

# The Lemming King

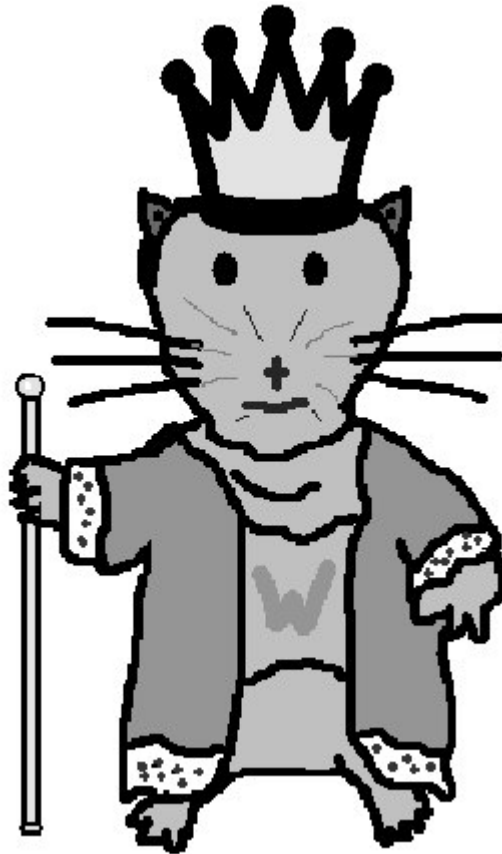
*A short story by  
Skelly Dubhuidhe*

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# The Lemming King



Near the coast of Baffin Island, in Nunavut, by the settlement of Qikiqtarjuaq, there dwelled a colony of lemmings. It was an ordinary lemming colony. During the summer months, thousands of lemmings roved the colony, feeding happily upon the plants and flowers that grew in their northern paradise. Now, you might not think of Qikiqtarjuaq as a paradise, isolated and barren as it is, but for the lemmings this was home and all of their favorite foods could be found.

The days are long during the summer on Baffin Island. The sky never grows completely dark and the sun, for the most part, circles the sky, dipping close to or below the horizon only briefly at night. After a long winter, the lemmings revel in the warm sun. Summer, in Qikiqtarjuaq, is a happy time for lemmings.

Within the colony near Qikiqtarjuaq, there lived a young lemming named George. George was not the brightest lemming in the colony. Some say that to call him average would be to heap far too much praise upon the little creature. Despite his shortcomings, he was born to an influential family, had access to the best grazing lands, and was well cared for. He never had a day without food. He never found himself without a plant to munch upon. He was a privileged lemming.

George's life as a privileged lemming had many benefits. Since his family was well known, no door in lemming society was closed to him. While many less fortunate lemmings were more intelligent, harder working, and more likeable, George, through his fortune of birth, had access to training, education, and opportunities that more deserving lemmings were denied.

Surrounded by comfort and affluence, George's view of the world was not exactly as the world is. He seldom saw the suffering of less privileged lemmings; lemmings that had to wander unprotected through the harsher grazing lands. In those few cases where common lemmings crossed his path and where he caught a glimpse of their more difficult lives, George's less than sharp mind seldom questioned the differences between his own life and the life of the less fortunate. George simply assumed that he was better than

the common lemming and that this was the reason why his life was better as well. He saw his privilege as deserved, though it never occurred to him to wonder just what he had done to deserve a better life. If he had, he might have found the answer not to his liking, for like most members of the elite at Qikiqtarjuaq, he had done nothing to earn his privilege.

In all meaningful ways, the elite at Qikiqtarjuaq were not much different than common lemmings. They were made of the same flesh. They were covered with the same fur. They ate. They slept. Some were intelligent and some, like George, were not.

George's own family knew their son was not the sharpest lemming in Qikiqtarjuaq. They tried hard to give his life meaning; searching for tasks to set him too, searching for undertakings that would give him a sense of accomplishment, and using their influence to rescue him from trouble whenever he went astray — and go astray he did. His transgressions, whether in breaking the rules of Qikiqtarjuaq society, coming into conflict with other lemmings, or avoiding service in the Mutual Defense Recognizance Scouts, an organization of lemmings intended to provide warnings of advancing predators; were always resolved, either openly or in secret, by his family.

