won't see anything in my eyes yet, darling. If, *if*, the virus is in me, my eyes will show it after four or five days.' He paused, unable to stop himself from reaching to her. 'I'm scared.'

She seemed to struggle for a moment and then rushed to him, circling him totally with her arms, squeezing hard as if to prevent the virus a hold on him. A stifled sob was her only sound. He gently pushed her away.

'Go on,' he whispered. 'Go and make up the spare bed. I'll stay there.'

There were new words hanging between them, and three days after that first, it was as if that bitter smell hadn't gone away after all. She hung her head, had put the glass door of the sitting room between them, knowing it wouldn't stop the virus, but needing it there anyway.

'Second positive,' she said again. 'I can't believe it.'

'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I... don't know what else to say.'

'Is there a chance...?' she started, her voice cold and flat through the glass.

'That I won't go to third? Of course there is, darling. There's always that chance.' He smiled at her, but the doctor's worrying statistics came back to him. Seventy five percent chance that a patient who tests first positive will not go to second. If he does go to second, there is perhaps only a thirty percent chance that the virus will stop there and not fully manifest. The doctor told him to get his house in order, to plan for the worst. And it's not like he would die, is it? It's just that the Farm does not allow for release. *A prison then*, he had said. *Think of it more as rehabilitation, just until they find a cure*, the doctor had replied.

'How did it happen? When...?'

He said nothing for a moment and then slowly held up his hand to her, showing her his palm. 'There's something you should know.'

Nestling in the soft webbing between thumb and finger were two tiny red wounds, each no bigger than the head of a nail.

'It was a girl from work,' he said. 'I'm so sorry, it only happened the one time. She was... lonely and... oh, hell I don't know. You've been so distant recently!' he blurted.

'Don't you dare lay this on me!' she screamed back at him, and sank to her knees, the fight gone. 'She bit you? Did you let her?'

He nodded, the shame showing in the tremble of his lips, the set of his shoulders.

'Where is she?'

He said nothing for the moment, and she saw the regret in his eyes, the shake in his hands as he struggled with the answer.

'They took her to the Farm. A week ago. She managed to avoid tests somehow, but they caught up with her. She had already changed.' He offered nothing further.

'When will you know?' she said, tears flowing freely now. The previous three nights had been the hardest in her life, knowing her husband was lying in the next room, imagining the havoc a virus was wreaking on his body. And knowing that part of her concern was not for him, but

how she would cope alone while he was at the Farm. Waiting for a cure. Waiting for the next controlled feed. Waiting until he was allowed into the open air. Waiting for the sun to set. A prisoner. That guilt was the thing keeping her awake, wrenching her insides until she felt hollow.

'A day, perhaps two,' he said. 'I can stay here until then, and then they'll arrange a house visit. No more tests, at least.' He tried to laugh and it came out a barking cough. 'The doctor said that the next stage is so obvious that no tests are needed. I will either have gone past second or I won't. Two days maximum,' he said again.

'I love you,' she said, suddenly aware that she may never get to hold him again. It had gone wrong so badly, so quick. At this, for the first time in three days, he cried.

'I'm sorry,' he said, and she nodded slowly, stroking her fingers down the glass of the door that separated them. She pushed it open, no longer needing or caring about the protection it offered and feeling separated from him all the same.

The cry came in the early hours. She awoke, sweat beading her body. Her mind was tired from lack of sleep and from thought. Too much thought. Thinking was over now. She crept softly into the spare bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed, a hand held mirror in front of him, his breath fogging the glass. She flicked on the light and he hissed. He whipped his head to look at her, and she fell back against the closing door, both hands on her face fighting to keep the scream inside. They failed.

His eyes. The pamphlet said it would show in the eyes first. They were red, the skin around them grey and swollen. The pupils and iris were colourless, and looking into them was like staring into nothing. It was worse than darkness. It was as if he didn't exist any more.

'I'm still here, darling,' he said, as if sensing her thoughts. His voice rasped like he had a throat full of sandpaper. He stood, silent as an owl, and dropped the mirror. 'I think you should leave. And call the doctor.'

'I've thought a lot in the night,' she said, moving towards him. 'I can forgive you for what you did. 'til death do us part? I meant it. I know you meant it. I don't want you to go to the Farm alone. I couldn't live with myself. And I can't live without you. I know that now.'

'Thousands do it. A cure will be found.' He seemed to find talking difficult, and his hands twitched. 'You have to trust me. And trust the Farm.'

'I want you,' she said, reaching a hand to his chest. It was cold, the skin dead. His eyes widened and his nostrils flared as if he were a wild animal sniffing his prey. A low growl started from somewhere deep inside him. 'You should go, I feel... out of control. The doctor said I should be taken in before I... '

He paused as she tiptoed upwards to kiss him, running her tongue across his papery lips, stroking a hand down his cheeks, once warm and rough with stubble, now smooth and lifeless as glass, a tracery of blue translucent under the surface.

'... before I bite,' he finished. The sentence should have sounded ridiculous, but it didn't. She moaned into his mouth as he opened his to her.

'I want you to infect me,' she said. 'I want to go with you to the Farm. Bite me, and then I will phone the doctor. I will get them to take us both in together.'

'NO!' he roared. 'You don't know what you ask.'

'I do. I want to share this with you. Please.'

'Even if I do... you know the odds. There's no certainty. The odds... '

'The odds are in our favour. I read the pamphlet. A bite to a major artery. That is our best chance. I want this.'

'Darling... ' he started, but she stopped his words. Her fingers prised his mouth open, and as much as he wanted her to stop, he felt something building inside him, the virus becoming sentient perhaps, perhaps his own urges let loose by V1. Whatever it was, he allowed her fingers to trace the smooth ivory of his new fangs, grown in the night, grown sharp and deadly. He felt a wash of cold suddenly, and imagined it was the last vestiges of his humanity gushing from him like blood from a torn throat.

He pushed her away suddenly.

'Please! Please, I want this. Don't go alone. Don't do it. You don't have to do it,' she cried, falling backwards onto the bed. Her hair fell across her throat and she pushed it aside, stroking the flesh there with her fingernails, and the sound was like the whispering of lovers to his ears.

He fell upon her in a flash, and his new fangs found their purpose, parting her skin lovingly and delicately, paring flesh and sinew and finding the source of her heat. Blood lapped at his probing tongue and then coated his mouth in a gush, and he drank. She squealed as her body tensed against the flood and dug her hands tight into his hair.

He pulled back suddenly and was standing against the wall before she had time to blink. He smiled at her, wiping his mouth in a gesture she knew well. He could have just finished a glass of wine.

'The pamphlet didn't mention *that*,' she whispered, her body drenched in sweat, her pulse throbbing like waves of joy in her ears. A trickle of blood tickled her neck as it ran onto the bed. He bent to her again and slowly licked the wetness away.

'It didn't mention a lot.' He paused and moved so she could sit up. They held each other tightly.

'There are things you should know,' he whispered.

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