

## AUTHOR'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I was born in Catania in 1987 and I have always been passionate about every possible art form.

Indeed, in 2004 I published “Colonne sonore per videogiochi” (“Soundtracks for video games”), a collection of soundtracks score I wrote specifically for gaming settings.

Then I began to refine my storytelling technique writing short fantasy novels, not yet published.

Scientific research had always fascinated me; I attended the University of Catania, acquiring a Bachelor's degree in information technology and, afterwards, a master's degree. I remember those years at university with affection. I met wonderful people, fellow students and professors that, together with my parents, have contributed to make me the man I am today.

After the master's degree, I worked as a game developer for mobile platforms (Android and iOS), standalone (PC, Mac) and web, initially as an indie game developer and later as an employee of a private company.

After this work experience, I collaborated with the University of Catania as a serious games developer.

Currently, I'm about to finish the first year of my PhD in the same university.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ancients – The Great Cold

Ancients – A Winston Blue

## INTRODUCTION

A Winston Blue is a spin-off of the *Ancients* saga, whose first volume is called *The Great Cold*.

It's the story of one of the most important militaries within the saga: Jimmy Sneider. Jimmy is an incredible dutiful soldier loyal to his nation. His dedication and his not quite friendly personality make him appear cynical and, because of his nature, he is repeatedly at odds with Liam, the protagonist of *Ancients - The Great Cold*.

In the first volume of *Ancients*, Sneider takes the rank of Sergeant and assists Liam for most of the adventure.

If you were to ask me an anecdote or something that could help you identify Sneider and his personality, I would surely tell you that he never walks around without his bloody Winston Blue, and in this short story you'll understand why.

Here, he's just a private in the throes of his first mission: to clear Hoover Dam.

It isn't necessary to read *Ancients - The Great Cold* to understand and appreciate this short story; I hope that reading it would encourage your interest in this saga.

After the short story you'll find the first pages from the prologue of *Ancients - The Great Cold* as well as my contact information and some useful links to buy the novel.

It only remains for me to wish you a good reading.

## A WINSTON BLUE

“I know, doctor, I like this no more than you, but the headquarters demands me to undergo a psychiatric evaluation. What can I say... everybody does it after returning from his first mission. Listen, I'll make you a deal: you'll listen in silence and I'll try not to take up too much time.

“Awesome! So, I was telling you about the first mission because that's exactly what I wanted to talk you about: my first mission. The headquarters believes that many of us break down the first time we kill a man. They call it post-traumatic stress disorder. You should know that I've done my research and I know the effects it induces to the war veterans, let alone to the rookies. Yes, it's such a son of a bitch, this disorder, and I hope I didn't get it. But you know what? I don't think so. I feel good, doctor, I feel great. Do you want a cigarette? No? No harm done, more for me.”

The soldier pulled a wrinkled pack of Winston Blue out of his army jacket. He opened it and put a cigarette between his lips. He was about to light it when he stopped. “You must forgive my manner. Do you mind me smoking, doctor...”

He approached the doctor and sat next to him. He extended his neck towards the name badge on his chest and read: “Doctor Makarov.”

He lit the cigarette without waiting for an answer. He tasted the first puff and pushed the smoke out. He contemplated the cigarette between his fingers and said: “Makarov is a Russian name. Are you Russian, doc? I read that Russians and Americans couldn't even frequent the same pub without someone getting killed, once, let alone cooperate in military operations. But the world has changed; you and I well know that, doc: just look at your gas mask. You're wearing one like most people around here. We soldiers, however, are relying on the dreams of a possessed professor with greasy hair, someone named Arthur Raymond Graham or something like that. He wants to build a city surrounded by an electric field that should repel the virus, can you imagine that? Hoover Dam was our target, our first mission. He and his scientists believe that the dam could generate all the electrical power needed to fuel his toys. I don't buy that for a second, but, as long as he pays my salary, I'll keep quiet.”

He took another puff and raised the cigarette above his head, showing it to his interlocutor.

