

Negotiations Are Going South - Secret Solution

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This puzzle is made up of 24 postcards, each of which contains a rebus and a fill-in-the-blank clue indicating a specific city. Solvers should realize that they are able to input each of their feeder answers into one of these blanks, with the 7 secret answers replacing their surface-level counterparts (although not necessarily in the same blank).

Rebus	Feeder Answer	City
ACCENT FURNITURE	SORTING HAT	Burbank, California
AIR TRAVEL	DICED TOMATO	Rome, Italy
CABINET POSITION	HERE ON OUT	Havana, Cuba
CUPBOARDS	BRUT ZERO	Reims, France
DREAMCOAT	CHIN UP	El Paso, Texas
DRIVE OFF	FUHGEDDABOUDIT	New York, New York
FOOLING	STUTTGART CARDS	Stuttgart, Germany
HOLLOW LOG	FRANK UNDERWOOD	Gaffney, South Carolina
IMPOSTOR	VOLKSWAGEN BUG	Monte Carlo, Monaco
INFIGHTER	MIMI MARQUEZ	Panama City, Panama
MITTENS	TASTY SNACK	Singapore
MOTORING	LOW CARD	Sacramento, California
NAVIGATOR	DEEP WATERS	Vinalhaven, Maine
NYLON	AMIGA ONE	Brussels, Belgium
ORCHARD	MIXED BAG	San Francisco, California
PEDALO	FROSTBITE	Galena, Alaska
PLAY DIRTY	GIRLS ON TV	Salvador, Brazil
SABOTAGE	LAMB OF GOD	Tamworth, United Kingdom
SWEATBAND	BIG BAD WOLF	Vardø, Norway
TABLE LEAF	ENGLISH BOY	Manchester, United Kingdom
TIGHT-KNIT	MERCUTIO	Verona, Italy
TURNCOATS	GEOCOCCYX	Santa Fe, New Mexico
UNION STATION	MONSTERS BALL	Illertissen, Germany
WAR BONNET	RUN RED RUN	Youngstown, Ohio

As indicated by the answer to Side Quest and the post-solve example of “con” vs “conSOLE”, we can append the name of a fish to a word in our meta answers. This gives us a new word that belongs to the same category as 6 of our rebused words.

Meta Answer	Semantic Connection	Extraction Technique
BET ON A POCKET PAIR	Treachery (BET+RAY)	Letter that appears twice (PAIR)
ENTRY LEVEL YACHT	Wood (CARP+ENTRY)	First letter (ENTRY)
PIECE OF HEART WOOD	Clothing (COD+PIECE)	Central letter (HEART)
TURN THE HEEL	Transport (TURN+PIKE)	Last letter (HEEL)

When the postcards are sorted by location from north to south (as indicated by the title and postcard graphic), the extracted letters can be read in order to spell what the penguins really want: **TOTAL CONTROL OF GOTHAM CITY**

Rebus	City	Connection	Letter
SWEATBAND	Vardø, Norway	CLOTHING	T
PEDALO	Galena, Alaska	TRANSPORT	O
TABLE LEAF	Manchester, United Kingdom	WOOD	T
SABOTAGE	Tamworth, United Kingdom	TREACHERY	A
NYLON	Brussels, Belgium	CLOTHING	L
CUPBOARDS	Reims, France	WOOD	C
FOOLING	Stuttgart, Germany	TREACHERY	O
UNION STATION	Illertissen, Germany	TRANSPORT	N
TIGHT-KNIT	Verona, Italy	CLOTHING	T
NAVIGATOR	Vinalhaven, Maine	TRANSPORT	R
IMPOSTOR	Monte Carlo, Monaco	TREACHERY	O
AIR TRAVEL	Rome, Italy	TRANSPORT	L
WAR BONNET	Youngstown, Ohio	CLOTHING	O
DRIVE OFF	New York, New York	TRANSPORT	F
MOTORING	Sacramento, California	TRANSPORT	G
ORCHARD	San Francisco, California	WOOD	O
TURNCOATS	Santa Fe, New Mexico	TREACHERY	T
HOLLOW LOG	Gaffney, South Carolina	WOOD	H
ACCENT FURNITURE	Burbank, California	WOOD	A
DREAMCOAT	EI Paso, Texas	CLOTHING	M
CABINET POSITION	Havana, Cuba	WOOD	C

