

Chapter 1

Pearse. January 2431 BCE.

An hour before dawn on a freezing February morning, the family of five slept comfortably together in a warm bed of woolen blankets. The night fire had burned down to smoldering embers, leaving the interior of the stone house icy-cold and in absolute darkness.

Pearse was awakened by a distant reverberation, a rumbling, the sort of thing one feels in the bones before hearing it. It was unlike anything he had ever felt or heard. With his eyes wide and breath held, he lay unmoving in his bed, waiting in silent anticipation for any clue that would reveal the source. He glanced at his wife and children, who were still dozing. The man prepared himself to leap up the moment he sensed danger to his family.

As the rumbling became audible and grew, Pearse sat up listening with rapt attention. His first impression was the sound of an approaching wildfire, although he knew that was out of the question. With temperatures well below freezing and deep snow blanketing the entire region, a wildfire would be impossible. Maybe, he reasoned, it was the sound of a windstorm; but when a

sonic boom detonated in the atmosphere, the thought perished.

Leaping from his bed, Pearse threw on his boots and coat in one swift movement, then burst through the door to investigate. His eyes scanned the horizon. But he found no danger there and no visible reason for alarm. Yet the sound continued. Pearse stared at the heavens, realizing something unknown to him was tearing through the atmosphere.

Winter's predawn horizon was barely visible beyond the snow-covered ridge where Pearse made his home. The River Nore, now ice-bound, wound its way through a grassy flood plain in the distance. A ragged strip of charcoal gray gave evidence of mountains distant. Behind them, dawn threatened to ignite the murky sky.

The steadily intensifying rumble echoed through the river valley. Pearse stared in that direction, but the sound offered no clue to its source or the cause. Lauryn, his wife, and their three children joined him on the high bank, all searching the murky sky as one. A mixture of wonder and dread of the unknown filled their hearts.

As it neared the ground, the sound grew exponentially, roaring, snapping, popping, and shaking the bones of the small group of onlookers. Then the low hanging clouds started glowing, radiating yellow light on the snow-covered grasslands. To the family, it seemed as if the sun was falling to earth.

They watched in horror as a fireball broke through the glowing clouds and streaked to the ground. As it struck, the object threw up a frightening plume of earth and snow, followed by a deafening boom. The concussion

wave that followed sent them reeling. Their world shook violently, and snow fell from the trees around them as they struggled for balance. Lauryn held their youngest child to her breast as it wailed inconsolably.

Pearse studied the growing cloud of debris in wonder as Lauryn tended the children. The little family huddled together as they attempted to make sense of what had happened. The event they had witnessed was beyond their scope of knowledge or experience. But they were certain whatever happened had laid waste to their little valley.

When the air cleared enough to expose vague details of the devastation, they were awestruck. Through the dust and smoke, firelight was visible. Then as the dust and smoke dissipated, Pearse made out the outline of a crater with a shimmering shape at its center.

“What is that—*thing*?” Lauryn asked her husband, with wonder in her eyes.

“I don’t know,” Pearse whispered, “but I’m going down there to find out.” Once he had set his mind on investigating the scene, he began barking orders.

“Lauryn, you build a fire while I get ready to go.”

“Tierney,” he called to his eldest son, “go get ready, you’re coming with me. Get something to eat and gather overnight supplies for two. We’re leaving as soon as we’re ready.”

“Aedan and Saoirse,” he ordered the younger ones, “go help your brother.”

Tierney, the thirteen-year-old, was always eager for an adventure. As he ran excitedly to the house, his siblings followed closely on his heels. The three youngsters wasted no time collecting the supplies needed for

cold-weather travel in deep snow. Once they had gathered everything together, Tierney took stock of the piled provisions. Once they were out in the weather, there was no room for errors; it had to be right the first time. Their lives depended on it.

The kit included a two-day supply of food and water with fire-starting stones, tinder, knives, a long-handled ax, and enough skins to build an overnight shelter. Once satisfied, they bundled it all together in waterproof skins with sewn-in shoulder straps. When finished, Tierney felt satisfied he had completed the task his father had commanded. Only when he was sure he was prepared to travel did he stop to eat.

Pearse put his coat and boots on, threw his pack over his shoulder, then noticed the air had cleared, allowing better definition of the glimmering mass in the crater. A peculiarity caught his eye. The fires seemed to shine rather than flicker as expected. Moreover, those strange fires appeared to surround the object spaced at even intervals. When he realized the fires shined without flickering or emitting smoke, Pearse's apprehension of the thing increased, and with it his curiosity.

Straining to see more in the dim light, he wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him. The improbability of the scene filled him with a sense of foreboding. Nothing was ordinary about any of what he saw there. The longer he stared, the more questions arose. Everything about the scene was strange, unknown, beyond his understanding. As he inspected the devastation, he probed his people's history, collective memory, and own experience for answers but found no useful information. This strange object was something he would

have to see for himself and try to understand.

Despite being keenly interested, Pearse was a cautious man. He wasn't about to allow curiosity to jeopardize his safety or that of his son. He determined to approach the thing with caution, vigilant, and with weapons at the ready. There was no way for him to know what to expect, so he would go in expecting the unexpected.