The life of a lemming is not without danger. Other residents of Baffin Island, such as the stoat, the arctic fox, the snowy owl, and the long-tailed skua, need to eat as well and, unfortunately, amongst their favorite snacks are lemmings. The only guarantee in life, a guarantee that comes with being alive, is danger. No living thing is without danger. Danger is just one of

those forces in nature that the living must come to terms with. Lemmings are no different. Nevertheless, lemming society at Qikiqtarjuaq was not a society of equals and so, as often happens in the world, some residents were more likely to become victims of danger than others. George, living well protected on the better feeding lands of his family, was just such a lemming. Other lemmings, employed by his family, watched the skies and the surrounding fields for George, looking out for predators when he grazed. These underclass lemmings were paid though access to the family's better feeding lands. George never grazed without their protection. His lack of experience with life as it is, by nature, shielded him from the reality of lemming life. When common lemmings fell to raids, George blamed them for their lot, imagining that if these common lemmings had the sense to employ other lemmings for their protection, as his family did, they could avoid such misfortune.

Now, as mentioned earlier, the Mutual Defense Recognizance Scouts was tasked with protecting the lemmings at Qikiqtarjuaq, but for the most part the Scouts dedicated themselves to protecting the "more valuable" lemmings, such as George and his family, and so, even in this, George was privileged. He was protected by two layers of defense while most lemmings were left to the random ravages of nature.

As George grew, his sense of entitlement grew. That is, George increasingly felt that he deserved more than other lemmings. Feeling this, he dreamt of becoming a powerful lemming. Since George looked up to himself, for the large part without justification, he imagined that other lemmings should look

up to him too. By the time George became an adult lemming; his will was set upon becoming the leader of the colony at Qikiqtarjuaq.

Most of the time, lemmings prefer leaders to leave them alone. Aside from the efforts to monitor the predators and to resolve the conflicts that sometimes arise between individual lemmings, the lemmings at Qikiqtarjuaq saw little need for a strong leader. After all, what is there in the life of a lemming that requires a leader? Lemmings, for the most part, can take care of themselves. They grow wiser with age and they help one another with life's daily issues. There is little reason for an individual lemming to fall in line and follow a leader.

As part of the elite, the opportunity to be a leader of the colony at Qikiqtarjuaq came upon George easily. Lemming leaders are given the title of Steward, and as the name implies, their job is rather limited. They are chosen only to manage those few things that lemmings need to manage collectively: the Scouts, enforcement of basic lemming law, and management of the lands. When George became Steward, the elite lemmings and the commoners all shared the belief that nothing much would change. George, as we know, was not bright and no one could imagine that he would have any significant impact. To the lemmings, this was good. They did not want much to change anyway. Most of all, they just wanted to be left to their own lives, free from anyone telling them what they should or should not do. Freedom is important to lemmings.

George's Stewardship of the Qikiqtarjuaq colony began as most began. No one paid the Steward much attention. Lemmings had their own concerns.

They wanted what was best for their families, they wanted what was best for their friends, and they wanted what was best for themselves. This is as life should be.

This, however, did not sit well with George. George dreamed of being a powerful lemming. He thought that being Steward meant that he would be powerful. The reality of the Stewardship was something that had escaped his less than sharp mind. Over his first weeks as Steward, he became disillusioned with his lack of significance. Yes, as Steward, he was significant, but he wasn't a king. He couldn't just tell other lemmings what to do. Even if he tried, they'd just ignore him. His power was limited to the tasks of the Steward. While these tasks were important, they had little impact on the lives of Lemmings.

When a less than brilliant lemming has a position of power, it is natural that more intelligent lemmings with less power will seek advantage through influence. George attracted many such lemmings from the elite. As George was not bright, he became dependent upon their advice for the more complex aspects of being Steward. These clever lemmings, seeing the opportunity to manipulate George, latched themselves onto him, promising that if George relied upon their guidance, he would become popular, well respected, and most importantly, more powerful.

