

# PROLOGUE

**S**he was old when the Earth was young.

She stood atop Cemetery Ridge when Pickett made his charge, and she was there when the six hundred rode into the Valley of Death. She was at Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius blew, and she was in the forests of Siberia when the comet hit.

She hunted elephant with Selous and buffalo with Cody, and she was there the night the high wire broke beneath the Flying Wallendas. She was at the fall of Troy and the Little Bighorn, and she watched Manolete and Dominguez face the brave bulls in the bloodstained arenas of Madrid.

She was there when Man went out to the stars. She saw the Battle of Spica and the Siege of Sirius V, and she sat in Jimmy McSwain's corner the fatal night he fought Skullcracker Murchison. She rode the spaceways with the Angel, watched Billybuck Dancer die beneath the red sun of a distant world, and stood beside Santiago when Johnny One-Note gunned him down.

She has no name, no past, no present, no future. She wears only black, and though she has been seen by many men, she is known to only a handful of them. You'll see her—if you see her at all—just after you've taken your last breath. Then, before you exhale for the final time, she'll appear, silent and sad-eyed, and beckon to you. She is the Dark Lady, and this is her story.



# PART 1

THE MAN WHO  
HAD IT ALL



# CHAPTER I

**W**here am I to begin?

This is not an epic saga, though it spans both millennia and star systems. Nor is it a story of passion and romance, though it was passion and romance that drove several of the participants to their doom. It is not even a tale of high adventure, though without high adventure there would be no tale to tell.

This is simply a true chronicle of events, and as such should be presented in the Language of Formal Narration. Were I to do so, however, I would be required to relate to you, in elegant order, all of my life experiences from the day of my birth, and this would give you a distorted view of my importance, since in truth I am little more than an onlooker who nonetheless managed to bring dishonor to his name, his House, and his race.

Therefore, I choose to speak to you in the Language of Informal Recital, and according to its rules, I shall begin my story at the last possible moment, which was, in fact, the first moment of my personal involvement.

That moment occurred as I climbed the broad titanium stairs of the Odysseus Art Gallery and, panting from my exertion in the thick, humid air, approached the front door of the vast, angular building. There were two attendants standing there, both clad in muted purple uniforms with glaring red stripes on their trouser legs, and I deemed