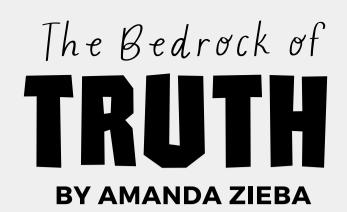
The Bedrock of

TRUTH

BY AMANDA ZIEBA







Hello Readers!

I invite you to join me on a literary adventure! This story includes a famous author, New York City, a cave, a newspaper article, four friends, clues, and an excellent plot twist. Follow along with your printed copy as I read the story aloud on YouTube!

With this short story and its accompanying resources, you'll be able to:

- Practice your annotation skills (instruction/printable included)
- Extend your vocabulary (slides included)
- Do some creative writing of your own (sheets + rubric included)

Related CCSS Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Psst!! These prompts contain spoilers so avoid them until you've read the story!

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

I hope you both enjoy the story and polish up your literacy skills.

Happy reading,

Amanda Zieba

Word Count: 4.006 words

ATOS Reading Level: 6.5

Great for instructional text!



The Bedrock of TRUTH BY AMANDA ZIEBA.

VOCABULARY

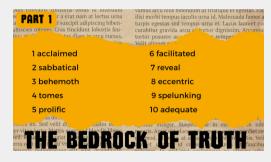
Preview the vocabulary words for each part of the story before you read. Ask students to make definition inferences using the context clues of the story sentences and images provided. Each vocab word is highlighted in the story text.

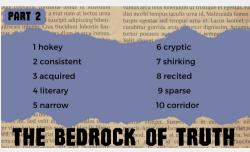


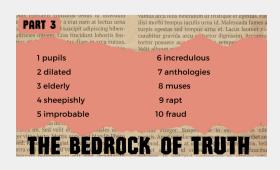




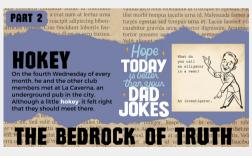
Sample Slides

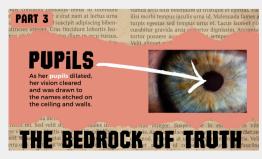














The Bedrock of TRUTH BY AMANDA ZIEBA.

VOCABULARY

Part 1 Vocabulary

1 devoted

2 acclaimed

3 behemoth

4 tomes

5 prolific

6 facilitated

7 reveal

8 eccentric

9 spelunking

10 adequate



Part 2 Vocabulary

1 hokey 6 cryptic

2 consistent 7 shirking

3 acquired 8 recited

4 literary 9 sparse

5 narrow 10 corridor

Part 3 Vocabulary

1 pupils 6 incredulous

2 dilated 7 anthologies

3 elderly 8 muses

4 sheepishly 9 fraud

5 improbable 10 commissioning



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LEARN TO ANNOTATE!



Annotating is a fancy word that means taking what you are thinking about in your brain while you are reading and putting it down on the page. You don't want this to take too long and pull you out of the flow, so jot down these symbols or a quick note and then keep reading!

Annotation Symbols



Emojis - Note how do you feel while reading with an emoji. Also note, now does the character feel?



Hearts and Stars - mark your favorite or important parts with a heart or star, so you can easily find these sections again.



Exclamation points - if you find a part hat shocks or surprises you, mark it with a !! Or a short phrase like WOW or HOLY COW!



Questions when you have a question, write down a ?? or write out your full question.



Connections note when
you connect
to the text or
when it
connects with
another story
or the real
world

Underlining and circling important text/words are still more ways you can annotate.

Mark up the text so that when you come back to it, you can jog your memory to remember what you've already read without having to reread the entire text.

If you aren't thinking about anything while you are reading, that's your clue to STOP, go back and read again. Think of it like seeing the words play out like a movie in your brain. If you aren't seeing anything in your head, that's your sign to find a place free of distractions and try reading again.



The Bedrock of TRUTH BY AMANDA ZIEBA

CREATIVE WRITING



Extend the story! Use these prompts to write your own adventure or mystery story! Be careful when you show/present these questions to students, because <u>some contain spoilers</u>.

