

IONA STRONGHOLD

BOOK TWO OF THE SYNAXIS CHRONICLES

PREVIEW



**An Epic Science Fiction Thriller by
Robert David MacNeil**

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This is a short preview of the exciting new SF thriller, Iona Stronghold. The publication date for this book is still to be announced, and significant changes in this chapter may take place before the book is completed. I hope you enjoy it! -Robert David MacNeil

Reading suggestion: Set your PDF viewer to "Single Page View" and be sure to enable scrolling. Enjoy!

PROLOGUE

THE FOUR CORNERS REGION OF NEW MEXICO

The old Chevy truck shuddered and jounced along the dusty washboard-rutted track illuminated only by the feeble light of its dirt-shrouded headlamps. Weary from the long day, the driver clenched the wheel firmly, staring numbly at the road ahead.

For Ignacio Vincente Cortez the day had begun before dawn at an abandoned farmstead in the desert northeast of El Paso. He'd arrived at the designated time to find a 1953 Chevy two-ton farm truck parked in a tumble-down barn behind a faded and weather-beaten mobile home. It was fueled, with keys in the ignition.

Entering the barn, Ignacio walked to the rear of the battered truck and glanced at its cargo. The old truck's high wooden box sides were straining under a load of over-ripe cow manure, already buzzing with flies. He shook his head and quickly climbed into the cab.

Someone less experienced might have questioned why anyone would pay good money to transport a load of bovine excrement more than four hundred miles through the hot New Mexico desert, but Ignacio knew better than to ask questions. He'd driven for these people many times, and had no doubt that the truck's odiferous cargo concealed something far more valuable than manure. He would have been shocked had he known what was in his truck this time.

Ignacio had been chosen for his reliability, but also for his ability to appear unthreatening. A middle-aged Hispanic man with oily black hair, he was heavy-jowled with an unshaven face, a beer belly, and a smell that rivaled the manure drawing flies in the back of the truck. Few would have cared to give him a second look, and fewer still would have suspected him as a courier for a major Mexican drug cartel.

Following carefully rehearsed instructions, Ignacio rolled through El Paso just as the sun was rising. Staying well below the speed limit, he followed I-25 to Albuquerque, then continued north on route 44 to Farmington, located in New Mexico's northwestern corner. At the outskirts of Farmington, Ignacio pulled off at a roadside café and wolfed down six greasy tacos and a bottle of *Dos Equis Ambar*.

Continuing through Farmington, he turned north on state route 170, snaking through a sandy forest of short, shrubby piñon pines and juniper trees. As the aging truck lumbered out of the San Juan River Valley into high desert, the scrub forest gave way to a sun-baked expanse of bare rock, sagebrush, and dusty sand as fine as talcum.

North of the town of LaPlata, Ignacio slowed and turned left onto an abandoned oilfield access road.

The mesas north of Farmington are crisscrossed with roads from the oil and gas boom of the '50s. When the northern end of the Hogback Dakota Field was depleted in the 90's, the wellheads were plugged, leaving a web of deteriorating roads and trails that had become a Mecca for off-road bikers.

The truck passed through the maze of trails and abandoned wellheads. Hard pack gravel gave way to rutted sand.

Through the long afternoon, the truck followed the road westward, its big tires thudding over rocks and through gullies, winding along sandstone ledges and around steep canyons filled with sagebrush and chamisa.

This was *Four Corners* country—the only place in America where four states meet, and the wildest, most inaccessible region in the nation. Ignacio's route led through a grim landscape of scrub-covered hills and sandy bottom land, broken by steep ridges and gashed by washes, gulches and arroyos.

Wispy clouds scudded across a deep cobalt sky. Toward evening, the winds increased, whipping up dust devils that slid spectrally across the horizon to the south.

After a westward trek of more than thirty miles, Ignacio angled north into the mouth of a broad canyon where the road ran along a sandy arroyo shut in between towering Red mesa walls.

As darkness descended, prairie dogs and ring tailed cats flitted occasionally across the road ahead.

Glancing at the odometer, Ignacio took a deep breath. After 436 miles, his journey was nearly complete

The sun had already set as the old truck pulled up to a chain-link fence topped by a double coil of razor wire. The fence stretched entirely across the canyon, broken by a single gate. In the dimly lit gatehouse, two guards clad in black coveralls stood alertly, watching his approach.