On a warm summer morning, as sometimes happens in course of lemming civilizations, a tragic event befell the colony at Qikiqtarjuaq. Raids by predators were a fact of life, but this summer's morning was exceptional. Not often, but not without precedent, the randomness of nature is such that



the improbable does happen. This was one of those improbable days. The colony was raided not by just one predator, but by several at once. In what seemed like the most unlikely of events, stoat, arctic fox, snowy owl, and long-tailed skua all converged upon Qikiqtarjuaq within the same short span of hours. The snowy owls swept down upon the grazing lands, unexpectedly and without forewarning, from the hills above, snatching with their talons many lemmings before anyone realized what was underway. As some of the lemmings struggled with the owls, a few freed themselves, only to fall earthward from great heights and to perish upon the fields below. At the same time, a flock of long-tailed skua, calling out as gulls do, terrified the lemmings, encircling them and picking apart any lemming unfortunate enough to fall prey. The screams and squeaks of the lemmings, who rushed as fast as they could in all directions to escape the raid, attracted the arctic fox and the stoat. From sky and from land, a savage sequence of raids left many lemmings dead, bloodied, or injured. When the raid ended, the colony was in shock.

While other lemmings mourned, George's advisors saw the raid as an opportunity. Immediately they spread rumors of betrayal, sabotage, and outside malice. They blamed the raids on a lack of vigilance. This lack of vigilance, they claimed, was a result of the many freedoms enjoyed by lemmings. "The lemmings should have been watching out for attacks!" they said with pretended authority.

Of course, the lemmings were watching out for attacks, as they always do. Not even the most vigilant lemming society could have avoided the raids. So long as there are stoat, arctic fox, snowy owl, and long-tailed skua,

lemmings will be subject to raids. Raids by multiple predators are not impossible and that which is not impossible will happen from time to time. Stoat, arctic fox, snowy owl, and long-tailed skua are clever. They adapt. Naturally, any changes to lemming society would be met by changes to the societies of their predators. Such relationships in nature evolve and no lemming society will ever exist without the danger of raids.

Nevertheless, the goal of George's advisors was not to increase the safety of the colony. Lofty goals such as these were mere cover for other plans. With the cooperation of George, his advisors took upon themselves the task of changing the colony at Qikiqtarjuaq from a free society into a society controlled by the Steward and his advisors.

Their first step towards absolute control of Qikiqtarjuaq was to promote the fear of further raids. False reports of predator sightings were circulated. With each false report, the level of terror within Qikiqtarjuaq society increased. Many lemmings were afraid to go about their normal lives, grazing upon the fields. "Something must be done!" many felt. George's advisors expected this reaction and stepped in with the solution.

George was pleased with his advisors' plan. The plan promised him absolute control of lemming life at Qikiqtarjuaq. If the plan worked, he would be, if not in name at least in effect, Lemming King. George was excited at this new prospect. His small mind imagined himself the great King of Qikiqtarjuaq, leading the lesser lemmings out of danger. He would be adored and, most importantly, he would be obeyed. Lemmings would fear to ignore or to question him. As many unintelligent lemmings with

power do, George imagined himself to be chosen by nature, to be infallible, and to be wise.

Following the plan to the letter, George called together a great assembly of the lemmings at Qikiqtarjuaq. Stung with fear and shock while mourning their dead, the lemmings needed answers to the unanswerable and, most of all, they needed to feel safe. In numbers unseen in the history of Qikiqtarjuaq, the lemmings converged upon the meeting place, eager to listen to anyone who could promise them a sense of direction or bring solace to their hearts.

George stood before the lemmings. He stood on his hind legs upon a rock towering above the fields, his back erect and his head looking upward with an air of confidence. The thousands of lemmings waited on his words, silently and solemnly, hoping for leadership. George began:

“My fellow citizens of Qikiqtarjuaq, I bring to you sad news. Hundreds of our loved ones perished in an unprecedented raid by evil doers. This attack will not go unpunished! We must come together as one and speak with one voice. I, as your Steward, have the awesome responsibility to lead you from danger. Moreover, I have the moral duty to see that nothing like this ever happens again on Qikiqtarjuaq’s soil. Place your confidence in me, as I will lead you back to peace.

“We live in a dangerous world. Evil lemmings have betrayed us. Other colonies have become breeding grounds for the predators that have murdered our loved ones. They will pay. They will pay dearly!

“We must vigilantly guard our homeland and protect it from terror. We must demonstrate to those who would challenge our resolve that we can bring upon them far more destruction than they have brought upon us. No lemming or predator, anywhere on Baffin Island, can be permitted to think about harming us, let alone trying it.

“Some of you may be asking yourselves, ‘Why would any lemming wish to do us harm?’ I have an answer for you: They hate our freedom!