Option #1 - Pretend Emerson and her friends are planning to meet up with Leona Rock one year later. They are supposed to deliver her a manuscript. What goes wrong? Does someone try to steal the manuscript? Do they face travel obstacles? Are they fighting about how to tell the story? Does Leona show up? You get to choose!

Option #2 - You are visiting a cave on a field trip or vacation. Write what happens while you are there. As you write, think about external conflicts (physical obstacles, weather outside the cave, etc.) and also internal conflicts (fear, distrust of your guide, etc.). Also, do your best to add in sensory details to heighten your character's emotions and your reader's reaction/response.

Option #3 - It is 20 years after Emerson met Leona in the cave. How have their lives progressed and changed? What are they doing now? Are they friends? Rivals/Competitors? Writing together? Are they famous?

Option #4 - Write a story that includes your own set of clues. Where will the clues lead? What will the item found mean to those who are looking for it? Think: is your story set in the past, present or future? How will the time period affect the delivery method of the clues?

Use this rubric to first communicate your writing expectations to students and then to evaluate the writing products they create. Students and/or peers can also use this rubric to self/peer score/evaluate the pieces of writing.

I assign 2 points if the task was completed and well done, 1 if the task was attempted but not mastered, and 0 if the task was not attempted at all.

Task	0	1	2
Follows the prompt and stays on topic			
Uses correct grammar/capitalization/punctuation			
Thoughts are clearly presented and easy to follow			
Length is appropriate			
Format is correct (letter, fiction story, news article, diary entry, etc.)			

Total Points = ___/10

Task	0	1	2
Follows the prompt and stays on topic			
Uses correct grammar/capitalization/punctuation			
Thoughts are clearly presented and easy to follow			
Length is appropriate			
Format is correct (letter, fiction story, news article, diary entry, etc.)			

Total Points = ___/10

Task	0	1	2
Follows the prompt and stays on topic			
Uses correct grammar/capitalization/punctuation			
Thoughts are clearly presented and easy to follow			
Length is appropriate			
Format is correct (letter, fiction story, news article, diary entry, etc.)			

Total Points = ___/10

Task	0	1	2
Follows the prompt and stays on topic			
Uses correct grammar/capitalization/punctuation			
Thoughts are clearly presented and easy to follow			
Length is appropriate			
Format is correct (letter, fiction story, news article, diary entry, etc.)			

Total Points = ___/10

CREATIVE WRITING TIPS

- Take a minute to think before you start writing. Jot down ideas, make a mind map, or just day dream!
- Put your phone/chromebook/tablet away. Distractions can easily pull you out of the writing flow.
- If you feel like you are stuck or have nothing else to say, but we still have writing time left, re-read what you have written. This might inspire more ideas. Or, you can go back and add in details to your response that you did not include the first time around.
- Ask yourself, if I were the reader... "what kind of story would I like to experience?"
- Before submitting your work, whisper read your work aloud to yourself. This will help you catch small, easy to fix errors.
- Listen to an instrumental playlist to create a blanket of white noise that will help you focus on your task, rather than the distractions surrounding you. Try this video!





CREATIVE WRITING PROMPT #1



	riends are planning to meet up with Leona Rock one year later.			
ley are supposed to deliver her a manuscript. What goes wrong? Does someone try to eal the manuscript? Do they face travel obstacles? Are they fighting about how to tell				
story? Does Leona show				
story? Does Leona snow	up? You get to choose!			

Rubric

Task	0	1	2
Follows the prompt and stays on topic			
Uses correct grammar/capitalization/punctuation			
Thoughts are clearly presented and easy to follow			
Length is appropriate			
Format is correct (letter, fiction story, news article, diary entry, etc.)			

Total Points = ___/10

Teacher Comments:



CREATIVE WRITING PROMPT #2



Rubric

Task	0	1	2
Follows the prompt and stays on topic			
Uses correct grammar/capitalization/punctuation			
Thoughts are clearly presented and easy to follow			
Length is appropriate			
Format is correct (letter, fiction story, news article, diary entry, etc.)			

