

The Last Rhino War is a novel that exposes the brutality of the international rhino horn poaching syndicates in Southern Africa. A hunter and a poacher fall in love and turn towards conservation of the species, despite immense obstacles before them.

THE LAST RHINO WAR: A Journey of Survival

By Rory Johnston

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RORY JOHNSTON

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A Journey of Survival

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Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic

In a smoke-filled, darkened room five men sat circling a naked, kneeling man, his hands and ankles tightly bound. A single bulb hung from the ceiling, affording the only dim light in the room, yet still strong enough to attract a myriad of moths that danced around it in a suicidal orbit.

Like a nervous tic, Johnny Wang stroked his thin mustache and curled the straggly greying tip into his lower lip. As he watched the man on the floor, beads of sweat formed on his brow despite the blast of cold from the air conditioning unit laboring against the relentless humidity of midsummer in Laos.

Somehow out of place in the old French Colonial villa, the tick-tock of an antique grandfather clock punctuated the silence. It was one of Johnny's prized possessions—a gift from a desperate British diplomat who had developed a taste for opium.

“Gentlemen, we have a decision to make. We offered Nguyen a partnership in the Red Lotus Triad. He ran our affairs in China, Vietnam, and Southern Africa with great skill. I was surprised when we discovered he was running an operation that was skimming our profit—a cardinal sin, as you all know, in our triad.”

On hearing those words, the kneeling man strained against his bonds and uttered a muffled wail, silenced against the gag stuffed deep into his mouth. Johnny continued, ignoring him: “Whatever is the fate of Nguyen here, who has betrayed our trust, we have to regroup to keep the supply of rhino horn flowing to the fools, and social climbers, out here in the Orient who believe the horn has medicinal powers. So, I'm open to ideas. Let's hear from you. Remember, each horn is worth

several million to us. It's much more valuable than ivory, opium, hardwoods—just name it.”

“Now that legal hunting avenues have closed, we have to resort to illegal hunting—poaching, I think they call it, Honorable Master,” said Costas.

“Yes,” agreed General Syvongsay of the Lao People's Army, “the African game reserves are full of rhino. It doesn't take much to kill a rhino. Believe me, I've done it. All you need is a decent rifle and you can almost walk right up to them—they can't see you until it's too late for them. It should be easy to equip some hunters, under guidance from a local coordinator. They could be in and out of a reserve before the authorities could even wake up.”

The four men nodded in assent and murmured, “Yes, Honorable Master. It is so.”

“So, gentlemen, our time is precious. We agree we must search for someone to replace Nguyen in Southern Africa, as we need to keep this valuable trade in our hands. As for the fate of Nguyen, you know the penalty for betrayal is death. Does anyone recommend clemency? What's your decision?”

A low keening sound came from the bound man, piercing the silence in the room.

Johnny's penetrating gaze shifted to the four men seated around the kneeling figure. Costas was first. The Greek sea captain, long a loyal member of the Red Lotus Triad, shifted uncomfortably on his seat. He raised his hand and signaled thumbs down. The next man, Major-General Syvongsay, raised his fist and mirrored the gesture. The other two men followed suit.

“Jin,” Johnny mouthed into the darkness.

A lithe form flitted from the shadows and swung a meat cleaver—honed over days to the sharpest perfection—severing the neck of Thanh Nguyen. His head bounced and turned, eyes

still open in surprise, looking at his impassive jurymen. Nguyen's body remained kneeling and motionless for a few seconds as a small fountain of bright-red blood pulsed out onto his chest. His body slumped over and, as if by design, lay supine next to his severed head as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

Jin called out softly, and two men came in and lifted Nguyen's body and head. They left as silently as they came. Jin retreated into the shadows, only to return and serve each of the men a small cup of steaming green tea. Despite being the executioner, Jin never forgot he was Johnny Wang's manservant, before any other task.

Johnny Wang sipped his tea, sighed, and turned again to his men.

"Jin, have his body delivered, in plain sight, to his family. It will send a signal to them and all those who worked for Nguyen that they shouldn't cross the Red Lotus."

Jin bowed respectfully and vanished into the shadows.

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Sentinel Ranch, Limpopo Province – South Africa 2010

“Full moon last night, Boss. I don’t like it. A poacher’s moon. I always get worried this time of the month,” said General. “Lord knows we can’t afford to lose any animals.”

“Yep, and with this south wind we would never have heard any poacher’s shots at the ranch house.”

The two men in the Land Rover crested a small rise before turning to the east at the far end of the ranch. It was getting towards the end of a long, dry winter in the northern scrubland of South Africa. Since there had been no rain for many months a long plume of dust trailed the vehicle, ready to pounce when they slowed down and cake the men with its fine powder.

“Stop, Boss!”

