



**SWAMP**

**LAND**

*A short story by*

**JENNI WILTZ**

# VERSAILLES

## 1670

**T**he poison works quickly, soaking into your mouth with the first sip of wine. Beneath your tongue and behind your throat, it begins: a slow burn, as if you've eaten horseradish or bitten a pepper kernel. You can ignore it at first. In this, the Italian chemists have done well.

Before the first course is cleared away, the poison will scorch a cannonball-shaped hole in your stomach. You reach for your water goblet and pour all the contents down your throat, but it will not help. There is nowhere for the water or your food to go. The poison has destroyed your entrails.

I know what you are thinking. You want to know how it ends. Do the convulsions of your dying body rob you of breath before they break your back? Do you bite off your tongue before the cloud of bilious foam pours from your mouth?

I can tell you all these things. The answer is yes.

They pulled me from my chair and laid me on the floor, valets squatting on my arms like crows on a withered branch. I knew what they were waiting for, but I could not oblige. The living imagine that our last words flee the body through the mouth, but they have left us long before anyone puts an ear to a dying person's lips. They are not

words at all, really. They are the shimmering tissue of memory to which your body clings, one precious vision so pure the soul commanded the body to retain it. If I had known that death would bring me back to that place, back to him, I would not have fought it so hard.



In those days, the gardens smelled of oranges. When the pale white blossoms were at their fullest, a gentle wind could shake them loose from their moorings. They lodged in our skirts and our shawls and our hair. Sometimes they would fall from our clothing during supper, landing in the soup. One could only laugh; what other place in the world served orange blossom soup? That was Versailles. A golden palace in a swamp, a place where whores twisted their pannier wires into wings for every masquerade.

That morning, the air fell soft and lucid over our rooftops. I slept alone in a great carved bed until my husband, Monsieur, threw open my door. “Wake up!” he barked, clapping his hands to rouse my lady’s maid.

Monsieur was everything his brother Louis was not—short and dark, thin like an eel with no muscle attached to his slippery frame. He wore a narrow moustache coated with wax. Sometimes he would choose a pretty young man with long fingers to accompany him to bed. When he woke, he would command the young man to dip one finger in pomade and stroke it over his twin slivers of hair.

“You are late,” Monsieur panted, his breath both sour and sweet. “He is in the garden.”

I blinked and rubbed my eyes. The card game in the salon had ended at half-past four; the clock on the bedside table read half past six. How could Louis already be up and dressed for a stroll? It is true what they say, I thought. He is only half human.

“What are you waiting for?” Monsieur cried. He clamped his fingers around my arm and pulled me from the bed. I stumbled to the floor, clutching the sheet to my bare chest.

For the first time, I noticed the other person in the room. A pretty young man stood behind Monsieur, his face powdered like an opera singer’s. The man’s lip rouge was smeared, over his own face and over Monsieur’s. Both of their chemises were torn and stained, sliding off one shoulder. They smelled of cognac and the sourness of love.

The powdered man snickered as his eyes traveled the length of my bare body. He knew where to find the nebulous purple circles that darkened my belly and thighs.

“Quickly,” Monsieur growled. “Or one of his whores will take your place. Surely La Vallière is not such a sloth as you.”

The powdered man curled his lip. “Sloth? She looks more like a tired nag.”

“That is what alchemy is for.” Monsieur snapped his fingers at Marie, my sleepy lady-in-waiting. “You!” He pointed at the cosmetic pots on the vanity table. “Make gold out of this bitter iron.”

“No,” I said, feeling the room whirl around me. “I cannot.”

“You will.”

Monsieur closed his fist and stepped toward me. If the court ever wondered why the king’s brother remained childless, that fist was the answer. It was the answer to what I wore, whether I rode on a horse or in a litter, whether I danced or reclined in the salon after supper. It was all in service of Monsieur’s great game, brother against brother, fought with the only weapon Monsieur had at his disposal. So help me, Monsieur had said as he climbed on top of me on our wedding night. There will be one thing I have that he does not.

The powdered man sidled up to Monsieur and placed his lips upon Monsieur’s white neck. “Enough of this,” he mumbled, pulling Monsieur toward my rumpled bed. “Send her away.”

Monsieur turned and kissed him on the lips. I watched their tongues scoop in and out, their cheeks cavernous with the force it took to reach so far into the other’s mouth. As they embraced, Monsieur snapped his fingers. Marie rushed forward to wrap me in a robe and usher me to the dressing table, crowded with my white lead paint, curling tongs, and patches.

“He is in the *Tapis Vert*,” Monsieur whispered, eyes rolling back in his head as the painted man bit into his neck. “He must see you.” Then he moaned with pleasure and stumbled over his lover’s feet as they swayed from the room.

Marie reached for the jar of white paint. She smeared a daub on

her hand, from which she would coat my face, throat, and hands. Long nights at the gaming tables had put permanent creases beside my eyes. Without cosmetics, the world would see how thinly I had been worn. “Give me your arm, madame.”