Total Points = ___/10

Teacher Comments:



CREATIVE WRITING PROMPT #3



	_		

Rubric

Task	0	1	2
Follows the prompt and stays on topic			
Uses correct grammar/capitalization/punctuation			
Thoughts are clearly presented and easy to follow			
Length is appropriate			
Format is correct (letter, fiction story, news article, diary entry, etc.)			

Total Points = ___/10



CREATIVE WRITING PROMPT #4



Rubric

Task	0	1	2
Follows the prompt and stays on topic			
Uses correct grammar/capitalization/punctuation			
Thoughts are clearly presented and easy to follow			
Length is appropriate			
Format is correct (letter, fiction story, news article, diary entry, etc.)			

Total Points = ___/10

LISTEN TO THE STORY READ ALOUD



The Bedrock of

TRUTH

BY AMANDA ZIEBA







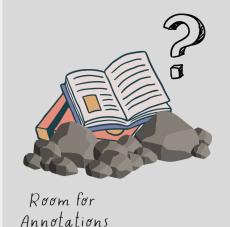












The Bedrock of TRUTH







Part 1

Emerson was the ultimate Leo Rock fan. No, more than a fan, she was a Leo scholar. A Leologist, she liked to call herself. No teeny-bopper fangirling or jersey chasing for her. Emerson was a hardcore, lifelong and incurable literary admirer of fiction author extraordinaire, Leo Rock.

Not only was she a member of several online fan forums and an attendee of the yearly convention devoted to all things Leo Rock, she had also won multiple Leo-Trivia competitions, both online and in person. Emerson was the first in line at Barnes and Noble each and every time a new book was released, even though history had taught her the author never showed up for signing appearances. She'd filled an entire moleskin notebook with her favorite Leo quotations and even had t-shirts made – in multiple colors. She wore them almost every day and when she'd walk the city streets, the white font was always visible. Keep Calm and Leo On. She, not-so-secretly, hoped that one day, Leo would see her and say hello. Because she'd been so loyal. Because she loved his stories so much. But he never did.

It had been six months since internationally acclaimed author Leo Rock disappeared. Died? Maybe? No one was really sure. To be fair, he was never all that visible to begin with. In a letter to the editor in The New York Times, the best-selling and award-winning author announced that he was taking an indefinite break, a career-ending sabbatical, a permanent vacation. He vowed he wasn't going to write another book. Ever. However, like everything else he'd ever written, there was more, a deeper layer, discoverable, if you were willing to look a little harder.

And where Leo Rock was concerned, Emerson was always willing. Her father, a poetry professor, had introduced her to the writings of Leo Rock when she was just six. The wandering fantasy tales wallpapered her imagination. The sound of her father's voice reading Leo's words filled her ears, her bedroom, her childhood. When she was old enough to tackle the behemoth tomes on her own, she read everything. And that's saying something.

Room for Annotations







In his letter to the editor, Leo left hints. One final manuscript remained. If someone were to pull out the clues and follow them, the manuscript could be theirs. One last story from their favorite author. Why the world would need this final story when he had given them so many already, seemed almost baffling. But for his devoted fans, having one last bit of magic seemed not only fathomable, but desperately important.

In a follow up article, a Times staffer wrote that "his letter was the latest episode in a saga of mysteries surrounding the prolific author." Because as spellbinding as his stories were, the fact that he wrote them entirely unseen was likened to modern day sorcery. Leo Rock had never given a face-to-face interview, nor answered questions over the phone. He had never done a public reading or facilitated a workshop. His picture never appeared in Time Magazine's Most Influential People of the Year, although his name was on the list several times.

He once wrote a short story for The New Yorker in Times Square. He posted pictures online of his notebook and pen, amidst the crowds on the street, surrounded by neon signs and taxis. These pictures accompanied the article. But no one had ever claimed to see him. EVER. His publisher littered the internet with photos of his workspace and pages of his works in progress. He wrote everywhere. At his apartment, on airplanes, standing in line for coffee. But never, in any of these photos, did the master author reveal himself.