“It all begins with this cigarette, doc. You're asking me why? It's simple: this cigarette reminds me of my father. John Callum Sneider. It's lucky that he decided to call me Jimmy; I mean, Callum is a

ridiculous name, come on. Anyway, John was an old son of a bitch, yet a badass. He was loyal and faithful to his nation like nobody else.” He waved the cigarette in front of the doctor, then talked again: “He was a soldier, an important one. He was killed during the famous riots suppressions, those of 2100. I’ve never known if the bullet that killed him belonged to one of those raiders on the motorcycles or to one of those madmen from the Movement. No harm done; I hate both of them and I’ll crush them like flies. Therefore, after his death I decided to go through military training and in a few years I found myself taking orders from a Sergeant named Ebner. A quiet man, I must say.” Sneider’s face darkened, took another puff from his cigarette and smiled again. “Pardon my anger, doc. I was talking about the dam, right? Good; so, we decide to move towards the target and what do we find? A drug lab. Can you believe that? Those fuckers on the motorcycles had taken over a behemoth capable of generating so much electric power to illuminate both Nevada and California; and what did they do? A lab to synthesise meth or who knows what. It was a massacre, we killed all of them. Only two of our own were wounded and I’m afraid that one of them won’t make it.”

He reached out his hand, pointing at him, and added: “Let’s be informal, doc, I’m pretty sure you’ll not get mad. Here, listen! Can you hear the screaming? The screams of someone dying... can you hear them? No, of course, how could you.” He made a grumble and took another puff. “Do you understand, then, why this cigarette reminds me of my father? Because they were his favourite. The smoking habit isn’t the only thing he gave me, you know? Oh, no... there’s also hatred. Unconditional and unfathomable hatred toward all the enemies of the State. This is why I feel so good even if I killed many men, today; because, despite everything, I wanted to put them down... one by one. You know, doc, many of them wear a lab coat as yours and a mask as yours. They were lab techs, no doubt. They made drugs for themselves or to sell it, I don’t care... they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now everything is in the hands of visionary Graham. I even heard the Sergeant praise my deeds to the headquarters. You know, doc, I think that Faraday will give me a promotion; I’ll be Corporal before tomorrow.

“Now, however, I want to talk you about my first killing.” Sneider took one last puff from the cigarette, then lowered the doctor’s mask enough to show his forehead and put it out on him. Then he took the lab coat from the laps and tightened it around him, paying attention that the blood that was dripping from the two holes in the chest didn’t stain his hands. He grabbed his knife and took

the name tag off the lab coat. He put it in his pocket. “You know, I don’t think that’s your real name, I don’t even think that’s your coat, to be fair. It must have been stolen like everything you have here, at the dam, but I want a memento of the first person I killed. I just regret that I didn’t see your eyes when you understood you were going to die. All because of that motherfucking mask.”

He ripped it off and looked at his face, disappointed. It was completely covered by dried blood, the mask had acted as a containment box when that man had begun to regurgitate fluid. He looked at the blue eyes and the blond and sassy hair; he got up and threw the mask against the doctor’s corpse. “You weren’t even Russian.”

He wore his army cap and lowered the visor; he dug through one of the tactical pockets of his jacket and grabbed his sunglasses. Holding them by the temple, he opened them with a twist of the wrist and put them on. He turned toward the dam entrance and walked with a half smile on his face.

The Sergeant was calling him.

Thanks to Adriano Calvanese Strinati for the professional high-quality editing and to Adriano Russo for the translation.

Did you like my short story? Leave me an honest review, if you like.

LUIGI CLAUDIO VIAGRANDE

# ANCIENTS

IL GRANDE FREDDO





# **Ancients: The Great Cold**

by Luigi Claudio Viagrande

**Ancients:**

**The Great Cold**

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PubGold

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ISBN

*pubme.me*

Cover art by *Simona Valentina Tornabene*

## Prologue

### 1

“Good afternoon to all American citizens; it’s six o’clock on this last cold day of the year. This is Roman O’Connell speaking and for those of you who are wondering where Nikolay is, well, I reluctantly announce that you’ll have to settle for my voice, at least until midnight. No, no, please, don’t turn off the radio or change the frequency. Actually, I don’t think you’ll easily find another station; so stay with us. We have plenty of music and my words are the same as Nikolay’s, just with a different tone. I’ll refrain from nagging you with my sermons right now; what about enjoying this afternoon with a Ray Charles’s swing? From our van that’s all for now. Good listening and have a nice life.”

### 2

Liam sat on the *terrace* of his house. That’s the name he gave to the rickety balcony set up on the side of the camper which, for years now, prevented from raining on his head. And when it rained, at that time of the year, it rained hail as big as ostrich eggs, that if they fell on your head they could induce a coma.

Nothing too serious or elegant furnished it: a coffee table, a wicker rocking chair – he had always wanted one when he was a child – and a radio; but it was his, and he was proud of it.