I stared at the paint, thick and lumpy like pus. If Monsieur saw Louis and I smeared in white paste, the way he and the powdered man had been smeared in lip rouge, the game would be over. I would be put away. I would never see Louis again. “No,” I said. “No paint today.”



The *Tapis Vert* was young yet, just a row of trees with trunks no thicker than a choirboy’s neck. I waited for him there, perched on a stone bench beside a pond frosted green with springtime pollen. My ladies ringed themselves around me, watching for La Vallière’s spies as they wove a wreath of pale flowers into my hair.

Louis liked us to wear pastoral colors as we lolled our feet in fountains or twirled in satin slippers down dusty garden paths. When the slippers got dirty, our ladies replaced them with new ones, retrieved from a wheelbarrow that followed us wherever we went. Nymphs, Louis said, could not prance in muddy shoes.

The day before, Monsieur had thrown away my favorite white kid slippers, in favor of a tissue-thin silken pair that would be shredded on the sandy pathways of Louis’s gardens. “They will only be good once,” I

protested.

“Just like you,” he said.

I looked at my feet. There was no freedom in being born the daughter of a king, nor in being married to a king’s brother. A woman, I thought, is nothing but a cage built to house the dreams of men. All she can do is choose the color of the metal.

I chose gold.

Louis traveled in a cloud of static, like the viscous heat of a summer thunderstorm. I felt him before I saw him, striding past the saplings towards me. He was beautiful then, haloed with youth and feverish dreams. The poison of Monsieur’s hands was still on me, in the clothes I wore and the shoes on my feet. I turned my eyes to the sky. Forgive me, I begged.

“What is it,” Louis asked, glancing upward, “that deprives me of your full attention?”

“Nothing, Your Majesty.”

“Then are you sure you’re looking in the right place?”

“No,” I whispered. The sun and moon and stars were in his face; of course I was not looking in the right place.

“Perhaps you ought to look at me instead.”

I obeyed, afraid the morning light would illuminate the circles beneath my eyes or the red veins lining their surface. He was perfect, and I was so far from it that God must laugh at the sight of us together.

“Why do you always look at the ground, Henriette?” he teased,

tilting my chin up toward him. “Are you so intent on becoming an insectologist?”

“Never,” I said. “I loathe creatures that spend the day on their bellies.”

“Do you now?” Louis said, pulling me up from the bench. I smelled the stables on him, the warmth of the straw and the musk of horse sweat. The heat from his body flowed straight through my flimsy dress. I wondered how Marie Louise slept at night next to him. Would she not sweat as though she had a fever? Oh, yes—you did not think I was the only one married to someone I did not love? Our most Catholic majesty was married as well—to the Infanta of Spain, his mother’s niece.

Twitters erupted all around us: my ladies, laughing nervously to cover the sound of our voices as we said things that ought never be overheard. “Away with you,” Louis said. The magical ether that surrounded an anointed king carried his words to their ears and they scattered like sand blown from a table. I said a prayer for them to stay away. I asked God to keep them tied up in spiderwebs until our moment had passed.

“Your shoes,” he said, looking at the shredded slippers on my feet.

“They are damaged, Your Majesty.”

“They are ruined.”

He reached down and picked me up, holding me against his chest. I knew he could feel my pulse beneath my knees, where my legs draped over his arms. *I love you*, it said.

He set me on the bench and knelt before me, taking my foot in his hands. The soft tips of his fingers brushed my ankle as he began to remove my slipper. I wanted to tell him to stop, that if he touched the soles of my feet, I would be lost forever. In my mind, there was no difference between a touch on my fragile sole and one on other places that lovers knew well.

Louis slipped one finger between the edge of my slipper and my ankle, sliding it gently back and forth across the thin, blue-tinged flesh. The slipper peeled away, falling to the ground like a leaf.

He stared at my bare foot, and I stared at him. The thin line of his scalp looked like a trail drawn in chalk, once the wind had begun to blur the edges. It made me want to blow over it and scatter the rest of the chalk. I opened my lips and shaped them in a circle, ready.

He untucked his chemise and cleaned my foot, patting it gently as if I were a child. Through the thin cambric, I could see the tangled copper curls nestled on his chest. I bit my lip to keep from crying out in want of him.

“Henriette,” he said, sliding his hands along the top of my foot. It felt like feathers, wings, fur, clouds. Then he began to knead the bottom of my foot in a circular pattern, directly in the center, pressing hard enough to turn the tips of his fingers white.

I grasped the rough edges of the bench as heat radiated through me in great sunbursts. I burned for relief, for something to heave itself against the ache that tormented me. My body felt ripe, like a

pomegranate. Seeds and juice encased in rosy flesh.

*Make him want you. Make him give you more.*

My desire had a voice, and it was not satisfied with a feathery touch upon my ankle. I reached out for him. His eyes were molten like spears cast into the fire, and he was ready.

