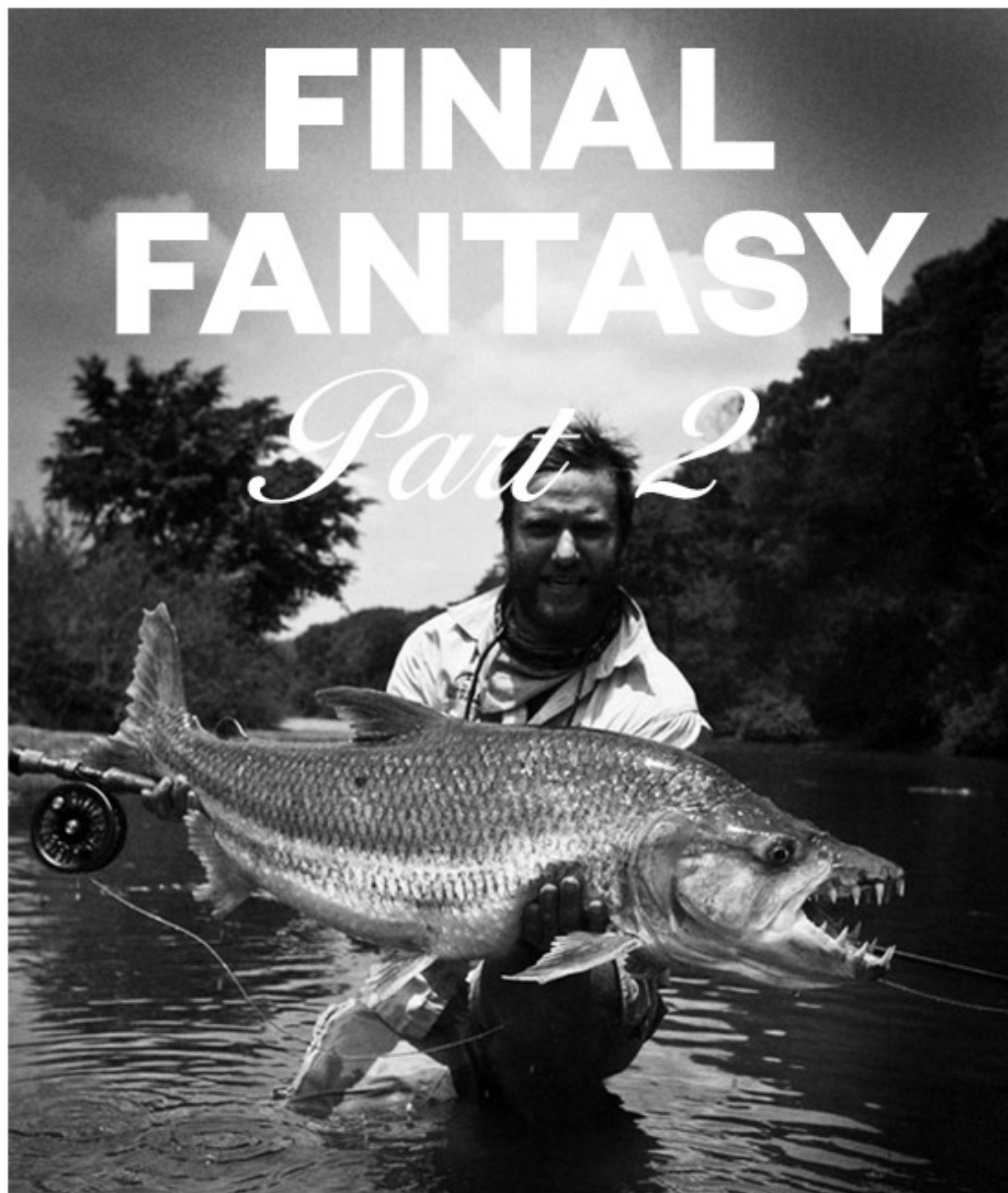




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Fly-fishing exploration is the thing that dreams are made of. There are precious gamefish to be found in the far corners of the earth, undisturbed by man. It can be a single pursuit for a once in a lifetime moment, or it can be an ongoing love affair for life. I have always dreamed of the goliath tigerfish.