His fans would try to chase him, track him down, catch a glimpse of the genius at work. They'd hang out in his favorite haunts, try to spot a mysterious figure scribbling in Central Park or in a nameless coffee shop. They'd hang out on Avenue of the Americas, where all the major publishers had offices, but they were never successful in finding their adored writer. To be honest, it wasn't a fair game of hide and seek. They had no idea what they were looking for in the first place.

He was everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Leo Rock's lack of public appearance did nothing to discourage his fans. If anything, the odd and eccentric set of circumstances seemed to propel Leo's fame even further. Some critics claimed his elusive behavior was purely a publicity stunt, while others speculated that his work was really a collection of several authors all writing together. These theories were debated and torn apart and reconstructed in publishing forums, academic circles, and pop culture gossip magazines. Even his publisher claimed to have never met him in person.







The fans didn't care and continued to buy his books by the million. None of it mattered as long as he continued to produce their beloved tales. Because the fans didn't care, his publisher didn't care, and everyone carried on reading and discussing and loving the work of Leo Rock.

At some point, Emerson couldn't remember when exactly, but probably around middle school, when kids were mean, and bodies were weird, and everyone should really just be alone until all the hormones balanced out, Emerson picked up a pen. At first it was easy to see where Leo's stories stopped and hers began. Eventually, however, her skills and craft, long influenced by the master, dramatically improved. Emerson took Leo's characters on new adventures in new worlds, but eventually left them entirely behind as she created people and universes all her own. Leo's influence was always there, in inspiration at the very least, but by the time Emerson got to college, she was a darn fine writer all on her own.

This made her want to find Leo even more, to thank the author, face to face, for giving her the gift of story. When she read her idol's mysterious letter in The Times, she knew her chance had finally come.

At first Emerson's journey had mostly required mental sweat. As a graduate student at NYU, it wasn't a situation that was unfamiliar or uncomfortable. In addition to screenshotting the digital version of the article in The Times online, she bought multiple copies of the actual newspaper, carefully clipping the letter and keeping each copy in strategic places. One she kept glued in the notebook she carried everywhere, as a good creative writing student was bound to do. A second, she laminated and slid between the pages of her favorite book, obviously written by Leo, and a third was stored in the back of her teeny tiny New York City loft apartment closet, in a fire-proof safe. None of her extra efforts were necessary though, because her lvy League brain managed to memorize the piece within a week of its publication.

But memorizing it had turned out to be the easy part. It took months to pull out, assemble, and organize the clues... which she was pretty sure were leading her to a cave. It took her even longer to be feel comfortable spelunking, especially since New York City was a little short on adequate landscape in which she could practice. There were several caves in upstate New York, but like a real New Yorker, Emerson didn't own a car. This small detail turned out to be a good thing because it led her to Carrett.

END OF PART 1



The Bedrock of TRUTH

BY AMANDA ZIEBA

Listen Along!

Room for Annotations



Part 2

Garrett was the leader of the local caving club. On the fourth Wednesday of every month, he and the other club members met at La Caverna, an underground pub in the city. Although a little hokey, it felt right that they should meet there. It took Emerson three months' worth of meetings before she figured out Garrett was also a Leo Rock fan, and another six before she was willing to trust him with her clues.

"Of course, Leo would hide his final manuscript in a cave," Emerson said when she finally revealed to Garrett her real reason for joining his club. "His last name is Rock after all."

"Is," Garret said. "Not was? You think he's still alive?"

"It might be more of a desperate hope than a scientific belief."

"It also doesn't take a literary genius to see the **consistent** use of stone metaphors buried in his volume of work," Garret continued. Emerson blushed. "Ah, shoot," Garrett muttered. "Creative writing major?"

"Ah, creative writing graduate student actually," Emerson said and shrugged. "And it's alright. His most famous series uses the entrance of a cave as a portal to a parallel universe. You're right. It wouldn't take a genius of any brand to figure it out."

