As twilight descended into night, Martha carefully placed another tallow candle in the window.

The flickering yellow flames echoed across all the village windows created a collective beacon of safe homecoming. Or so they hoped.

‘Old wives’ tale or not. I’m not risking it,’ whispered Martha, ‘Not again.’

Though warmed by the open fire, Martha shivered, wrapping her shawl tightly around her wiry frame. A vivid memory was unlocked. She tried not to gag as the faint, damp smells of seaweed, brine and charred timbers encircled her, equally familiar and repulsive.

Tonight, was exactly like last time. The morning’s light airs now tore across the raging sea and howled through laneways. An onshore breeze, most wicked of all, teased sailors and fisherman alike when combined with a swirling tide. Jagged teeth of reefs waited to unmast sailing vessels, or rip keels from unwary fishing vessels.

The village was uneasy, pleading for peace while expecting the inevitable distress call from those who wouldn’t escape the sea. The last ship lost twenty men, ten claimed by the sea, taking them to her depths.

Martha looked heavenwards, ‘Won’t be long now.’

As though hearing her prayer, the siren rang out, a plaintive yet urgent note.

Martha ran to join her neighbours in the alleyway, a cacophony of scurrying feet on cobbles. Shrill voices screeched, “What ship this time?”

Skirts whipping their bare legs, the women struggled against the storm to the beach. Ahead, a doomed sloop raised its bow high above the surf and crashed onto the rocks. Thunder rolled around the bay and a flash of sheet lightning matched the exact moment the powder magazine exploded.

Fresh cries rent the air. Survivors on board leapt into the sea, escaping blazing timbers, although that choice did not promise safety.

Older village men inflated sheep bladders, floats for their fishing nets. Younger, fitter men tied them onto the bodies in the water.

‘Stops the sea grabbing them,’ explained Bill, ‘Can’t sink, see.’

A young man crawled exhausted from the breakers, pulling in his precious cargo.

‘Got one,’ called Davey, ‘Alive.’

‘Nice work lad,’ called Bill, ‘Never mind you flattering yourself though. Plenty more to be fished out. Hand him over and get back out.’

Davey nodded, ‘Help here!’

Two women grabbed the injured, straining to drag him over the sand. Davey turned and plunged through the surf for another.

Through the long night, agonised calls lessened until they stopped. By morning the storm had passed and a clean, fresh day broke mocking the carnage below. A ship beached high on a rocky outcrop, flag dangling from a broken mainmast, and corpses decorating the shore, each one tied to a bladder.

By late afternoon, Martha trudged home exhausted, overwhelmed by today’s losses and another, many years ago.

‘Such a waste,’ said Martha, ‘Twelve found, five missing, and only two still alive.’

A single tear rolled down her cheek as she prodded the fire back to life.

‘No, six missing,’ she choked, ‘Young Davey went in, but hasn’t come out. Yet.’

As twilight descended into night, Martha carefully placed another tallow candle in the window.