The fishing that ensued in the following days would be the best, and the worst, I had ever experienced. Three giant fish were hooked on fly in that pool, but I could not land any of them. With a twelve-weight rod, there was just no stopping them and when I began losing fly lines, it was time for a change. The fish had also become wise to the flies, so we left the pool in search of similar waters that might offer a better chance of landing one of its denizens. Then the river offered up one of its many secrets. We came across a junction between two deep pools that flowed over a sandbar then funneled through flat bedrock. Everything seemed calm, but then I noticed a school of agitated baitfish moving back and forth along the sandbar. I did not pay much attention to them, when suddenly the water erupted as all the baitfish flung themselves up into the air. A charging bulge of water came across the top pool then a Nile perch delivered a smashing attack. The fish crashed across the shallows of the sandbar with baitfish raining down around him. The enraged perch kicked up buckets of sand and water as it burst after a smaller fish into the deep pool downstream. It engulfed the baitfish, turned

on a tricky and rushed back to the top pool. It was the perfect ambush situation and while I was switching over to a floating line, the fish launched a second attack. Would he return? He did! On the third attack, I dropped my largest baitfish pattern in the middle of the chaos, and with one strip, I was on. The battle was short; I held the reel and reversed, to drag the 22-pounder from the shallows and leave it flopping about on the sand without a fight. My small victory.

By the time I realized that my hopes and dreams of catching a goliath were slim, I resigned to catch Nile perch instead. The sandbar along the bottom pool where I caught the first perch offered a great walk and stalk opportunity, so I continued along the water's edge but it struck me as strange because there was no activity here like there had been in the pool above. Maybe the fish avoid this bottom pool.

I began making blind casts toward some oyster-covered boulders. I was in one of those meditative fishing walks where the action of casting takes over all thought and concept of time when—Bang! After years of fishing, you

know exactly what a big fish feels like when it hits your fly. You also know the feeling of a line severed and the weightless fly-less retrieve.

The razor-cut end of the 40-lb fluorocarbon had me thinking that the only fish that could engulf a 9" Puffy with the teeth to cut through that line must be—it's a goliath. Then it all started to make sense. The Nile perch knew to avoid that bottom pool. The key, it seemed, was the particular combination of features found in the river. Once I went back to the map, I could see that I had been prospecting in the wrong place. The shape of the river pinpointed the precise place I wanted to be that was several kilometers upstream. It was clear that we would have to move camp. I consulted with Georgie and Alphonse but the question was whether we would be able to reach the new area that I was convinced would hold the fish.

We finally made the decision to pack up our camp and we proceeded to hack our way through the uncharted forest. Know that a deviation from the original plan in such an isolated place, all sorts of things can go wrong, and they did. I nearly pulled the



Above: A dream come true – I found myself speaking to the fish after catching it and begging it to swim away alive. Right: The cannibalized goliath – the next day we arrived at the pool of the incident, we found the remains of the fish being feasted on by eels. It seemed the big goliath never intended on eating it's own.

plug at one stage, because no fish could be worth what we were going through, but somehow we persevered. We carved a path by machetes to a suitable campsite to make our final push into the unknown.

We only had two days left to explore the last bit of the river and decided that we would prepare for the possibility of sleeping on a sandbar. At that time, the river had receded to its lowest possible level. I measured the visibility at more than a meter deep with a flow channeled through small but strong rapids that required a major effort to negotiate with the boat. The shape and



Top: In the final hour before catching the goliath. The many shallow runs and glides require a bit of a push.

depth of the pool was different from the rest of the river. An eerie calm loomed over it, the prehistoric looking trees, and I was never sure whether I liked being there or not or what we would find. We continued to explore before we attempted to fish there. The water was notably deep with sandbars, rock pinnacles, and innumerable species of fish gliding calmly through the clear water knowing this was their sanctuary. We finally made it to the head of the pool, where oyster beds lay jagged on spiny rows of lava bedrock, creating a maze of small channels and cuts. Two smaller fish sped into the shallows as our boat passed over them and then it happened.

