

In Enemy Territory

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“People couldn’t say if I was dead or alive.” Haruun paused, gazing at me intensely, his dark eyes burning bright. “I had a high fever ... to touch me was to touch fire.”

I nodded with a growing sense of trepidation.

“This was during the early days of the pandemic.” Leaning back in his chair, he pressed his fingertips together, dropping his gaze. “It still seemed like an ‘over there’ phenomenon ... something that happens to other people ... it began with a few cases in the South and then spread to the North, faster than anyone expected ... consuming nearly everyone in its wake. We didn’t think we needed to pay special attention at first. We are surrounded by news. We can access news at our fingertips. This just seemed like another news story, but the reports steadily trickled in ... the cases were increasing rapidly. It didn’t seem like a novel news story anymore. The virus has dominated the country. Our home has now become enemy territory.”

He paused, took a sip of water, and continued. “I didn’t think we would be affected. I hadn’t even heard of the virus before. We were just beginning our life together. We ... we were hoping to start a family.” His voice trembled, the first crack in his otherwise calm composure since the interview began. Haruun swallowed and his eyes narrowed as he steeled himself to continue, “It happened suddenly as these things do. Misfortune doesn’t always call before it strikes.”

“I thought it was a simple cold at first. I continued to work. We were saving up for a new home. I was trying to work as much as possible during that time. I worked at a rice farm and my wife, she ... she worked at a garment factory.”

He looked away, an expression of guilt flitting across his face, a face that appeared aged beyond its years. “Many of my coworkers became ill and ... and passed away. People tell me it’s not my fault ... how could I have known? The virus was everywhere. But it’s hard to live with yourself when you’re one of the few who have survived. I lost many friends ... many friends. Every day people were dying. I eventually stopped following the news. Ironic though, isn’t it? Since I’m talking to you.”

He turned his piercing gaze upon me. I was transfixed by the anguish in his eyes. There was an air of supplication in his gaze as though he desired my forgiveness. I wanted to reach out and comfort him. I felt as though he was present in the room, seated in front of me and not thousands of miles away, viewing me on a screen. Deep down though, I was grateful to be safe in my New York office, separated by this distance. I felt safe from contracting this deadly disease tormenting Sormbay with its silent and invisible presence.

Haruun's symptoms began as a sore throat and headaches. He thought it was a common cold or perhaps the flu, something he would recover from within a week or so. However, his health quickly deteriorated, and he was struck by bouts of high fever and vomiting. This eventually progressed to acute encephalitis. He spent many months in the hospital although he can remember almost none of it. However, he was one of the lucky ones. He had gotten a hospital bed. He had survived the virus by some "sheer act of will or grace of providence" as he put it, somewhat bitterly.

Now, the world knew this was some sort of Novel Nipah Virus (NNiV). The Nipah Virus had previously been identified by the World Health Organization as a potential pandemic agent and this fateful proclamation had now seen its fruition.

Haruun is one of the early survivors of the NNiV pandemic. The Nipah Virus was little known among Sorbayans until the pandemic hit and they had no choice but to face this aggressor. What is most alarming about this pandemic is the high proportion of apparently healthy individuals falling ill. Young people would be healthy one day but within a few weeks, they would be struck by fever, bouts of vomiting, and their brains would swell. They couldn't walk. They couldn't talk.

Currently, there are no effective treatments for NNiV infection. The rate of mortality is 70 – 90%. Even survivors experience long-lasting debilitating effects.

"The hospitals here always seem to be overflowing with patients. We have a growing population. Babies are born each day. People grow old. People fall ill. Our healthcare system cannot sustain this but what can we do? We were already barely scraping by, but this pandemic knocked us over the cliff and now ... now, we're drowning."

Referring to a previous outbreak in Malaysia, Haruun shook his head sadly as he spoke. "In the past, they could exterminate the infected pigs but what good is that now?" One reason for the catastrophic nature of this virus was its abnormally high rate of transmission between people. This along with a high rate of mortality presented a deadly combination.

"It wasn't just the people. So many pigs were dying – the whole town smelled like death."

Previous outbreaks primarily involved infected pigs; however, pigs, people, and even cats, dogs, and horses had fallen prey to this virus' now expanded reach.

"They say we can prevent the virus by wearing 'personal protective equipment' but where can we find this? This sort of equipment is generally reserved for hospitals. What was sold in-store has been snatched up. People have had to resort to making their own 'equipment'. If you look online, you will find a sort of black market for this equipment." Haruun laughed abruptly, a caustic barking laugh.

I glanced down at my notes. As a journalist with the Daily Post, an independent American news outlet, I am documenting the stories of pandemic survivors and those involved in the Sormbay pandemic response. This is a somewhat personal issue for me as my grandfather passed away in long-term care during a previous pandemic. I am often wracked by guilt knowing I couldn't be by his side during his final moments.

Drawing me back to the present, Haruun continued. "I stayed in isolation. I wasn't allowed visitors. The healthcare workers who attended to me were covered from head to toe. I could hardly make out their features – that is ... when I was conscious. Most were faceless bodies hurrying from one patient to the next."

Located in South Asia, the country of Sormbay is densely populated. Challenges with limited infrastructure and access to healthcare are common. Prior to the pandemic, the country had not previously reported cases of Nipah Virus. Like Haruun, many people did not know it was Nipah at first. The symptoms are non-specific and only when the symptoms became worse did people seek care. By that time, they had already infected their families, friends, coworkers, and complete strangers.... The virus held the country in its deadly iron grip. Deaths were happening so quickly; it was near impossible to give everyone a proper burial. Funeral homes were either overwhelmed or workers did not want to touch the infected bodies. This opened the door to other diseases, straining the already overburdened healthcare system.

"It's tempting each day to sink into despair, to not get up. That was me when I first recovered. I should have been grateful to be alive but it's hard when you feel as though you have lost everything. I know though that I survived for a reason, for some greater purpose. That's why I felt compelled to share my story and to be a sort of advocate for better pandemic preparedness. I can now appreciate how fragile life is and I know I must not take it for granted. I must not give into defeat. Things are a bit better now – I hear case rates are stabilizing. The situation is a little less bleak."

He sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. "But we continue to wait. We wait for a vaccine. We wait for effective treatment. There are some experimental ones out there, but those who are better off will likely receive those first. I know I didn't get any.... I hope the world can learn from what happened here. These things are not as much of an 'over there' phenomenon as we may hope."

After a long pause, he concluded, "The worst part of all this...." He passed a hand over his face as his shoulders slumped into his thin frame. "The worst part of all this was not the fever or the aches or the months spent in hospital. The worst part was ... the isolation ... the worst part was not being able to hold my wife one last time. I – I never got to say goodbye."