



Rogue Garden, Rogue Gardener

by John A. Frochio

"To nurture a garden is to feed not just the body, but the soul." — Alfred Austin

Oliver dragged himself through the freshly scented corridors of the officeplex, soaking in the colors and aromas of the office gardens. He'd been a Gardener for over fifty years. Since Jacob retired, he was the most senior Gardener in New Green City. Jacob was an honorable man who had loved his job, but he was forced to retire at age 80. Having no close family, he was frequently found wandering the gardens he once tended.

Last week Oliver found him among his irises and petunias, lifeless, with a pleasant smile on his face. Ever since that day, Oliver's attitude had turned bitter.

As depression continued to consume Oliver, he let his own garden "go rogue." In small stages, it spread beyond its perimeter, into walk spaces, into transit corridors, crawling up walls and windows, sometimes reducing sunlight into closed spaces. His garden even intruded into other gardens. The admins, of course, were too busy huddled in their greenoffices to notice Oliver's personal rebellion.

However, Natasha, a young Gardener barely through her first year, *did* notice Oliver's rogue garden, since it encroached upon her own charge. Natasha was a young black woman who kept her hair long, unlike most of the female Gardeners, who kept theirs close-cropped. She was dressed in Standard Gardener Green, but with colorful accessories—belts, wrist bands, head bands, rings—another break from tradition. Though she was an outsider in certain ways, she performed her professional duties with respect and care.

But fuming at the rogue flora's invasion into her turf, she went in search of the responsible—no, clearly irresponsible—Gardener.

She found him on his hands and knees singing to himself in a small corner of her garden, pulling weeds the old-fashioned way, by hand. No electric weeder was in sight.

The song he intoned painfully off key reminded her of a funeral dirge. Some good plants came out with the weeds.

She halted a dozen feet from him. She immediately recognized him. Oliver was almost as legendary as the late Gardener Emeritus Jacob. Word had been spreading that he was losing his touch since Jacob had passed.

"Be careful," she said, her voice calmer than she expected. "You're uprooting the good plants, too."

He looked up but said nothing, his face blank, glazed over. Did he even see her standing there? Had he gone mad?

She clutched her tool pack tightly against her slim body. A growing panic crawled up her spine.

Finally, he grunted. "This is my greenspace to tend. Your garden has invaded my space."

"You're mistaken, sir."

"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever."

Her voice rose as she spoke; her body trembled. "Is this—is this all for nothing? These plants and the city and the people all around and through them, they work together in a beautiful commensal harmony of nature. Is this all for nothing? No! It's a relationship forged by tender loving care, the hard work of the elite class of Gardeners. We are an honored class, revered by all."

He looked at her now as though he was seeing her for the first time. He shook his head.

"That used to be true. No more. We're taken for granted now. Many have forgotten we even exist. They believe it all happens naturally, nature and mankind in a perfect loving relationship. Who are we but the busy little bees who keep the flowers pollinated and blossoming? No, I'm mistaken. Even the bees get more respect than us."

Fresh scents of new green growth mingled with the sweet perfumes of the flowers and fruits. She breathed it in slowly, letting it calm her trembling.

Before she could say another word, he reached out and snagged her weeder from her toolbelt.

"Hey!"

"We weed," he said. He passed her weeder over the plants without turning it on. "The weeds must be dug out and discarded so the good plants can thrive. Do people know we weed twice a week?"

He grabbed her power shears, held it high.

"We prune. The dead branches must be cut off, and the dead flowers must be deadheaded so the young ones can spring forth. Do they know we prune weekly?"

She was afraid to move. He was truly mad.

He snatched her nutrient distributor. "We nurture. We water. Like people, they need food and water to grow, but they also need love and attention. We must coddle them like babies. Do they know we nurture them daily?"

She blushed and hastily gathered her equipment from the ground where he had discarded them. He hunched down, dropping his arms, his head sagging.

A familiar buzzing and clicking sound caused them to pause their conversation. An AI courier bot wheeled by, its many arms loaded with parcels of various sizes. They watched it pass by and disappear around a corner.

She took a deep breath. "Some don't know of course, but many do. We do it because we want to, not for adoration. We love our work. I believe you've gone mad, sir. You've let your garden go rogue, yet you claim you love your charge."