“We, however, will not relent. We, the free lemmings of Baffin Island, will not only remain free, but we will bring freedom to our fellow lemmings living under the terror of the evil doers.

“Freedom, my dear lemmings, is not free. All of us will need to sacrifice. Freedom has a price: the price of eternal vigilance, the price of putting the colony above our own selfish needs, and, unfortunately, the price of life. Some of us will be sent to fight against the colonies that have sent the predators upon us. We will wage war on terror and we will win the war, but not until the last betrayer is punished and not until the last stoat, arctic fox, snowy owl, and long-tailed skua is eliminated from Baffin Island. It will be a war that will last for generations. History is calling upon us to sacrifice for our grandchildren. We must sacrifice so that they can be free!”

The throng of lemmings that came out for the speech applauded loudly.

George continued:

“I am putting together various programs to protect the homeland. Among these I put forth a call — a call to service. I ask all lemmings to help pay the price for freedom by volunteering to assist the colony in its protection. Over the coming weeks, I will be announcing the institution of these new organizations.

“Together, unified and with one voice, we will protect the homeland!”

The applause was deafening. The lemmings were moved by their leader’s speech. After what seemed like an eternity, the applause diminished and a lemming in the audience asked a question, as is expected at such speeches by the Steward.

“Mr. Steward,” asked the lemming, “why were the Scouts unable to give adequate forewarning of the raids?”

Just as the question was being asked, George was escorted from the rock and disappeared into a circle of lemmings tasked with his protection. No one paid attention to the question. Once again, the lemming repeated the question, this time in a louder voice.

“Mr. Steward, why were the Scouts unable to give adequate forewarning of the raids?”

George's spokes-lemming came upon the stage. He looked irritated about the question. This time the question was heard and the lemmings in the audience were quiet, waiting for a reply.

"Good evening," said the spokes-lemming. "We live in a time of danger. I advise everyone to be careful about what they say or ask. For reasons of colony security, the Steward cannot answer that question at this time. I warn all lemmings to think carefully about what they say or ask. Things are not as they were."

The spokes-lemming threw a menacing glance at the lone lemming who had dared to ask a question. A chill went through the audience. The message was clear, lemmings were to follow their leader and keep their questions to themselves. Things really had changed.

Over the next weeks, the Steward and his advisors put together volunteer programs for the lemmings of Qikiqtarjuaq. Lemmings were recruited to watch other lemmings. Any lemming speaking out against the plans of the Steward was to be reported to Colony Security, a new department created in response to the raids. Lemmings wandering close to or beyond the borders of the colony were to be reported immediately.

All across the colony, a sense of paranoia set in. Some lemmings were truly frightened and reported anything out of the usual to the authorities. Other lemmings took advantage of the paranoia to settle old scores, making false reports about lemmings that had crossed them or over whom they were jealous. In one such case, a lemming reported seeing another lemming in

conversation with a stoat. Of course, lemmings never communicate with stoats, but this did not stop Colony Security from investigating the incident nor did it stop the spread of rumors of betrayal and imminent attacks by predators.

Intentionally, the Steward's advisors began to circulate false rumors of predator sightings. "Snowy owls had been seen, just last night, perched upon the ridge...", "A stoat was seen sneaking through the colony as the sun dipped briefly below the horizon...", and so on. As these reports circulated, the degree of paranoia increased. Many lemmings willingly surrendered their peace of mind and liberties to the Steward's leadership, hoping to protect themselves and their families from doom.

As happens in any society, not all lemmings at Qikiqtarjuaq were gullible. Some began to question George, his advisors, and their intent. At first, they questioned silently, daring only to say the obvious to themselves, but in time the need to share their thoughts with others became overwhelming. Little by little, these skeptical lemmings began to find each other and share their suspicions about George and his war on terror.

George's behavior set off alarm bells in the heads of the better educated amongst the lemmings at Qikiqtarjuaq. Those keen on history knew that lemming society often goes through cycles. After many generations of blissful grazing and happiness, a ruler appears who exploits the natural fear of predators for his own aggrandizement. Such leaders, more often than not, lead the lemmings to disaster and it requires generations to bring a society that falls victim to such a fate back to normalcy. "Could George be a

despot?” wondered these lemmings. “If George is such a lemming,” they thought, “when is the correct time to act, before we know for sure or after it is too late?”

