Schist happens.

“This is stupid,” the constable says, shaking his head. “I’m talking to a bird.”

The green-feathered bird hops a little closer, its talons click, clicking on the metal bonnet.

“It ain’t stupid, ma bro.”

The constable looks up. Only the alpine peaks of Mount Aspiring stare back at him, and an empty car park at Raspberry Creek, save for his lone police cruiser, and a bird.

“Hello? Who said that?” The constable grips his radio.

The green parrot tilts its head, blinking a dark unbothered eye it hops closer.

“Down here, mate.”

The constable looks down at the curved open beak of a kea.

“What? Ain’t never seen a talking bird before?”

The constable shakes his head, staring slack-mouthed, and the silence stretched across the Matukituki Valley.

“Want to find the missing hiker or what?” The green bird fluffs its feathers impatiently.

“You know where the missing hiker is?”

The kea flaps its wings. “Course I do. Nothing in these mountains happens without me hearing or knowing about it.”

The constable’s thumb hovers over the radio’s talk button, but he doesn’t press it. What would he even say? *Base, a parrot just offered to help with air support on our search grid.* He’d be back on desk duty by sunset.

“You’re a talking kea,” the constable mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. “A kea is talking to me.”

“Yeah, and you’re wasting daylight, Hemi,” the kea replies, hopping along the bonnet, its claws scratching aggressively against the white paint of the police cruiser. It stops right in front of the windscreen, leaning its head forward until its sharp beak nearly touches the glass.

“How do you know my name?” Hemi asks, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“Printed right there on your chest, bro,” the kea says, gesturing with a flick of its olive-green wing toward Hemi’s silver nametag. “Now, are we going to talk about the guy in the bright orange jacket and rugby shorts out there on the trail, or are you just going to stare at me like a stunned mullet?”

Hemi takes a slow, deep breath, trying to process the absolute absurdity of the situation. “Fine. Where is he?”

“The wind is picking up on the Makarora side, looks like a storm blowing in, you’d better follow me.”

Before Hemi can say another word, the bird launches itself into the air, a brilliant flash of scarlet and olive against the grey, green and white tops of the alpine backdrop. Realising he had absolutely no other leads, Hemi grabs his heavy pack, laces his hiking boots tight, and sets off into the gathering storm.

Hemi’s boots are soon crunching through freezing snow as he tracks the bird through a blizzard. True to its word, the kea guides him past the treacherous drops of the high valley, past a scree slope and leads him straight to a concealed opening in the mountain face.

Inside, shielded from the howling wind, Hemi finds the missing hiker. The man was shivering violently in his orange puffer jacket and rugby shorts.

"You found me!" the hiker exclaims, his eyes wild. “I thought I was gonna die up here.”

“How did you end up here?” The constable asks, setting his heavy pack down to fish out medical supplies. The hiker nods a head in the general direction from where he came.

“There was a long schist slope and I lost my footing, slid most of the way down it, got a foothold and ended up here. Broke my arm somewhere in the process too. Or at least I think it’s broken, it hurts something fierce.” The constable nods, assessing the damage before wrapping the hiker's arm in a white bandage and a makeshift sling.

“Schist happens, aye fellas.” The kea laughs, flapping its wings. The hiker stares at the kea, then glances at the constable.

“The kea is talking.” The constable nods.

“It’s been a long day.”

“Get it? Schist happens, cuz you fell down a schist slope.” The hiker just stares at the kea with wide shocked eyes. “Man, the joke ain’t funny when you’ve got to explain it.”

The constable huffs, standing at the entrance of the cave. “Well it looks like there’s a gap in the weather we’d best get going, the storms interfering with my radio and you need a hospital. Better you broke your arm than your leg, but we’ll need to leave your bag here.” The hiker shakes his head.

“Nuh, uh. I’m not leaving it here.” The constable sighs.

“Why not?” Reluctantly the hiker unzips the bag, revealing massive chunks of glittering gold. "Look at this! There's millions down here. Millions!"

Hemi stares into the backpack. His thoughts drift to his mortgage, the mounting bills, the new baby, his stressful low paying job, and how easily any mention of gold could disappear from an official report.

"We could... mark this down as a standard rescue," Hemi mutters, his voice dropping. "Split it. No one ever needs to know."

The kea hops onto a rock between the two men.

"Oh, real classy, Hemi," the kea scoffs. "Two minutes of cold weather and suddenly you're a pirate crew?"

"Hey! It's a lot of money!" Hemi protests, you wouldn’t understand, you're just a bird.

"It ain't yours to take, bro," the kea says, its voice turning deep and solemn. "You human fellas never learn. You think everything you find belongs in your pockets. This gold belongs to the *whenua*, the land. If you take it, the mountain takes you. Balance must be kept."

The hiker grips the bag tighter with his good arm. "I'm not leaving it!"

"Alright, have it your way," the kea shrugs a wing, letting out a sharp whistle.

A moment later, dozens of dark green shapes and flashes of crimson fly in from the cave mouth. A small squadron of kea swarming the hiker. They claw at his orange jacket, tear the emergency whistle off his pack, and begin playing a chaotic game of tug-of-war with his shoelaces.

"Okay, okay! Take it!" the hiker screams, tossing the backpack away.

"Good choice," the kea says. "Now, let's get you boys down the hill shall we?"

Three long hours later, the storm clearing Hemi and the hobbling hiker finally reach the empty Raspberry Creek car park. The kea flies to perch on the roof of the police cruiser. Hemi walks over, exhausted, and when he finally looks up at his vehicle, His jaw drops.

The car was completely totaled. Every single piece of rubber molding, the windscreen wipers, the radio antenna, the door seals, and the plastic emergency light bar cover, all ripped to shreds.

"Payment for services rendered, mate," the kea chirps, tossing a piece of door-seal rubber into the air and catching it in its beak. The bird gives a smug, feathery shrug. "What can I say? Schist happens."

With a sharp whistle and a loud, cackling laugh, the bird launches itself back into the alpine sky, leaving Hemi standing in the freezing Central Otago air with a ruined car, a traumatised hiker, and a story absolutely no one would ever believe.

WORD COUNT = 1,190