

The *Gamble* Begins ...

Volcanologists believed there was no way to define an active volcano, which could raise its ugly head in a lifespan ranging from several months to several million years. Reinhardt Richter knew better.

Volcanoes, he said, never lost their fire, and they were all connected – every last one of them – by an inner linking network of tunnels filled with molten lava that spread throughout the netherworld. They wormed their way like a maze through the hard-rock recesses of the earth, and together they possessed more energy, more radiation, and certainly more heat than the sun.

Thousands of volcanoes from every corner of the globe were emptying their assorted magma into one great ocean of fire and brimstone that was near enough to the surface of the ground for mankind to reach down and touch it. Only Reinhardt Richter knew the location. It's there, he said, nodding as astutely as any scholar would.

Where?

He grinned, an old man with an old and wizened grin. In the ground beneath my farm, he said. You can hear them rattle sometimes when the day grows dark.

What?

The gates of hell, he said, and the grin lost its bite. The howling of the condemned will sometimes keep you awake at night.

His face turned to stone. Then again, it might have been the beer.