He'd been expected.

An efficient guard examined his papers and quizzed him for almost ten minutes before opening the gate and waving him through.

Ahead, the canyon narrowed abruptly and angled to the left, then widened into a steep-walled valley. Less than twenty-five miles to the Northwest, the ancient *Anasazi* peoples had once built cliff dwellings into the walls of a similar canyon. Here, however, no structures were visible, yet the place was clearly not uninhabited. Six helipads were spaced around the valley floor. Two were occupied by luxurious American Eurocopter *AStars*, and one by a massive 234LR *Chinook* transport. A maze of paved roads led from the helipads to three sets of huge steel blast-doors set into the side of the mountain.

The floor of the canyon was brilliantly lit by quartz-halogen lamps affixed to the canyon walls.

One set of steel doors was standing open, and before its gaping maw, nine men stood watching the truck approach.

The men awaiting the shipment wore identical non-descript black jumpsuits... all except their leader. The man in charge was dressed as a Texas cowboy in tight Levi denims, a plaid shirt, and well-worn alligator boots. Even before the truck pulled to a stop, the cowboy was barking instructions to his crew.

Ignacio eyed the cowboy with a sense of foreboding. The man was solidly-built with thick black hair and a face as worn and leathery as his boots. His thin colorless lips were drawn tight in a grimace as he peered at Ignacio with the cold, emotionless eyes of a psychopath.

As Ignacio brought the truck to a halt, the men donned protective masks and went to work, using shovels and rakes to clear the manure from the truck, exposing a set of stainless steel canisters.

Ignacio stood to one side and watched with interest as the canisters were uncovered, still not suspecting the true nature of his cargo. It didn't look like a typical drug shipment. He counted twenty identical stainless-steel canisters, each measuring 24 inches by 16 inches by 8 inches. The canisters rested directly on the truck's steel deck, supported by its heavily reinforced frame.

With the canisters exposed, one of the men used a high pressure hose to blast away the remains of the manure, then directed Ignacio to pull the truck away from the manure pile. Following the man's instructions, he pulled the truck up to the waiting doorway, then watched with mounting curiosity as the crew manhandled the first of the heavy canisters out of the truck and onto a waiting cart.

A balding, middle-aged *Anglo* in a white lab coat had emerged from the underground fortress. He wordlessly opened the canister and examined its contents, carefully "sniffing" its interior with some kind of electronic probe. After a few moments, the technician nodded to the cowboy, and allowed the crew to wheel the cart through the blast-doors into the interior of the mountain. The man repeated the process with each canister until all twenty had been examined, then accompanied the last canister into the tunnel.

Ignacio would never know that the nondescript cargo he'd delivered to this remote canyon held the potential to bring hellish death to millions. For within each of the eighty pound canisters was one modified Soviet RA-120—a miniature nuclear device developed by the Russians in the last days of the Soviet Union. Each one contained a single critical mass of plutonium with a yield of 4.5 kilotons, about one-third the explosive power of the Hiroshima bomb.

The RA-120 was part of a class of Special Atomic Demolition Munitions, known in the intelligence community as *SADMs*. Designed to be transported and detonated by a single individual, they'd been nicknamed *suitcase nukes*.

In the chaos following the dissolution of the Soviet Union more than 100 of these devices had remained unaccounted for. They'd been clandestinely snatched up by a far-sighted Russian oligarch and hidden away in a cavern in the Urals, knowing that at the right time they could be sold to the highest bidder.

And an American bidder had finally made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Secreted across the old Soviet border, they'd been refitted in an underground lab in Tunisia, then trekked overland to Mali where they were loaded onto an aging 727—an unmarked plane used by a Mexican drug cartel for its lucrative trans-Atlantic trade. Arriving at a remote landing strip in Central America, the cartel had easily smuggled the canisters across the Arizona border.

Ignacio watched the unloading without comment.

When the last of the canisters disappeared into the mountain, the cowboy approached him, eyeing him with disgust. Without a word, Ignacio extended a filthy clipboard. The cowboy received it, slid a pen from his pocket, and quickly scrawled his name on the receipt.