As some lemmings began to question George’s policies openly, a great deal of effort was exerted to silence them. Colony Security was quick to denounce such lemmings as latent betrayers of the colony. The Director of Colony Security went so far as to label them enablers of terrorism. As dissent grew, George felt the need to take further steps to silence the dissenting lemmings. These steps included the spreading of false rumors about dissenting lemmings, harassment and, in some cases, murder.

From time to time the Steward is expected to address the colony and report upon progress. Taking advantage of this opportunity, George stood before the lemmings to make another speech:

“We live in dark times. The evil stoat, arctic fox, snowy owl, and long-tailed skua tirelessly attempt to breach our security. We have already stopped many such attempts of which we have spared the public the agony of alarm. There are those amongst us who doubt us. They doubt our intent. They do the work of the predator by increasing our fear and creating divisions amongst us. Let me make one thing clear, ‘You are either with me, or you are against me!’

“An axis of evil has formed. Various lawless colonies along with the stoat, arctic fox, snowy owl, and long-tailed skua seek our destruction. We must unify to defeat this axis of evil!



“I ask each and every one of you to be vigilant of those who would divide us!”

The crowd cheered and with each cheer those who dissented felt the weight of an ever thickening ice of repression upon their hearts. The message was clear, “Dissent would not be tolerated.”

Lemming repressed lemming. No one needed to enforce George’s rule on a grand scale. George could depend upon his believers to do this for him. Many lemmings that had dared to speak out were harassed, alienated, and, in some cases, attacked by their fellow citizens. Some dissenting lemmings left the colony, hoping to make a better life elsewhere. A few continued their open dissent and this handful of brave lemmings received the full weight of Colony Security’s attention. Some were murdered and their murders were made to look like accidents or suicides.

George had lied when he said that many attacks had been stopped. There had been no further attempts beyond the normal raids that were part and parcel of lemming life. George’s lemmings exaggerated every incident that came their way, like vultures circling the fields looking for the remains of an unfortunate lemming. The goal was to increase fear: for fear, they believed, would increase unity beneath George and unity means power.

In an effort to enhance the public perception of his steadfastness and firm control over Qikiqtarjuaq, George began to portray himself as a military commander. He assumed the posture of a warring lemming at public events.

He took great pains to control every public appearance. His aides were instructed to ensure that at every community engagement, he would be placed on a rock higher than any other lemming. The sun must shine from behind him, creating the illusion of a halo about his figure. Only those in agreement with his policies should be allowed to attend such events. All lemmings submitting questions must have their questions approved in advance or, even better, must be given questions to ask, carefully composed by his advisors. Dissenting lemmings were not to come within earshot or eyeshot of his appearances. The illusion of complete unity was to be maintained at all expense.

Like many dull minded lemmings, George began to fall for the false perception of himself that he had created. The halo, the posture, the cheering crowds — all impacted his psychology. He began to believe the image and as his belief in himself increased, his behavior became ever more exaggerated. Through this self feeding process of inflation, the distance between George and the world increased, at least in the mind of George.

George began to organize the colony into voluntary “defense” clubs. He sent members of the Scouts to train the volunteers and organized them into goon squads, aimed at silencing dissent. As the population spent more and more time performing this “voluntary” service and less time tending to their own needs, the economy of Qikiqtarjuaq began to suffer. However, few complained as all knew what happened to those who criticized George. To the few who did complain, George publicly berated them for putting their personal needs before the good of the colony while privately sending his lemmings out to ruin their lives.

The stress of an ever increasing load of unproductive work began to impoverish the colony. Qikiqtarjuaq had once stood out as amongst the wealthiest of lemming colonies on Baffin Island, but under George's Stewardship it began to decline. A crisis of morale descended upon the colony and George decided that he needed to play a more personal role in directing the defense squads.

"I am the most important and glorious of all lemmings," George thought. "Nothing will boost the morale of my lemmings better than my personal leadership of their squads."

George came down from his high rock to lead the squads during defense practice. The Scouts had done a wonderful job of regimenting the lemmings. On this particular day, the sun was bright and the sight of thousands of lemmings organized into columns and ranks was impressive. In front of the army of lemmings stood George upon his hind legs, back completely erect, in a truly royal posture.

Every lemming in the colony was ordered to fall in that day. After all, the leader himself had taken precious time off of his all important agenda to be with his lemmings and it was important to return the gesture by falling in behind George.