In the blink of an eye a fish appeared. It moved and stopped with the precision of a barracuda and was now poised to strike the cornered baitfish next to the boat. The small fish nervously wove their pectoral fins, ready to make a dash for it while the paused silver spear measured the situation. Then there was no more doubt in my mind because I could see the black in its eyes pointing at me. I was staring at a goliath tigerfish and it stared back.

As fast as the fly hit the water over the baitfish, they scattered and goliath dashed away zigzagging between the shallow rocks. It was a profound moment, seeing a goliath hunt in shallow clear water. A thing I thought we would never find was right there in front of me.

Multiple casts in the direction of the escaping fish yielded no results. Obviously, the fish would eventually return to their chosen spot but it required time. We fished further downstream and drifted past a curved sandbar sitting on the edge of the channel. After a long cast and on the third strip, I felt the line stop and two quick hauls later I felt something big shaking its head. The fish did not run or jump; it just shook its head in confusion. Georgie slowed the boat with the paddle and I heaved into my rod when the fish slowly came to the surface. It was a goliath. The fish began thrashing about on the surface but we were on him in a flash and Alphonse went straight for the Boga Grip, while I kept my attention pinned on the fish. That is when we spotted another fish lurking below. It was another goliath and this one was a monster. The excitement on the boat was fever pitch as a horror scene evolved.

The larger goliath attacked, grabbing the smaller one on its back below the pectoral fin. It released it for a second and I pulled as hard as I could but she came about again and lunged, this time pinning the other fish against our boat as she reset her cannibal grip with more determination. Alphonse tried to beat her off our catch with the paddle but she would not let go. He grabbed the Boga again but when Alphonse



Bottom: Georgie was responsible for magnificent photographs. He even stopped and told me to hold the fish in the same manner as what I always instruct others.

came face to face with two snapping jaws of vicious teeth, I think it took lot of guts just to think of the attempt. I grabbed the paddle to try to beat on the big fish again when the fly popped out. The big goliath turned at once and disappeared into the depths still clutching onto the other one. Alphonse looked up at me with an expression of shock and disbelief, shaking his head speaking in French: "Terrible! Terrible dente!" Hundreds of baitfish then appeared on the scene and they were flashing about gobbling up the mass of glittering scales left behind, picking off the remnants of the battle that had disappeared into the depths below.

Do you know that feeling you get when you see a male lion kill off the cubs from a new pride he has taken over? What is the nature of the beast? That night I could not sleep. I tossed and turned, thought of the fish and endured the torture—to wait for dawn.

As the first rays of the rising run began to break through a patchy sky, we crept back to the place where we saw the smaller goliath hunting. The casting space was ideal and Georgie and Alphonse were

were waiting at the ready a few meters away. I was sure that the fish would return to this place and hoped to intercept him in his hunting ground. We staked the area out for an hour but nothing happened, so we returned to the place where the goliath attacked. After multiple drifts and anchoring over the exact position of the attack, with a variety of flies and retrieves, there was still no sign of the goliath. We regrouped on the sandbar. I decided to make a few casts along the shallower edge of the sandbar while I formulated a new plan. The fly had barely moved when I felt it stop just below the surface. It was a fish. The fish did not do much at first, but when it realized that something was wrong, it shot off like a racehorse in a blazing run to the middle of the pool.

A massive goliath tigerfish erupted into the air and crashed back into the water. Once you hook a goliath, disbelief will turn into panic—you realize there is nothing you can do to ensure your fish is going to stay on. The fish was enraged and changed its

direction to the pinnacles in the pool as my line streaked after it. I hit the brake by palming the reel first but that did not slow her down. It was a matter of turning the drag until it locked before the fish showed any sign of slowing. I do not know how but I managed to turn the fish amongst those dreadful pinnacles and get it back into open water. It seemed the fight was over but, in a last attempt, she dashed up and down along the sandbar and almost made it into the boat's propeller. A dogged war of attrition ensued but the water just got too shallow for her and she was now on her side, tired. I grabbed the leader and reached for her tail. It was a dream come true. She measured 101cm fork length—a beautiful and precious trophy.

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