Retrieving the clipboard, Ignacio glanced at the cowboy's signature. The letters were written erratically with a strange backward tilt, but the signature was legible enough. It read *Grat Dalton*. He studied the name for a moment, then turned wearily toward the truck to begin the long drive back to El Paso. Before he reached the cab, however, the cowboy called to him.

"*DRIVER...*" He barked. "Wait a minute!"

Ignacio turned and eyed the cowboy with apprehension. Grat flashed him a toothy grin. "Here... Let me give you something extra for your effort."

Grat extended his left hand to reveal a thick roll of bills.

Ignacio's eyes lit up, greed instantly replacing trepidation.

"Gracias, Senior." Ignacio stammered in surprise, and turned to approach the cowboy. In his mind, Ignacio was already picturing what the extra money would buy him a few nights later in the brothels of *Ciudad Juarez*.

With the Mexican's eyes fixed on the wad of bills in his left hand, Grat slid his right hand down to unsheathe a 16-inch bowie knife from the side of his right boot, taking care to conceal it behind his back.

The unsuspecting driver approached, extending his hand to receive his reward. But instead of placing the roll of bills in the Mexican's hand, Grat suddenly clenched the money tightly in his fist and batted Ignacio's hand away.

Grat lunged forward, reaching his clenched fist around the startled Mexican's back. He pulled him close, their faces almost touching. The alarmed driver frantically backpedaled, trying to pull away, but it was to no avail. Grat brought his right hand around, and jerked it forcefully upward, thrusting the knife into the driver's abdomen and angling it up under his ribs. In one smooth motion, the razor-sharp blade ripped through layers of flesh and fat, piercing Ignacio's diaphragm and penetrating his heart. Death was almost instantaneous.

As the driver's mouth dropped open and his uncomprehending eyes began to glaze, Grat jerked the knife free and wiped it clean on Ignacio's shirt as his dead body crumpled to the ground.

Turning to his assistants, Grat kicked the body roughly, "Get rid of this..." he said coldly, "but keep the truck. We'll use it again."

His task completed, the cowboy flipped open his cell phone and pressed a key for a pre-programmed number.

The voice at the other end answered on the second ring with a curt, “yes.”

RAVEN’S NEST, IN THE MOUNTAINS NEAR BOULDER, COLORADO

Alexander Carrington was the only surviving son of California newspaper magnate William P. Carrington. In the years since his father’s tragic death, Alexander had leveraged the family’s fortune into serious money by producing some of Hollywood’s bloodiest—and most successful—slasher flicks. Then, while still in his forties, he’d multiplied his millions many times over through shrewd investments in the cable TV and video-game industries.

Now in his 50’s, Carrington used his well-deserved reputation for decadence as a cover for his ultimate goal, the single-minded pursuit of raw political power.

His sprawling, high-tech mansion, *Raven’s Nest*, was blasted deep into the side of a granite mountain, a forty-minute drive out of Boulder, Colorado.

Carrington’s dark bloodshot eyes surveyed the view before him. His private office featured a wall of floor-to ceiling armored plate-glass windows, affording him a panoramic view of the Colorado Rockies, with the city of Boulder just visible in the distance. While those privileged to visit Raven’s Nest often commented on the breathtaking view, few realized that a simple code tapped into the household computer would activate four-inch-thick steel blast doors that could slide into place in less than a minute, transforming the lavish mansion into fortress-like survivalist stronghold – protecting its inhabitants from the very holocaust Carrington was preparing to unleash.

His cell phone rang, and he flipped it open. “Yes.”

“Mr. Carrington, this is Grat Dalton at the New Mexico facility. The shipment has arrived. It’s been examined and secured.”

“Has the driver been silenced?”

“Yes, sir.”

Carrington’s lips drew taut in a satisfied smile.

He glanced at the woman seated across from him. She brushed a strand of long black hair from her eyes and returned his smile. Though she appeared to be in her early twenties, the woman had been his trusted advisor from the start of his 30-year career. He attributed much of his success to her sage counsel.

“Excellent, Grat,” he said curtly. “Kareina’s with me now. I’ll let her know the plan is coming together... You know what to do.” Without waiting for a reply, he mashed the “end” button.

“And now it begins.” Kareina’s face hardened. “Our years of preparation are about to pay off. The opening of the Iona Portal was a setback, but our plans are too well established to be thwarted. In less than three months, the earth-realm will be ours.”