"But you know more than just the first clue," Garrett said, leading her further into the conversation.

Emerson nodded. Garrett ordered another round and although they were the only two who remained at the meeting, or maybe because they were the only two who remained, they carried on. The hints from the letter and the facts acquired through their lives of disciplined study piled up like boulders of truth, one after the other, tall enough to clearly mark the way.

Emerson would have gone on the quest to find Leo alone, but the author insisted that the adventure include other literary souls.







Stories, after all, were meant to be shared. And with his clues, author Leo Rock assured that this particular story would not be a solo affair.

The road ahead maybe dark and narrow, but you have nothing to Fear.

As long as you bring your friends, you'll be able to keep your head cleak.

Four. Four friends. They needed two more adventurers. Garrett introduced Emerson to another fan, Ethan, a buddy he met in the dorms freshman year and also a rare geology and communications double major. When the three of them teamed up to write a cryptic piece of their own that was published in, The Washington Square Review, the NYU Graduate and Faculty Journal, Claudia followed their clues and found them one Wednesday, seated around the table at La Caverna.

They'd likely have never met in person had it not been for the clues or the quest, but once they found each other, it felt like they'd be together forever. Perhaps they already had been, only now, instead of occupying space in a shared fictional world, they were finally together, in the flesh.

On the three Wednesdays a month they weren't meeting with the caving club, the group, who all now lovingly adopted Emerson's self-declared title of Leologist, met to prepare for the ultimate quest. A quest that would take them to the largest cave in the United States, and hopefully, to a treasure worth more to them than their combined weight in gold.

But first, they had to graduate.

Emerson had barely made it across the stage and flipped her tassel before she was shirking out of dinner celebrations with her parents to jump in Garret's car and officially begin their quest. Fourteen hours and three pit stops later, they arrived, sleep deprived, but full of overconfident adrenaline and caffeine.







When Emerson stepped up to the cave's entrance, she felt a cool blast of air brush over her bare arms. Goosebumps rose on her skin and she wasn't sure to blame the breeze or the endorphins coursing through her veins. She had known the cave would be cool, sixty degrees year-round the brochure boasted, but she couldn't imagine wearing anything other than her Keep Calm and Leo On shirt. She'd picked her favorite one, in green. Leo's favorite color. The color of all his book covers.

As she walked, she recited one of the clues.

The bedrock of truth lies beneath the reality you believe in.

New surprises await you, and my real story will finally begin.

Down and down they walked. After an hour of descent, the tourists had long since dropped out, and a half hour later even the serious spelunkers were getting sparse. Thanks to their training, and emboldened with the purpose of a noble quest, they felt confident despite the crushing darkness that surrounded them. When the path finally ended, Emerson stood face to face with a sheer rock wall. She ran her hands over its pockmarked surface searching for an opening. But there was nothing. They had reached a dead end.

"Now what?" Ethan asked.

Claudia began to dig in her pack, reaching for what Emerson already had memorized.

When all seems lost look not to the sky,
but to the ground.
The way forward is there and what was lost
will soon be found.







Emerson bent down and let her hands explore the bottom of the wall, reading the surface with her fingertips like a blind man reads braille. And there, just as the clue instructed, was the thinnest of corridors, a crevice just big enough for a human to pass through. Emerson peered into the sliver of space that remained open between the floor of the cave and the wall that stretched upward.

"I'm going in," Emerson announced. The others nodded silently.

"We'll follow you once you are through," Garrett said.

Emerson took a deep breath and nodded. "Sounds good. Stay calm,"

"And Leo on," Garrett and the others completed.

Emerson slid forward on her belly. Pebbles and gravel pressed against her stomach, her thin t-shirt doing nothing to protect her from their sharp edges. She tried not to think about the crushing weight of rock surrounding her body and instead focused on the intensity of the light from her head lamp, waiting for it to diminish once it broke through into the next room.