INFIGHTER	Panama City, Panama	TREACHERY	I
MITTENS	Singapore	CLOTHING	T
PLAY DIRTY	Salvador, Brazil	TREACHERY	Y

Authors' Notes

We decided early on in our overall hunt brainstorming that we wanted to write puzzles with secret answers, akin to Galactic 2020, and that it would be fun if the ending of the hunt depended on whether the secret answers were used. We thought it would be particularly elegant if the difference between the endings didn't require any additional puzzle infrastructure, only the knowledge that some kind of transformation was necessary.

These constraints inspired me to come up with a list of words that could have the name of a common fish appended or prepended, because the answers could be given "a side of fish" and thus completely transformed semantically. I generated a list of about 40 different common fish and used Qat to find words that had very different meanings with and without the fishy appendages. After I generated the list, I manually attempted to create cycles or pairs of fishy and fishless words. This was surprisingly difficult! Some fun examples that ultimately didn't pan out include:

CHAR+COAL	DRAW+LING	GAR+NET
GENT+EEL	PORT+RAY	SALMON+ELLA
SHAD+OWED	SKATE+BOARD	VINE+GAR

Once I had a cycle I was happy with, we built out reasonable-sounding meta answers that reinforced the semantic connections and clued distinct letter extraction mechanics. It would have been nice to have used mechanics that were more interesting than first/last/central letter, but it was clear that the fodder words would be incredibly constrained without getting too fancy.

It was then time to come up with the actual answers to the supermeta. We had joked about The Penguin making an appearance when we came up with the penguin theme, and the secret ending seemed like a reasonable place for that to happen. We had also discussed early on that it would be nice to incorporate the daily feeder answers directly into the supermeta as a way to keep fast solvers engaged throughout the entire month. With all of this in mind, I came up with the two 24-letter answers A PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE PARTY for the straight ending and TOTAL CONTROL OF GOTHAM CITY for the secret ending.

With answers and mechanics settled, it was time to create a proof of concept. We generated lists of words for each potential pairing of extraction mechanics (e.g., all the words that had a doubled A and ended with E), and we (and ChatGPT) went through these lists and flagged words related to the relevant category (eg, treachery). We chose a "best" word from each set of

mechanics, rated it on a scale from 1 to 5, and then generated a final set of answers that maximized overall Word Gooditude™. We then gave this list of words and meta answers to another teammate to see if they could work out the final answers to the supermeta.

It was at this point that my hope that these fodder words could also be feeder puzzle answers was completely dashed; overall word quality was fine enough, but there didn't seem to be enough options to generate truly good answers that would work as feeders for our metas as well as puzzle answers in their own right. We also determined that we needed to slightly change some of our potential meta answers: BET ON A PAIR OF KINGS (theme: royalty) became BET ON A POCKET PAIR (theme: clothing), as royal words got very obscure very quickly. COST OF ENTRY (theme: ticketing) became ENTRY LEVEL YACHT (theme: transportation), as the relevant list of words was pretty short.

Next up, I needed to determine how to implement a reordering step that would be different based on the set of feeder answers used. I liked the idea of penguins from all over the world sending their demands to their leaders in Antarctica on postcards that would indicate their location of origin as a "Greetings from ____" clue. It was unclear whether it would be possible to come up with reasonable clues for all of our feeder answers (which of course still hadn't been written) that would also give us enough flexibility to swap out 6-8 feeders for their secret answers (which also hadn't been written), so we created yet another proof of concept using the answers from Advent 2024, figuring that if we could create geographic clues around those answers, we could create clues around anything.

Several weeks later, after the metas were written, we went back and wrote geographic clues using all the feeder answers, starting with the clues that would need to produce different locations for the secret and non-secret answers. Locking in the feeder order allowed us to come up with the actual list of fodder words. I liked the idea of cluing these words with rebuses; in a perfect world, we could have created some really cool Curt Teich-inspired designs for the postcards, but I am not an artist (and the actual art team would've killed me if I'd seriously put in that sort of request), hence the more streamlined final product.