Pearse said goodbye to Lauryn, assuring her that he would be careful and that he expected to return before dusk. Then he and Tierney set off on what he estimated to be a three to four-mile walk through the knee-deep snow.

Once they had made their way down the high bank and crossed the River Nore, they made good time following a game trail across the snowy flood plain. The thick cloud layer blocked out most of the morning light without offering the slightest hint of its location in the sky. Since their footfalls were silent in the dry fluffy snow, all was quiet except for their steady breathing. Pearse and his son were the only things moving in the desolate valley that morning.

As they trudged up the incline leading into the surrounding hills, dense forest replaced the grasslands. Snow was piled high under the trees, shaken loose by the morning's event. For the first time in months the tall trees were free of snow. Now forced to crawl through loose deep snow their pace slowed considerably.

They found themselves confronted by masses of downed trees and thick branches blocking the way at the top of a ridge. Although relieved to be out of the loose snow, they now faced the arduous task of scrambling

over the big logs one by one. Many were as big around as they were tall, making the going difficult. Their progress slowed to a crawl.

“Father, why are the trees broken like this?” Tierney wondered aloud.

“I cannot say, boy,” Pearse confessed, panting from the exertion. “Do you want to turn back? I think we are close.”

Tierney considered the offer for a moment before answering. “If we are close, let’s keep going. I want to see it.”

Rubbing his son’s shoulder affectionately, Pearse said, “Alright, but be careful climbing over these trees. I don’t want to carry you back!”

As the boy and his father fought their way to the top of a ridge, they came to a viewpoint that revealed the entire crash site. The destruction seen there was stunning, stopping them in their tracks. Below lay a half-mile-wide clearing devoid of anything more substantial than a pebble. The cleared depression was surrounded on all sides by the huge trees, all lined up in neat rows in every direction. The landscape appeared as if a giant hand had combed them into place around the impact crater. An earthen wall encircled the strange glittering object perfectly placed at the crater’s center.

The gleaming silver shape shone brightly against the earthen backdrop, with its nose partially buried in the ground. Sensing the boy’s tension, Pearse put his arm around his son’s shoulder. He noticed how the ship’s lights were evenly spaced along its smooth flanks, just as he had seen from his home on the high bank of the River Nore. His curiosity increased as he realized they

must be lamps but wondered how they burned without making smoke.

Bewildered, Pearse and Tierney sat together on a log resting from the hard climb, studying the unearthly sight. The area was eerily silent, with nothing moving on the ground or in the air. Beyond the crash's affected area, thick snow covered the forests as far as the eye could see. However, everything within a half-mile diameter of the crater was swept clean of both trees and snow. The destruction was complete, yet the mysterious object lying at the crater's center dominated their attention.

Pearse stared at the object intently. The only thing he was able to compare it to was that of a fish, although no fish could ever be as large. But it wasn't a fish, and it certainly wasn't alive. The shiny surface made him think of glass; Pearse had seen glass at the summer gathering. In his estimation, the thing appeared to be similar to that glass.

"Father, what is that?" Tierney asked, his finger pointed at the indescribable object.

"I don't know. But it seems to be made of glass."

"What is glass?"

"See how it shines? Glass shines like that," explained Pearse. "Remember we saw glass last summer, outside the conclave lodge? A man had a table with white and black glass for sale. It was smooth and shiny. White, just like that thing."

"Oh, yes, I remember. But that man only had a few pieces, and they weren't as bright as that." Tierney cocked his head curiously to the side, then added, "Do you think there are people inside?"

"I don't know," his father sighed. "Maybe we will find out when we get there."

The possibility of people inside the glass fish was something Pearse hadn't considered. The thought troubled him. The thing seemed to be constructed rather than natural. There was no question that it was large enough to hold many people. If there were people inside, were they dangerous?

"Can we eat now?" Tierney asked, giving a hopeful glance at his father's bag.

Pearse smiled. *Teenagers*, he thought to himself. *They're always hungry*. Without answering he opened his bag and removed two long strips of dried meat, one for each of them, which they ate in silence. The boy attacked the simple meal as if he hadn't eaten in a week. After the meat was gone, they shared a handful of dried camas root each, and water from a skin bottle. When they had finished eating, they stared at the extraordinary scene of devastation with the gleaming silver object laid out before them.

"I wonder if it's dangerous," Pearse said absent-mindedly, unaware he had spoken the words aloud.

"It doesn't seem to be dangerous, and it isn't moving," the boy observed. "I don't see anything that looks like trouble around it. But..." he thought for a moment, then said, "why did they build a wall around it?"

"I don't think anyone built it. I think it happened when that thing hit the ground. Do you know what happens when you throw a rock in the river?"

"It makes a circle where the rock went in?"

"That's right. I think it happened the same way," Pearse said. "But the rock is a lot smaller than that big

glass thing over there,” he observed. “That thing is a lot larger than a rock, and so is the circle.”

Tierney nodded. “That thing is greater than the conclave hall!”

