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THE WALKING DEAD has really learned how to master the pre-credit sequence. No exception, “Hounded” sets the tone from the word “go”. Merle and some good ol’ boys from Woodbury are on a hunt for Michonne and as they discover, Michonne is hunting back. She gives them the straight up Viet Cong guerrilla treatment, first with a message written in downed walkers and then a brutal ambush where she takes down half the hunting party with her katana. Merle does manage to wound her, but it’s beyond clear she isn’t helpless prey.

It’s a masterful hook and after the opening credits we get right back down in it with poor Rick and his deteriorating mental state. He’s back on the phone again, and this time we get some more insight on who is on the other end. A female voice is telling him about a safe place and Rick begs her to tell him how to get there or to appeal to people in charge to let his band of survivors join them. In the depths of his madness, he is still thinking about the group and their safety.

Later, as Rick tells Hershel about the phone call, you can clearly see the incredulity on his face as he lifts the dead receiver to his ear. The show keeps us guessing about whether this is all in Rick’s head right up to the point where he receives a second call, this one a man asking about the people Rick has killed and why and how he lost his wife. Nobody outside the prison could know about Lori and the baby and so it’s confirmed the caller on the other end of the line is Rick’s own delusion.

Merle and his remaining huntsman catch up to Michonne again and what was shaping up to be a classic confrontation is broken up by walkers. In the ensuing melee, Michonne escapes again, covered in zombie guts after a nasty disembowelment.

In another interesting turn, Daryl is rising up as Rick descends into hell. He helps with the baby, he bonds with Carl over the tragic story of how his mother died in a fire ("she liked her wine and smoked in bed, Virginia Slims"). It's funny how that detail makes the scene all too real, the brand of cigarettes that contributed to her demise is burned into his mind. It's great to see that the characters in this show always seem to be in motion now in terms of their development. They are rising and falling in the ruthless arcs of this new world.

Back in the bush, Merle wants to give up on the hunt for Michonne but his emboldened partner wants to carry on and refuses to lie to the governor. For his loyalty, Merle gives him a bullet in the face, proving that at least while he's out of The Governors sight, he's his own dog.

For her part, Michonne discovers that with a good slathering of walker guts on you, the undead will leave you alone. It's like the mud in PREDATOR, or something. She stumbles into a town and finds Glenn and Maggie and unfortunately leads Merle to them, as well. After a standoff where Michonne stays in hiding, Merle manages to kidnap Glenn and Maggie and takes them back to Woodbury. This sets up a Bad Cop (Merle) and Good Cop (The Governor) torture routine next episode. We'd bet money on it.

In the good borough of Woodbury, Andrea ends up finally falling for the charms of The Governor and they end up in bed. In an interesting revelation about his former life though, he mentions he was nothing special; didn't have a car and house he was proud of. This fits with the theory of him as someone who sees this apocalypse as a chance to hit the reset button on his life and become a very different sort of man. Many people with failed ambitions went on to become brutal authoritarians and the more we learn, The Governor is fitting this like a glove.

At the prison, Daryl finds Carol's knife in the throat of a zombie he takes down. It leads to him searching for his lost friend. They were close, and seeing him later in the episode sitting outside a cell with her knife, terrified to open the door and see what remains of her—walker or no—is so human. It's awesome to see these dimensions of Daryl. When he works up the courage to open the door, I think we all breathe a sigh of relief that she's alive!