

'What d'you know fe reasons? Nuttin' at all. The Witness church is where my roots are. It bin good to me when nobody else has. It was de good ting my mudder gave me, an' I nat going to let it go now we so close to de end.'

'But Gran, it's not . . . you won't ever . . .'

'Lemme tell you someting. I'm not like dem Witnesses jus' scared of dyin'. Jus' scared. Dem wan' everybody to die excep' dem. Dat's not a reason to dedicate your life to Jesus Christ. I gat very different aims. I still hope to be one of de Anointed evan if I am a woman. I want it all my life. I want to be dere wid de Lord making de laws and de decisions.' Hortense sucked her teeth long and loud. 'I gat so tired wid de church always tellin' me I'm a woman or I'm nat heducated enough. Everybody always tryin' to heducate you; heducate you about dis, heducate you about dat . . . Dat's always bin de problem wid de women in dis family. Somebody always tryin' to heducate them about someting, pretendin' it all about learnin' when it all about a battle of de wills. But if I were one of de hundred an' forty-four, no one gwan try to heducate *me*. Dat would be my job! I'd make my own laws an' I wouldn't be wanting anybody else's opinions. My mudder was strong-willed deep down, and I'm de same. Lord knows, your mudder was de same. And you de same.'

'Tell me about Ambrosia,' said Irie, spotting a chink in Hortense's armour that one might squeeze through. 'Please.'

But Hortense remained solid. 'You know enough already. De past is done wid. Nobody learn nuttin' from it. Top of page five please – I tink dat's where we were.'

At that moment Ryan returned to the room, face redder than ever.

'What, Mr Topps? Is it? Do you know?'

'God help the heathen, Mrs B., for the day is indeed at hand! It is as the Lord laid out clearly in his book of Revelation. He never intended a third millennium. Now I'll need that article typed up, and then another one that I'll dictate to you off the cuff – you'll need to telephone all the Lambeth members, and leaflet the –'

'Oh, yes, Mr Topps – but jus' let me tyake it in jus' a minute . . . It

couldn't be any udder date, could it, Mr Topps? I tol' you I felt it in my bones.'

'I'm not sure as to how much your bones had to do wiv it, Mrs B. Surely more credit is due to the thorough scriptural study done by myself and my colleagues -'

'And God, presumably,' said Irie, cutting him a sharp glare, going over to hold Hortense, who was shaking with sobs. Hortense kissed Irie on both cheeks and Irie smiled at the hot wetness.

'Oh, Irie Ambrosia. I'm so glad you're here to share dis. I live dis century - I came into dis world in an eart-quake at de very beginning and I shall see the hevil and sinful pollution be herased in a mighty rumbling eart-quake once more. Praise de Lord! It is as he promised after all. I knew I'd make it. I got jus' seven years to wait. Ninety-two!' Hortense sucked her teeth contemptuously. 'Cho! My grandmudder live to see one hundered-and-tree an de woman could skip rope till de day she keel over and drop col'. Me gwan make it. I make it dis far. My mudder suffer to get me here - but she knew de true church and she make heffort to push me out in de mos' difficult circumstances so I could live to see that glory day.'

'Amen!'

'Oh, hamen, Mr Topps. Put on de complete suit of armour of God! Now, Irie Ambrosia, witness me as I say it: I'm gwan be dere. An' I'm gwan to be in *Jamaica* to see it. I'm going home that year of our Lord. An' you can come dere too if you learn from me and listen. You wan come Jamaica in de year two thousand?

Irie let out a little scream and rushed to give her grandmother another hug.

Hortense wiped her tears with her apron. 'Lord Jesus, I live dis century! Well and truly I live dis terrible century wid all its troubles and vexations. And tanks to you, Lord, I'm gwan a feel a rumble at both ends.'