If a lemming had been left in the hills above the fields, he would have been impressed at the sight. However, no lemmings were in the hills above the fields. Only stoats, arctic foxes, snowy owls, and long-tailed skua sat upon

the hills viewing the spectacle. To say that these predators were impressed would be a monumental understatement. They were impressed indeed! They were not only impressed, but they were excited too. Most of all, though, they were hungry and seeing thousands of lemmings all lined up and waiting, like a buffet, was more than they could stand.

With no one assigned to watch for predators, the stoat, arctic fox, snowy owl, and long-tailed skua descended upon the columns and ranks of the Qikiqtarjuaq lemmings. At first, filled with visions of his own glory and superiority, George did not notice the shrieks, screams, and terrible cries of the lemmings behind him. He continued marching forward, blissful and happy. As the screams grew louder and ubiquitous, even George could not ignore them. He turned around and saw in his wake a sky full of snowy owl and long-tailed skua. Beneath he saw a growing pool of blood and the slow disintegration of the following ranks.

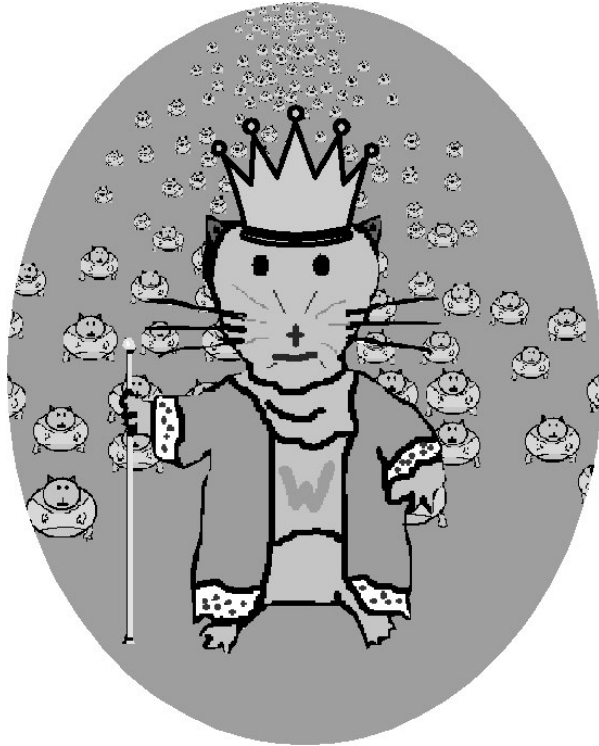
George became indignant, “We are your King!” he yelled. “How dare you pay heed to those terrorist birds when your glorious leader stands before you? You are safe in Our care. March forward and We will lead you to safety!”

Proudly, George marched forward. His masculine posture and confidence captured the hearts of his lemmings and they fell into position, trailing George with faith and resolution. Soon they too were oblivious to the carnage and screams. Steadfast and with determination, George led the army forward. As the number of predators increased, George marched faster and faster. After a few minutes, the entire army, with George at its head,

was running as fast as it could, away from their Qikiqtarjuaq. The predators followed. As the lemmings ran faster, the screams got louder and louder.

No one knows exactly when it happened, but somewhere along the way the army became a panicked mob. Predators were raiding from all directions. Rather than break up and disperse, a disunity that would have saved many, they followed George as they had learned to do. George, for his part, was now consumed with absolute fear. The predators were gaining on him. Blind with fear, he ran. In fact, he ran so blindly that he failed to notice the cliff looming before him. As they neared the cliff, the lemmings converged on George. The entire mass was so closely packed that no lemming could see beyond the lemming before him.

As George reached the edge of the cliff, he dug in his paws, noticing the drop below, but it was too late. The mob of lemmings behind George slammed into him from behind. George was sent flying over the precipice into the void below. From that point forward, no lemming could see the cliff's edge before flinging himself into the abyss. The entire colony rushed over the precipice and plunged into the canyon below.



Excitedly, the owls and skua dove over the edge, swooping down upon the canyon floor. There were far too many lemmings strewn upon the earth to be collected and preyed upon. After stuffing themselves until they could eat no more, they left the carnage of thousands of lemmings to decay in the summer's sun and returned to their nests.

Amongst those left to rot, was George, King of Qikiqtarjuaq.