He had already smoked two cigarettes and was about to light the third one when the radio began to transmit the delicate and melancholy notes of Ray Charles’s piano, while he sang *I can’t stop loving you*.

He turned the volume knob a fourth of a turn and the notes increased in intensity.

At that moment, the other knob, the one that regulated the frequency, broke away and fell on the table; Liam grabbed it and looked at it with indifference.

No harm done: he would fix it the next day, or the day after, or when he had the time.

Maybe he would find a better one during the eviction of an abandoned apartment, between paperwork that smelled of dried coffee and old computers that sparked from their transistors.

It wasn't like that radio was so bad: he had bought it for half a litre of water and not because he was a music or *vintage* lover; but because, if nothing else, it could cover the constant buzz of the electric field that surrounded the city. He could hear it any hour of the day or night because the generators never stopped working; how could they? It would be the end of New Yermo. Actually, the generators were equipped with an internal battery backup that provided around thirty-five minutes of energy in the event that Hoover Dam, the old giant – as one hundred twenty townspeople and around half the population of the external territories called it – had a malfunction; in the hope that it started supplying power again before the generators died.

So, the buzz wasn't too high a price to pay, considering that their lives strongly depended from the electric field that prevented the viral spores from infiltrating into the city.

However, they didn't have to love that constant and irritating buzz; it was like a giant mosquito inside the ear and Liam's old radio was able to keep it away for a little while.

He listened to Ray Charles's voice while he smoked; then, before the singer could reach the closing lines, he turned the power knob into the *off* position and the voice was interrupted.

The mosquito started his annoying buzz again.

### 3

It wasn't just another night, Liam knew that.

Roman O'Connell had announced two great truths in the radio: first of all, it was the last day of the year, the long-awaited New Year's Eve. As a matter of fact, on that day they celebrated not the end of the year and the beginning of the new one, but the birth of the first true research centre of the New World, after the raid of 2100. That night, Liam would work as a waiter for the government bastards; he would serve tarts and champagne – and yes, even some glasses of water, if that tightwad of Hoober, the mayor, felt generous enough – while the flower of the local male aristocracy would gossip and speculate about the new laboratory potential, leaving their women, dressed like porcelain doll, to babble about each other hairstyle.

The second truth was that the last day of the year would be bloody cold.

Liam didn't know when everything had started, but he thought – better to say he *knew* – that there hadn't been two last days of the year cold in the same way, although there had been a

gradual decrease of the global temperature over time, with sporadic increases. Last summer the thermometer had never risen over twenty degree Celsius and it would hardly be possible to walk around in an undershirt during the next one.

Worse, for a few years a weird mist stationed in the skies of California, like a perpetual storm cloud; you could barely see the sun, other than the occasional sun rays that managed to pierce that thick cloak. By then, the predominant colour of days was grey. Liam vaguely remembered the warm and bright colours of summer mornings and he feared that he would completely forget them soon.

*All because of those fucking Middle-Eastern*, he thought.

He got up. The thermometer hanging in front of the door read two degrees above zero. He contemplated it frowning before to get inside the camper.

He quickly walked through the corridor, getting past a pile of pans and bowls stacked on a shelf at his left.

A cockroach sneaked out of the bathroom half-open door; it crossed him, swerving like a drunk, until he disappeared through a hole in the bodywork.

Liam went into the bathroom, leaned to the crusty sink and looked at the reflection on the mirror, grabbed the black plastic comb and pulled back his hair; they were really short, so the operation didn't take more than a few seconds. On the other hand, he allowed himself a few minutes to fix the braid he had decided to grow on the left side, behind his ear. He had taken that decision when his parents had died, back in 2105. Each year he let his braid grow a little, long enough to add a weave on the anniversary of their death. He had seven weaves in total.

He turned his head left and right: there was just the slightest hint of stubble around the mouth, it wasn't time for shaving.

He took a deep sigh and breathed out while he stared at the two water bottles that were camping at his left, inside the medicine chest. The white of the plastic was blackened in several places, and the water didn't taste better than the appearance of its containers.