He nodded at her outburst and sighed. "I'm Oliver."

"I know who you are."

"You've heard about Jacob? He was my friend. He was the Senior Gardener, but now I am. I suppose you'll have to report me. That's fine."

He stood up shakily, staggered a few feet, then collapsed like a deflating balloon onto a decorative bench in an alcove under a morning glory-lined trellis. The flowers seemed to bend toward him as he sat, beckoning for attention. Was it an illusion?

She sat on a bench nestled opposite him among the tulips and daffodils, which shyly turned away from her. She set her equipment down. A puzzled expression skimmed across her face.

Why was her garden so shy with her today? Perhaps it was the presence of the rogue Gardener. Or perhaps it had never seen her angry before, lashing out at the old Gardener. This unseen side of her could be distressing her plants. She was never like this when she was tending her garden. She was always cheerful and frequently sang joyful songs out loud. She didn't feel like singing today.

More calmly she said, "I don't know what I'm going to do yet. Will you do something about your wild garden growth infringing upon my greenspace?"

He didn't answer, only stared at her.

Natasha said, "Your plants are well-behaved. They're responsive to you. They'll listen to you. You can get them back in order. Promise me."

"They're my children. Yes, perhaps their wild actions are a response to my sadness and anger at the loss of my friend. Of course, of course. I promise."

"Then I'll say nothing."

He sighed, lowered his head. "You're so young."

She hesitated before answering. "I love our gardens, our commission. I took my training seriously."

"I don't doubt it. I can tell you're a Gardener of good conscience. There are things, however, you can't learn from books or even hands-on training. Those are too structured. They teach you step one followed by step two, and so on. But experience teaches you that the real world isn't always so perfectly organized. You learn these lessons from the plants themselves. We learn from each other, without words or a twelve-step program."

"I mentored under Jacob. He taught me how to empathize with the plants under my care. He spoke those very same words."

His eyebrows rose. "You knew Jacob?"

"Yes. A humble and passionate man. I was in his last class before he retired from teaching last Autumn. I learned a lot from him. He always said the real world was the best teacher."

"He taught me how to program the louvers to allow the correct amount of sunlight in at the correct times onto the correct plants. He taught me which plants could co-exist

with which plants and which plants absolutely would not. He taught me when to give up on a treatment and try something else. He taught me to think outside of the garden box."

"I miss Jacob."

She paused. "I miss him, too."

After a brief silence passed between them, he said, "I'll get my plants under control."

"Thank you."

She gathered her equipment and stood up.

As she turned to walk away, he said, "Except. . ."

She stopped, turned back, and looked at him. Her eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

"I'm not sure they'll listen to me. Since I've been negligent, they've become rebellious. I'm afraid they might ignore me, turn on me."

"Assert yourself. Remember the Code of the Gardeners. Loving care with a firm hand. Take command. They'll obey their Gardener. They're like children you know. We love them, but we won't put up with bad attitudes or disobedience."

"Do you really believe that?"

She smiled broadly. "Of course. They'll come back to you."

His face flushed. His head hurt. He was the Senior here, yet she was quoting the Code to him. He would laugh out loud if he could. But he needed to get some rest. Today was not the right time. Tomorrow he would start fresh, take charge, and set things right. For Jacob. And for young, idealistic Natasha.

He stood up wearily. "You're right, but I need sleep first. Tomorrow I'll take care of it."

She looked around.

"But look how wild they've become, even since the time we first met. They need to be disciplined now before they ruin my whole garden. They need to be told. I'm not their Gardener. They won't listen to me. You have to do something now."

He knew she was right, but he was exhausted. *Jacob, why did you leave me, old friend?*

"So tired. Just need to rest a little first."

He stood up, leaned on his staff, and lost his balance, staggering into the trellis. She dropped her equipment and rushed over to him. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders and steadied him. He had been a tall man in her memory, but he seemed so small now, hunched over and aging before her eyes.

"I'll stay with you. I'll help you get through this."

"But why?"

"Gardeners stick together."

He stared at her. Before he could say another word, she helped him back to his seat.

"Rest a while here. What can I get you? Water? A protein stick?"

He shook his head weakly.