The passage was long. Longer than any she and her friends had explored before. The darkness and fear and sound of the stone floor grating against her bare arms and toes of her boots almost convinced her to turn back. Maybe this whole thing, as real as she wanted it to be, was just a fairy tale she had written in her own mind. Maybe she had convinced the others to follow her on an imaginary quest. Maybe her hero worship and obsession had crossed the line to addiction.

Emerson's heart suddenly felt like it would shatter her rib cage in it's attempt to break free from this small and dark space. Simultaneously grieving and attempting to escape. Her heart needed... she didn't know what it needed... except maybe some more space.

The thought of turning around and going all the way back was unbearable. Forward was the only solution, but she had to do it fast, or at least, faster. Emerson pulled with her arms and pushed with her toes, ignoring both the painful beating of her heart and the slices of skin she was surely removing from her cheeks and forearms. Faster and fast until finally she was through, until she was free.

When she made it to the other side, she saw she wasn't alone.



Room for Annotations

The Bedrock of TRUTH







Part 3

In the middle of a giant cavern there was a desk, lit by a battery powered lantern. An old school typewriter also sat on the desk, and beneath it a pile of tin lunch boxes. Emerson could see the metallic red of Wonder Woman's W's glinting in the lantern light. But more importantly, hunched over the desk, was a figure, who was writing.

Emerson's heart, which hadn't yet resumed normal functioning, stopped all together.

She looked up and blinked rapidly, forcing her eyes to adjust. As her pupils dilated, her vision cleared and was drawn to the names etched on the ceiling and walls. The names of explorers past, others who had successfully made the trek and felt the need to leave their mark as proof. The last line of clues flooded her mind.

I'll be where words surround me, for
with words | feel at home.

But do not leave me there forever, |'ve
decided it's time for my words to roam.

"Leo!" Emerson suddenly shouted. Her voice echoed in the confined space. She jolted forward but was immediately jerked back by the ropes still attached to her companions on the other side of the rock wall. She fumbled to disconnect her carabiner, her nerves and thoughts all tumbling together in the dark. "You guys!" she shouted back the way she had come. "Leo's here. We did it! He's really here."

When she turned around, she saw that the person at the desk was standing. For a second, she thought that the shadows of the room were playing tricks on her. Because instead of seeing an elderly man with a wise beard (how could Leo Rock not have a beard? Emerson had often asked herself as she wandered New York looking for him), a woman stood at the desk.







Emerson stared at her as they walked towards one another. She took in the woman's smart glasses and the long hair streaked with gray that poked out from an adventurer's helmet adorned with a head lamp. The woman smiled sheepishly and removed the helmet before jutting out her hand.

"Hello, I'm Leona Rock. It's nice to meet you."

Emerson let out all the breath in her lungs. Her head spun. Her world was turned upside down. "Hi," Emerson said. She reached out a shaking hand and numbly rested it in the hand of her hero. "I'm Emerson."

"You know," Leona said with a smile. "It seems improbable, but I was hoping it would be you."

"Me?" Emerson managed. "How- why? I mean, we've never met!"

"Not directly no, but I saw you all the time. In the city, in the park, in my favorite coffee shop. In fact, your shirt," Leona pointed. "Gave me some much-needed motivation and inspiration on some of my lowest days."

"You? Need motivation?" A tiny, incredulous laugh escaped Emerson's lips.

"You are like the most amazing writer ever!" To her own ears Emerson's praise sounded basic, elementary. Just how do you communicate a lifetime worth of gratitude in a single sentence?

Leona nodded. "For me, the words are always there, but some days I needed a reminder, some reassurance, to continue in the lifestyle I had chosen. Here, pull up a rock. Let me tell you." Leona gestured to the others, who had now made their way past the limestone wall, to join them. Just like children at a library, the four Leologists circled at her feet.

Leona took a breath and hesitated for only a second before plunging in.

"When I was just starting out, no one wanted my stories. Not journals, or contests or anthologies. Not publishers or agents or even my hometown newspaper. No one. The rejections built up and were threatening to crush me. But I only knew how to be a writer. I only wanted to be a writer. I just had to find a way. A new way. I stopped submitting for a while but kept writing. I worked hard on my craft, studied masterpieces by my favorite authors and kept writing. Writing, writing, writing. So much writing.