He took the right bottle, almost empty, and drink it all in one sip; the coppery and stale flavour of the water filled his stomach. He closed the cabinet and came out of the bathroom, heading into the bedroom. As a matter of fact, he had to take just a few steps, because the driving area, now useless, was designated as the sleeping quarters: the driver and passenger seats had been

removed and aligned with the wall in a kind of bed; barely more than a brown and creased spot, but at least he could rest at night. He remembered that one time he had brought a weird rectangular heap full of feathers to Jeoffrey Miles, his employer. He had found it inside a crumbling apartment, in the vicinity of Nipton.

“It’s a mattress,” Jeoffrey had replied when Liam had asked him what it was. It didn’t take him much to understand that he had found one of the core parts to make a real bed.

There also was a book opened in the middle, with its pages resting on the leather covering of the seats. Liam grabbed it and read its title:

*Book of Dreams*  
*Jack Kerouac*  
*City Light Brooks, 1981*

He closed it – folding the corner not to lose the page – and put it next to the bed, with the other books he still had to read or not, that he had stolen during his several salvage operations. Writing was a luxury in those days; reading was even more and Liam had already learned how to write, helped by his parents, and now he wanted to continue the wonderful work of his instruction. Stealing books that for a fluke had escaped the Fireflies was an excellent starting point, according to him.

He grabbed the gloves from the driver seat and wore them; the left one had a hole and his index turned up from the fabric.

He also wore his wool hat and his scarf, then went out in the icy cold wind.

He lived at the corner between the 3rd and Yermo Road; the celebration was northwards, inside the renovated warehouse designated as a research lab, at the bottom of the Mojave motorway. He turned left towards Union Pacific, instead. He still had something to do before he went on duty.

It was 6.15 in the evening. The police were guarding the lab at that time, in the event that someone would try to ruin the party.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to catch a patrol right in that corner of the city, at the border with the electric dome. Liam enjoyed this deep thought: it would be dangerous to explain what he was going to do during the next ten or fifteen minutes.

His enthusiasm vanished when two officers appeared from the corner down the road, as if they had been recalled by his proverbial optimism to spoil his plans. He wasted no time and turned right, seeking refuge within the walls of what was used as a junkyard for a long time now. He squatted, rested his ear to the wall and waited. With his heart pounding in the chest, he heard footsteps getting heavier and closer to his shoulders. For a moment that seemed everlasting, he thought that they would cut through the junkyard and find him. He became more afraid when they stopped. He heard them mumble with bated breath, before resuming their walk. When he knew they had gone, he allowed himself to breathe again. He extended over the walls: he recognised agent Tucker and the other one had to be Ortega, considering the ponytail that came down to his buttocks; they wore their unmistakable blue uniforms, white gloves and leather holsters and had the swaggering way of walking of those who use the uniform as a symbol of power. Of all the policemen sons of a whore he could meet, those were the worsts: two bastards in blue. He was relieved that they hadn't noticed him.

He started on his way again and turned right at the corner of Avenue. He decided to skirt the junkyard, in the event he stumbled on more patrol late for the party.

When he finally decided that he could rest, he looked to the left, where the railway ran in all its ancient and falling beauty.

Liam couldn't know it, but there was a time when those rails were used, not left to rot and rust.

His father, Henry Cooper, often told about giant machines that didn't move on wheels but glided on rails. He said that they were powered by electricity and developed a potency and a driving force capable of towing an indefinite number of containers which, in turn, transported people and things. Henry called them trains but he had never seen one moving, just an old disused

engine left on a desolate rail, south of Yermo. He had found it around Route 66 and that old and ragged engine could easily have been vomited from hell because of the fear it had caused in the then little Henry Cooper; he had dreaded it would suddenly wake up and eat him.

That was the only time Henry got to see one. And what he knew about trains and their function, their history, came from his mother's tales, Liam's grandma, when she praised the good old Jebediah James Cooper, her husband who had died in 2055; it was the years of the riots suppressions.

"J. J. was often away; when the government ordered, he had to go. He boarded the train and you didn't see him for months." Those were his father's words, and his grandma's before him, but Liam thought that his old man had always made fun of him: Liam had never seen one of those trains since he was born. Henry claimed that the Middle Eastern had bombed the strategic points of the railway to cut off the supplies; the last train that had crossed the Union Pacific had been hit by a bomb in Long Beach, while it was crossing the Terminal Island bridge and it had sunk into the sea: the injured at Silver Lake Medical Center of Los Angeles would never receive the shipment of bandages and medicines that the train was transporting for them.