At that moment a bell sounded from her wrist. She hastily withdrew her umbrella from her bag, popped it open, and held it over herself and Oliver. A dusting drone passed over them, sending cascading waves of weed-killer over the plants. She was usually more prepared and aware of the time for the regular sprayings, but today she was off—in more ways than one.

After the drone had passed and the dust had settled, she retracted her umbrella and kneeled before him. She took his hands in hers.

He felt oddly comforted. He wasn't used to people caring about him since his wife had passed away years ago and his son had moved to the other side of the world. It had been a long time since he'd felt those kinds of feelings. He tried to reject them out of hand, toss them to the ground, trample them underfoot. It was too little too late. But. . . no. It wasn't too little. It wasn't too late. It was actually just what he needed at just the right time.

But he was so tired.

He was worn out. Like an old shoe. The thought made him chuckle.

The flowers and vines that had gone rogue from his garden turned to Oliver, reached out, wrapped themselves around him, caressed him, enveloped him in their leaves like comforting cloaks.

He sighed and smiled softly as they smothered him in a cocoon of solace, like a warm blanket on a chilly winter evening. As he succumbed to the pleasures of their warmth, he felt his heart race.

"I don't feel well," he said. His voice rose barely above a whisper. "Is it my time already?"

"No, no, it isn't," said Natasha, trembling.

He slowly closed his eyes.

She wept as she hastily punched 911. Soon a bevy of medibots and service drones wheeled into their greenspace, circling the limp body of Oliver. She stood out of the way and watched in silence. He was saying something, but she couldn't hear his words.

. . .

The next day, Oliver's rogue plants were back in their proper confines, climbing over the structures that were made for them, bursting with fresh colors along the walkways, exploding with all their varied shades of green. A new Gardener would soon be taking care of Oliver's garden since he had been retired to a state nursing home. Natasha had promised to visit him, though the doctors informed her he'd probably not last long. His heart was weak, and he wouldn't survive a transplant operation.

Natasha walked through Oliver's garden on her way to tend to her children. She paused briefly to admire the bright and luscious variety of plants that had thrived under his charge. She hoped someday to attain his level of perfect tranquility and beauty. For now, they were behaving, obeying his final choked commands as the medibots had carried him out.

Later, as she was leaving for the day, she encountered the new Gardener tending Oliver's garden. It took her a minute to realize it was an AI, one of the new prototype "Garden Tenders" being tested in various locations around the city. She shook her head. She was not comfortable with this new trend. They weren't ready to replace a human. How could an AI "feel" a garden, understand its deepest needs? She thought of Jacob, her mentor, and all he had taught her. Did anyone teach like that anymore? Could an AI be taught like that?

It rolled past her, acknowledging her presence with a meaningless beep. A sudden chill made her shiver in the electric warmth of the green corridor.

It wasn't long before Oliver's garden turned brown, bent over in mourning. The perplexed Garden Tender whirled about in a frenzy, darting from one dying plant to the next like a mad dancer.

Natasha decided to stage an intervention. She spent her free time helping the Garden Tender called GT7 troubleshoot and resolve some of the issues with its plants. The AI watched and learned, adding new understanding to its gardening algorithm. It took a while, but gradually the garden became more responsive to their combined efforts. GT7 was learning to accept its limitations concerning the value of a human Gardener's tender touch and nurturing love.

Jacob had been skeptical about the future of AI gardening. His voiced doubts had infected Natasha's thinking as well. However, she came to appreciate the benefits of humans and robots working together, applying their individual strengths to accomplish a beautiful outcome.

Natasha resolved never to give up her fight for the ways of Jacob and Oliver, the perfect bond of garden and Gardener. But she knew the future demanded a compromise.

So began the era of the Human-AI Pact, the hard-fought understanding that working together could accomplish greater things than working apart.

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About the Author

John A. Frochio lives in Western Pennsylvania and recently retired from developing and supporting computer automation systems for steel mills and hospitals (a strange combination indeed). He's had stories published in a variety of online publications and anthologies, including *Time Travel Tales* (2016); *Visions VII: Universe* (2017); Third Flatiron's *Hidden Histories* (2019); *Something Wicked This Way Rides* (2021); and *Strange Wars* (2022).



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