Room for Annotations







"One day I wrote this amazing story. It came out in a flood, a gush of words, and they were great. I loved them. It was one of the only times I didn't need to seriously edit my work. A true gift of the muses. In a rush, I sent it out to a fantasy literary journal. I made a rookie mistake that would forever change my life."

The Leologists sat in rapt attention. Leona continued, "I forgot to include my name. All the editor had was my email. LeoRock[at]gmail[.]com. When he replied to say he was printing it, I was so excited I overlooked the byline. The story printed under the name Leo Rock. It went on to win an award. When it came time to submit another story, I decided to used the name Leo. And they took it, and the next one and the next. At first, I turned down interviews and in person meetings and photo shoots because I was afraid they'd think I was a fraud. They wouldn't believe that a twenty something girl had written these deep and twisting fantasy stories they loved so much. What does a fresh college grad really know about truth and identity and fear, right?" She looked at them meaningfully, estimating that anyone who made it this far into the quest had likely been powered by brains and the burn of past underestimation. "Age, just like race and gender and stature, shouldn't disqualify the stories anyone has to tell."

Leona paused and looked around the cave, casting for how to begin the next chapter. "And then, I just liked being left alone, to create the worlds I wanted to live in, instead of playing a part in theirs. Your shirt," she said, gesturing to Emerson. "Let me know that my unconventional choice was okay. That I was just being me. And that being me, was a fine thing to be. But I'm done with that now. I've been writing stories for twenty-five years. And I plan to be writing them for twenty-five more. But I've decided that I want to be a part of the real world too." Leona reached down to grab one of the lunch boxes at her feet. She handed it to Emerson. "Inside these lunch boxes you'll find my journals. They go back to when I was very young, six, maybe seven years old, and travel forward, all the way up until this morning. Also included are plenty of artifacts to prove the undeniable, albeit implausible, truth. They are my story. The final story in the life of Leo Rock. And I'd like you to tell it."

Emerson looked at her. confused.

"I'm commissioning you, all of you," Leona explained. "To write my biography. Work together; support one another. I'm sure you all have your own set of talents that will contribute to the final product." Here she paused and Emerson could see through her tears that Leona was holding back her own. "Stories are so much better with friends."

10







The small band of fans waited while Leona added one more journal entry, detailing their meeting and the task of chronicling her life. They took a quick group picture with their hero and promised to meet Leona with a finished manuscript in Times Square one year from today.

"Where are you going? What will you be doing?" Emerson asked her. It came out as more of an accusation than she meant it to. Now that she'd finally found her, she wasn't ready to leave Leona Rock.

"Don't worry," Leona said. "My days of hiding are over. I'll be in touch."

They said goodbye, ferried the lunchboxes through the slim opening in the wall back to the rest of the cave, and then loaded their packs with their treasure trove. As Garrett, Ethan and Claudia began walking back toward the surface Emerson slid back through the opening one more time. "Is everything okay?" Leona asked.

Emmerson nodded. "I just didn't get a chance to do what I've always wanted to do."

"What's that?" Leona asked.

"To say thank you. I don't know who I would be without your words. I know that sounds dramatic, I'm sorry." Emerson blushed, suddenly self-conscious. "I'd just hate it if you never knew that. For me, yeah, but for so, so many other people too."

Leona enveloped her in a hug and then pulled back to look her in the eyes.

"I didn't think I needed that," Leona said. "I've told myself for so long that I didn't. But I guess the truth is, I did. Thank you. It was my pleasure."

The women hugged each other once more and then Emerson left to catch up with the others.

An hour later Emerson and her friends climbed out of the cave completely covered in dirt. The daylight had faded, but their eyes were alight in a way even the sun couldn't rival.

They had a story to tell.

The End... for now.

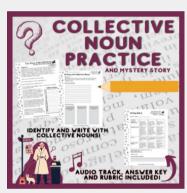


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