*Pull him to you.*

I obeyed. The pressure of his fingers on my wrist sent waves of pleasure all the way through me, echoing through the bench, down to the ground beneath me, into the soil, beneath the trees' roots, into the damp ceiling of Hades itself. We will break everything, I thought. And we have not even begun.

Louis brought his lips to my ear and the baroque pearl laced through it.

*You are almost there, the voice said. But he must be closer still.*

I put my arms around his neck. His eyes met mine, searching. I could not see where they ended and the rest of the world began. "Henriette," he said again. "I want—"

"Yes," I answered.

*That will be all, the voice intoned. Now get away from him. You have done all I intended you to do.*

My heart clenched as I realized Monsieur's voice mirrored the voice of my desire—two treacherous forces colluding to bring me to grief. I cannot leave him, I cried, feeling as though I might die from the ache that hammered in the cavernous space inside me. It was empty, and it

would kill me. I will not die for you, I told it.

*But will you die for him?*

I did not hear. Louis was already kissing me and the sun itself could not have burned as hot as my own body beneath him. I was the silken cocoon in which we would both hide until the scars and nightmares faded away, until we could be reborn into this terrible world, unblemished, ready to begin again.

Yes, I said.



When I returned to my room, I found Monsieur slumped in a chair, his black eyes glittering with what looked like tears. The proud slant of his shoulders had gone. He looked at me as if for the first time. “Were you caught in a storm?”

So, I thought, this was how it would be. The truth, veiled like a Muslim. “Yes.”

“You rode it out, I trust?” His long black curls, usually shaped so carefully on heating tongs, slid in a tangle from his shoulder to his back.

“I found shelter, yes.”

He flung himself from the chair, pulling me to him. Monsieur pressed his nose into the torn lace at my breast. “I can smell him on you!” he cried. “His face has been pressed here, just as mine is!”

He breathed in deeply, holding the scent in his chest.

I closed my eyes. I had no pity for him. He had put me in his brother's way, knowing what would happen. He had done this to himself. Whatever happened, I would float away, carried by the webs I had spun to keep the rest of the world away from that bench. "Do what you must," I said.

Monsieur threw me to the floor. "He already has."

His black stare seared every inch of my body. He, too, believes his brother to be half a god, I thought. He, too, believes that taking such a man inside of you must leave you visibly altered. I wondered if there was a glow surrounding me, like the halos of Byzantine icons.

Suddenly, the door opened without a knock. A powdered face burst into the room. "There you are!" it chirped. The lip rouge had been carefully reapplied, a grotesque carmine color. Both eyes dripped with wet black lacquer. "I found what you asked for!" He waved a vial in the air, alive with small white particles.

"That is it?" Monsieur asked softly.

"That is it."

"Take it to your room. I will join you shortly."

"And I shall have all you promised me?"

"And you shall have all that I promised you."

Monsieur's paramour closed the door softly behind him, lips pursed in a mischievous scowl.

"What are you doing with that man?" I asked.

Monsieur blinked long, sooty lashes. "The Chevalier de Lorraine

has found my smelling salts.”

“You do not appear as though you need to be revived.”

“Oh, but I do,” he said, crouching low so his eyes met mine. “I have been sleeping, and I wish to awaken.” His hands cupped my face and I thought he would crush my skull between them. “It is a nightmare, is it not?”

Tears pricked the dry surface of my eyes. The nightmare was of his design, and now he himself had tired of it. How stupid the world could be. “Yes. But it needn’t be.”

“No,” he whispered, blinking until tears fell down his cheeks. “I suppose not.”



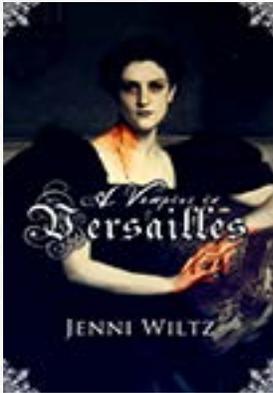
Six years later, I died on the kitchen floor of Saint-Cloud. That is how long it took Monsieur to overcome the pangs of guilt he felt at plotting the murder of his own wife, a woman his brother had loved. The smelling salts found their way from the Chevalier’s hands to my goblet, and the end was writ.

Louis sobbed when he heard. And then went to bed with the Marquise de Montespan.

# THE END

## Also By

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## Reality Bites

Henriette d'Orléans was a real person. She was married to Louis XIV's brother...but was really was in love with the king. Her father was the murdered English king, Charles I, and her mother was the great Henri IV's daughter, Henrietta Maria. This story won third prize in the 2015 Keats Soul-Making Literary Contest! Yay, Henriette. The credit goes to her for leaving me so much to work with.

# About the Author



Jenni Wiltz writes fiction and creative nonfiction. She has won national writing awards for romantic suspense and creative nonfiction. Her short fiction has been published in literary journals including *Gargoyle* and *The Portland Review*, as well as several small-press anthologies. When she's not writing, she enjoys sewing, running, and genealogical research. She lives in Pilot Hill, California. Visit her online at [JenniWiltz.com](http://JenniWiltz.com).