*The old engine should still be near the Route 66, Liam thought, maybe one day I'll go there.*

On the second street corner, he flattened against the fence of the junkyard. He peeked into the residential area; no one in sight: good. He turned left, following the road. He crossed the railway and shortly found himself between a group of abandoned houses that the government couldn't use ever again. They were old, ragged and crumbling and, moreover, there wasn't any workforce. All the workers were employed in more useful jobs, like making the dam work or providing water; there was no time to rebuilt the quarters. So, the less fortunate had to live outside, in contact with the virus, slowly dying like dogs with an inexorable malignant form of cancer. Who knows how many families could be saved from the lethal virus.

*If only...*

He squinted his eyes: that thought gave him a sense of increasing unease, while he left the road to cross a patch of trees that were growing around a small log cabin equipped with a garage. A white van was parked with its front facing the gate. The hood was dented: some planks had fallen from the roof. One of them had opened a hole in the windshield; it lay that way for who knows how long, like a flagpole, and it was his very own reference point.



Liam walked on, climbing over the broken glass scattered around the van and he found himself walking through the ghost neighbourhood of New Yermo; some camper lay abandoned in the middle of a rest area, with broken windows and flat tires. You could count five or six houses around the square, but the one Liam was after stood exactly in front of the lumberjack's cabin, across the street: a dark building whose roof planks were torn and bent inwards in a hole that looked like a grotesque version of a human mouth.

He went through the courtyard and climbed the dusty steps up to the entrance door. He leaned over, looked at the handle and smiled because he knew that no one had been able to find out what happened inside that house. A thin strip of twine was tied up to the handle; the other end was still where he had left it, namely framed between the door and the knocker.

No one could enter without first releasing the twine, he judged.

The door creaked, pressed by the young man, and the now familiar smell of mould and dust flooded his nostrils. Someone might sneeze for several seconds, someone else might feel bad, as it happened to him the first time he went inside. This time, as always for a few months, he walked into the wasted lobby, immersed in the faint light that filtered through the open door and the uncovered roof, without a problem. He occasionally covered his mouth with his sleeve to protect himself from the pretty treacherous dust, but he usually had no problem. He climbed over the planks of wood that had fallen from the roof; some broken glass sizzled underneath him while he got past the uncovered knockers of a door and he found himself walking through a narrow corridor. He headed positively towards the third door to the left, to the bathroom.

A sink with a rusty tap, a toilet and a tub, inside which there was the skeleton of a man, or maybe a woman, with its left arm dangling over the edge and its empty sockets peering at the door from which Liam appeared.

"Well met, Walter," the young man said. Walter, the skeleton, didn't reply.

"I like you because you're a discreet man. Did you guard it well?"

Again, there was no sound.

Greeting the skeleton had become a thing with Liam; it was almost as a ritual, by then. The first time he had seen it, he hadn't felt fear, just sympathy, to the point of giving it a name. Man or woman, it was Walter to him. Each time he asked it questions and each time he got no answer, but he was fine with it.

“You know, if you don’t start greeting me, I might even resent,” Liam continued while he approached the toilet.

“What the hell, I behave and you do nothing but stare at me each time I come. Then, on top of that, you never say hello to my friend. He says that you’re a strange man, Walter, and I tell you the same, as I met many people like you.”

He knelt, grabbed the toilet and pulled. The toilet bowl came loose with ease, revealing a fair-sized hole under it, as large as a human being of average size. A smell of sewage raised up from the passage, but he didn’t mind. He rolled his sleeves up and sank his hand inside the toilet exhaust pipe. Shortly after he pulled out a thin iron bar that had been cleverly stuck so that to stop it from falling into the murky waters. He hit the water tube: two beats, one beat, two beats; a metallic and dull sound. When it faltered, he listened. The reply didn’t take time to arrive: deep in the sewage pipes, a responding echo raised up generated in who knows what kind of narrow ravine of those dark and foul-smelling tunnels; one beat, two beats, one beat.

Liam smiled, barely stepped back and waited: a nickering informed him that someone was coming.

## USEFUL LINKS

Author Page on Facebook: <https://bit.ly/2ylEayV>

Instagram Page: <https://bit.ly/2NKxVtl>

Youtube Page: <https://bit.ly/2QUw6vX>

Wattpad Page: <https://w.tt/2NH2ro4>

Did you like *Ancients - The Great Cold* prologue? Would you like to read the novel? Take part in the crowdfunding campaign to translate the text and you could receive the ebook or the printed copy.

Crowdfunding campaign link: [Crowdfunding](#)