“It’s big,” admitted Pearse. “I think someone made it, and the makers might be inside. It’s large enough to hold many people. If there are people inside, we need to be careful not to anger them.”

Tierney nodded. Meanwhile, Pearse’s mind was assaulted by a myriad of questions. Logic dictated that people had built the thing, that it wasn’t something naturally occurring. Pearse assumed that if people made it, those same people might still be inside. But that possibility troubled him because if people were inside, that meant it was a vessel. And if it was a vessel, who could build such a thing? Undoubtedly anyone strong enough to build such a thing to ride in might be dangerous.

We have probably seen enough, thought Pearse, but I wouldn’t mind getting a closer look at that glass fish. But is getting closer to it worth the risk? The last thing I want to do is put the boy in danger.

Pearse’s gut told him he should turn around and go home. *That would be the safest thing to do.* But if he was to go back now after getting so close to the goal, he feared his son might believe he was afraid, which was something Pearse couldn’t allow. Plus, he wanted answers, and he wasn’t going to find them if he turned back.

“Let’s get going, boy. Just remember: this is like hunting. Be careful, and be ready for trouble.”

To demonstrate the situation’s seriousness, Pearse slipped his quiver over his shoulder and readied his bow. Then he took the knife from his belt, a large killing

knife, and handed it to the boy. When the man locked his gaze on his son's eyes, he saw fear in them. But he considered that a good sign: *He understands the risk we're taking*. However, as Pearse hardened the stare, the boy glowered back at him bravely, searching his father's eyes, refusing to blink.

It was a proud moment for Pearse; the boy was becoming a man, someone he believed he could count on when he needed it. At that moment, he knew there was no turning back. *Nothing there to be frightened of*, he told himself. Then he turned and began creeping warily toward the earthen wall with the boy following close behind.

When they arrived at the base of the berm, they were relieved to find it climbable, approximately twenty feet high, with a moderate grade. Once they had reached the summit, they found the crater's inner surface as smooth and shiny as a polished marble floor. However, Pearse's heart sank as he realized the smooth surface provided no protective cover for them. With nothing to conceal their approach, they could be easily seen by anyone or anything within half a mile.

Crouched atop the mound, Pearse saw that nothing moved in the sky, on the ground, or about the ship. The silence was eerie. Pearse guessed the impact had either driven the birds and animals away or killed them outright. As he assessed their surroundings for threats, he found no reason for concern other than the object itself, which gave no sign of danger.

Before moving forward, Pearse inspected the overcast sky to determine the time of day. He was worried about being out past dusk without a visible moon or

stars to guide them home. He decided it must be close to midday, which meant time was limited. The wind was picking up, and the low hanging clouds appeared to threaten snow. If they didn't keep moving, they would be forced to spend the night in the cold, which Pearse wanted to avoid.

"I don't see any reason we shouldn't get a closer look at it," he said to the boy. "But keep your guard up. Let's go; we need to hurry if we are going to make it back before dark," warned Pearse.

The approach to the ship was visually deceptive. As the adventurers drew closer, they found themselves dwarfed by its size. Being a lover of storytelling, Pearse wanted to be able to relate his experience accurately, so he paced off the vessel's width and length. He discovered it to be thirty-five paces wide and one-hundred-twenty paces in length. He guessed the height to be just less than its width. Then he paused to evaluate the object in greater detail.

First impressions being what they are, he didn't expect the assumption that the thing was a glass fish to hold true. He never believed it was a fish; it just happened to look like one. Like a fish, it was longer than it was wide, with protrusions not unlike fins. As expected, the skin was smooth, just like glass, brilliant in the diffused light of the winter day.

Pearse scratched his head, puzzled at the nature of the ship's skin. He wondered how something so large could have hit the ground with such force and yet remained so clean and smooth. He concluded it must be the nature of the glass, so he reached out to touch it.

The instant his skin made contact with the ship, a

bolt of energy hit him, hurling Pearse to the ground. He was laid out flat, unmoving, as a whisper of smoke escaped from his clothing. The boy rushed to his father's side, shaking him, praying for a response, anything. But his father didn't move, and he wasn't breathing.

"Father! Father!" the boy called repeatedly, but the man remained lifeless in his arms.

The horrified boy felt hopeless, deprived of any basis for understanding as to what had happened. Now he was left alone, without answers or any help, desperate to do something to help his father. Tierney didn't know what to do. Confused and terrified, the boy cradled his father's limp body in his arms and wept bitterly.

Pearse and Tierney weren't the only ones interested in investigating the unusual sights and sounds occurring that morning. Four men, hunters, watched every move Pearse and Tierney had made from their vantage point on the opposite side of the crater. As hunters, these men were instinctively cautious, satisfied to let others go about the seemingly dangerous job of assessing the strange object.

Crouching and hushed to protect their position, they watched as the man and boy approached the ship. Anticipation built among the hunters as the man reached out to touch it, then gasped as one when a flash of light erupted. The air wavered briefly around the man; the strange silence was broken, and the man was hurled roughly to the ground. The boy ran to his father's aid, crying out in alarm, but the truth was immediately apparent. Smoke rising from the man's unmoving body