“What you got?” Mike slammed on the brakes.

General jumped out of the Land Rover and ran up to the fence, then immediately turned back, looking around at something, as yet invisible to Mike. “Foot prints, also traces of blood on the fence. See here Boss,” General said, pointing to the tell-tale sign of dried blood against the diamond wire mesh. Mike eased himself down, ever mindful that every inch of his own tracks may cover up valuable clues. “Look over there, on the other side, tire marks right up against the edge of the wire. A vehicle was driven right up against the fence.”

At that moment another Land Rover swung into view and braked alongside, sending their trailing cloud of dust swirling over them. Four men of Mike’s heavily-armed anti-poaching unit clung on desperately to avoid being thrown out of the sliding vehicle.

“Boss, we heard shots at dawn on the other boundary and went up there. We didn’t find anything, then we heard the

single shot over here about half an hour ago. It was a trick to throw us off!” shouted the driver.

“You think it’s poachers, General? They use a pick-up truck and throw a mattress over the hot wires at the top, you think?”

“That’s what they did before. I don’t like it for sure—I’m worried we may have lost an animal last night, boss. Come on, let’s go.”

Mike and the rangers followed General, who took off at a run into the dense undergrowth, impervious to the “wait-a-bit” thorns ripping into their flesh. Nature’s defense for the *Acacia brevispica* tree were hooked, opposing thorns that dug deep down and surrendered slowly only to the most patient. The running men had no reserve today, thorns ripping their flesh as they swept forward. The dogs followed, ranging from side to side, noses down to the ground.

How does General spot this stuff? Even after all these years he sees tracks I can’t. I would’ve driven right past those signs, thought Mike.

It took them less than a minute to find the dead rhino. It was a young male, just entering his prime breeding age. Its horns were crudely hacked off. Despite the cold wind, buzzing, bloated blue flies had found the bloody pools on its nose. Beetles were already feasting on the red turgid tide spreading on the dirt beside the stricken animal. The approaching men disturbed two hyenas circling the carcass. They slunk away under the thorn trees into the shadows, yet not letting the rhino out of their sight.

General reached out and felt the body. “He’s still warm Boss, must have just died.”

“You think so, General.”

“For sure. It looks like to me he was probably alive when they cut off his horns. See here, blood hasn’t congealed yet

which means it happened less than half an hour ago. Plus, their shot doesn't look like a dead kill wound."

"Damn, damn. You're probably right." In his heart Mike knew that General knew his stuff and was certainly correct in his assumption.

About half an hour earlier back at the ranch house and as a creature of habit, Mike Delpont and General listened to the Farmers Weather Report on the radio. "More of the same shit every day, right General? No damn hope of rain on the horizon. Fucking cold." Mike pulled his six foot plus frame off his chair and ran his fingers through his long blond hair, a courtesy passed down from his Dutch ancestors. Just as they had resolutely built the dikes to hold back the sea, he was equally determined to work his land.

General, his taciturn assistant ranch manager, grunted in response as he made up their morning coffee gazing out the kitchen window. He knew his boss was having a hard time making ends meet and there wasn't much he could do to improve his humor. He thought to himself, *I've got to try something to cheer him up, there are too many jobs at stake here on the ranch for us to fail. But what?*

"We'll get through this drought boss, just as we've always made it through. The rains will come. Remember when you decided to give up cattle ranching? Things were pretty bleak then, 'til we got the rhino hunting up and running."

"Maybe so." Back then Mike realized that all the attempts that he and his neighbors made at cattle ranching were just futile. It was a semi-arid part of the country with little and always unreliable rainfall.

"There they go General," yelled Mike that morning years ago. The roaring diesel transporter buffeted and brushed past him, sweeping away with the last of his emaciated herd, on their way to the slaughterhouse. It was that moment of

realization that Mike had a eureka moment. As the dust settled and calm returned, Mike turned to his manager, “General, why don’t we stock the land with species that are used to surviving in this dry environment, just as nature did in the past?”

After some research Mike soon discovered that rhinos needed very little care and hunting them made a handsome profit. Success built upon success and he was able to buy up failing surrounding ranches, their owners mostly relieved to be able to pay off accumulated debts. Mike’s clientele grew and he became one of the most well-known professional hunters in Africa. In time, he was able to parlay his profits into ownership of some twenty thousand acres of grazing land for his rhino herd.

As the sun climbed this morning Mike switched off the radio in disgust and strode down the wide verandah steps, relishing the bracing winter air, which always helped improve his mood. “Come on, General. Let’s check the fences.”

“Sure, Boss.”

Years ago, General had joined Mike as his assistant hunter. Mike was impressed with the young man’s ability from the get-go and called him the general-in-charge. The moniker had stuck to his assistant from those early days, pleasing the young man no end. His heritage was from the proud and often war-like Zulu nation. He figured he fitted in really well with the name. Tall, athletic and confident beyond normal, General ran things at the ranch for Mike as if it were his own.

General climbed into the Land Rover beside him holding two mugs of steaming coffee, laced with a large dollop of South African brandy. “Here you are then Boss, this’ll perk you up.” Brandy had become a winter ritual for them, as it helped ward off the bitter, snow-bearing winds from Antarctica that barreled off the high Drakensberg Mountains to the south.

Recently the morning dollop of brandy for Mike extended to one more and yet another. Before he knew it, Mike propelled himself through the day on close to a bottle, more when he felt panicked. He had no idea what to do with his ranch full of rhinos, as rumors were circulating that hunting was about to be banned by the government. More than once or twice he found himself muttering into an empty bottle, “Man, I’ve got to give this shit up. It’s eating me alive.” It never happened and his predicament worsened. Mike knew he had to find a way to keep his ranch going—somehow, someday.

Despite his momentary exuberant mood this morning, an awful recurring iceberg of self-doubt always appeared in Mike’s mind, sidling out of the surrounding mist. Waves of desperation about his mounting debts swept over him, despite the brandy coursing through him.

Putting on a brave face in front of General, he swung the Land Rover out of the workshop and called his dogs, which leapt at a run up into the rear behind the cab, baying all the while.

Less than one hour later all had changed. Silence descended on the group of men as they looked on the lifeless rhino. One by one they turned towards Mike for guidance, seeking some comfort, some words from him that would make the sickening, bloody sight seem somehow alright.

“God damn those bastards...” Mike muttered. Despite having seen and inflicted death himself many times during his life, this time it seemed more personal, more awful and even obscene to him. He fought to keep the bile from rising up his throat, turning towards General.

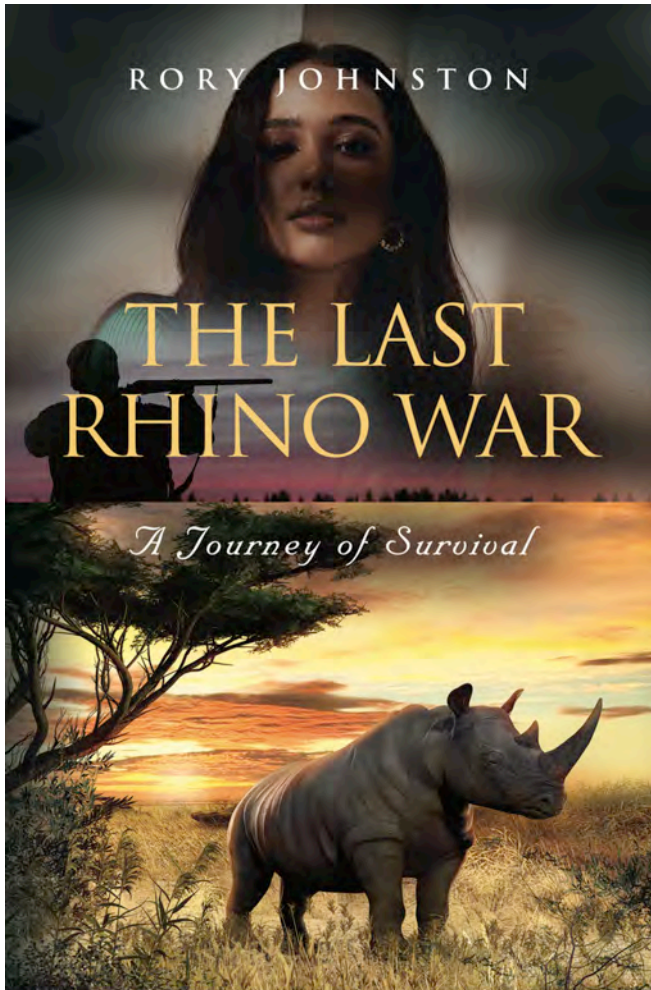
“I can’t let this continue. This is not right. No matter what it takes, this poaching has to stop.”

The Last Rhino War

General stared back, stony faced and silent. He thought to himself, *was it anything different to what they were already doing? We're killing for profit too, aren't we?*

About the author

Rory Johnston grew up in the photo-safari business in Africa, and has planned and led expeditions throughout his life. On one such expedition to raise funds for Madikwe Game Reserve Anti-Poaching Unit, Rory witnessed a recently poached rhino mother and calf. The savagery of that totally unnecessary death prompted him to write this novel. It has taken many hours of research to ensure the novel, although in a fictional setting, is factually correct. It is vital to help educate the world to the unfolding tragedy taking place in Southern Africa, and to save the rhino for future generations.



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