

# *The Never Ending Year*

*by fabaulti*

Joe doesn't miss people. He has nobody to miss and he's certain nobody would miss him if he was gone either.

He doesn't miss Rikiishi, not really. The bastard lives in his mind at this point, and Joe gets to see his shit-eating grin every time something goes wrong, taunting him even in his ghost form. There's nothing to miss here.

He doesn't miss Nishi either, even though he sometimes catches himself wishing for a good spar with the guy. The fact that he's moved on with his life and quit boxing is bittersweet, but Joe gets it. They're different.

He can't even fathom missing Yoko, as she gives him no chance to even think about it. She's always in his business. Still, he feels like he owes her. If it weren't for her he wouldn't be here, thinking about missing someone for the first time in his life.

Joe's unsure steps follow Robert's voice down the hotel's hallway. He can hear it clearly — the idiot is telling Carlos how proud he is, how wonderful their fight was and other nonsense like that, just to fill the soul crushing silence that lingers upon them after the fight. Danpei does that too, sometimes.

It's much too late and the place seems almost desolate. It feels like the three of them are the only people remaining in the world at that moment, and Joe likes it.

The voice halts, and so do their steps, allowing Joe to catch up with them. He underestimates the distance between them, giving Carlos the opportunity to spot him.

“Ah, Joe! Hello! Have you come here to settle the score?”

Robert shields Carlos with his body, hyper aware of Joe's every move.

“What do you want, Mister Yabuki?”

The question is so silly that not even Joe has an answer to it. He doesn't know what he wants, or why he is here in the first place. He only knows Carlos is leaving soon. Too soon.

And it makes no sense. Because they fought, and it was everything Joe hoped it would be. Carlos freed him from Rikiishi's ghost and gave him back his wings. He should've said thank you and left, just like the other man did. But he can't. Because Carlos is leaving so very soon to fight Mendoza or whatever and finally win his title. Because Carlos is moving on and Joe can't.

It'll be over, Joe realises — Carlos will be the number one in the world and he will remain a child of the slums, rain hitting his

face through the gym's roof night after night, with only the memory of Carlos' punches to keep him warm.

"You're leaving tonight?" he manages to ask, and Carlos' expression softens instantly.

"Tomorrow night," he says.

"I see. Just wanted to say thanks... for everything."

It's an awkward thing to say, but it's the best Joe can do. Because there's no way he can ask Carlos not to leave. He can't say I'll miss you to someone he barely knows outside the ring.

"We must thank you too, Mister Yabuki, for tonight's wonderful fight," Robert tells him, and Joe's half listening. His gaze lingers on Carlos, on the bandages on his face and the ever so faint smile that always seems to rest on his lips. There's something akin to understanding in his eyes.

"Robert, I'll see you tomorrow morning," Carlos tells the blond. Surprisingly, Robert doesn't make a fuss out of being dismissed like that, wishing them both good night and warning Carlos that they have to wake up early tomorrow.

The silence grows in Robert's absence, leaving Joe in the company of Carlos and an overwhelming feeling of inadequacy. He's unsure what to say next or what to do. He doesn't know what

he wants besides simply being in Carlos' presence for as long as time allows it. It's maddening, this unidentified feeling.

"Why are you here, Joe?"

"I don't know."

It's as good of an answer as any, and it's certainly the only truthful one.

Carlos fishes the key out of his pocket and silently unlocks the door, forgetting Joe's existence for the time being.

*It's over, Joe thinks. He'll go to his room, lock that damned door behind him and I'll never see him again.* A wave of panic gushes over Joe and his knees threaten to give out. The feeling is similar to the uncontrollable panic he used to feel whenever he tried to hit his opponent's temple.

"Why don't you come in and we can find out together? I have a bottle of champagne somewhere around and it's not too late to celebrate the new year."

It's an odd offer, but Carlos is an odd man. He fights ruthlessly one moment and spends all his hard earned money to buy presents for the poor children of the slums the next. His punch almost dislocated Joe's jaw, yet his smile warms his heart.

"Sure, why not?"

Carlos is so very warm to the touch. His skin radiates the devastating warmth of a wildfire, leaving burns on Joe's own skin with every touch. He's rough and soft at the same time, caressing Joe with both determination and care.

For the first time in his life — and it feels like there are a lot of firsts happening tonight — Joe is still. Carlos is pinning him down, cradling his head in his calloused palm and kissing him hungrily. Joe doesn't dare move. He doesn't know what to do and how to do it, only that he doesn't want this to ever stop. The warmth of Carlos' body leaving him becomes a terrifying thought.

Carlos is biting at his lips, urging Joe to fight him this once too. This battle Joe knows he can't win — the kisses feel just like the soul shattering punches he got against the ropes, with Carlos keeping him in place, helpless while he gives and takes everything he pleases.

“Do you want to...?”

“Yes,” Joe breathes out, again and again, because he wants.

“Whatever you want to do.”

It should scare him, the fact that he's willing to give himself so easily, but Carlos is so very gentle. Almost undeservingly so. He attends to Joe's pleasure more than he does to his own, touching and stroking parts of Joe that he didn't even know were pleasurable to

begin with. The hand never leaves his nape, holding Joe's head in place, but the other one grabs at his shirt, struggling to untuck it from the confines of his trousers.

"I wonder if Joe Yabuki fucks the way he boxes..." Carlos whispers. His warm breath next to Joe's ear makes the man shiver.

"I've never... I..."

"Oh."

It's not often that Joe feels inadequate. He prides himself on the fact that he's larger than life, that nothing ever phases him. Yet here he is, small and vulnerable beneath Carlos. He expects the man to stop now that he knows Joe's secret, that he's so very inexperienced in this. That all he knows how to do is fight.

Instead, Carlos kisses him once again, slower, softer, careful.

"Then I have to make sure your first time will be good, don't I?"

Joe laughs. Because if he didn't he would be crying. Because it's his only mechanism of hiding whatever feeling he's not ready to confront. Carlos joins him too, and they share a breath.

He's not in love. The thought refuses to leave his mind and Joe clings onto it. He's not in love, he repeats when Carlos touches him again and he catches fire.

For once, all the loneliness that has been following him throughout his life disappears. The same loneliness that momentarily goes away when he steps in the ring but otherwise consumes his very being is now gone. The man above him takes it away with a single touch, with a single kiss and a smile. He shouldn't, goddamnit. He has no right to make Joe feel wanted.

He grabs onto whatever part of Carlos he can; his broad shoulders, his neck, his smooth back. Joe's hands explore them all, settling on the bruised cheek and pulling the man into another hungry kiss.

He's not as gentle as his partner. He doesn't know how to be, so he just takes whatever he wants and Carlos gives it to him so very willingly.

"Let me make you feel good, Joe."

Hiding the overwhelming feelings becomes harder and harder and Joe knows that he should stop this very moment if he wishes to retain whatever dignity he has left. He half heartedly struggles out of Carlos' embrace and the man lets him go.

"Did I do anything wrong? Are you hurt, Joe?"

"Shut up!" is all he manages to get out before warm tears flood his cheeks.

Carlos gives him space. He doesn't ask any questions and Joe is grateful for this. For a moment he thinks about leaving. Pretend none of this ever happened and let Carlos go. But he can't. The thought of returning to the crummy excuse of a boxing club while Carlos goes to win his title crushes him.

"Would you like some water?"

"Do you ever feel lonely?" Joe asks instead of answering.

Carlos is taken aback by the question but smiles at Joe nonetheless. There is not an ounce of judgement on his face, neither for the crying nor for the peculiar question.

"All the time. But I don't feel lonely when I'm with Robert. Or with you."

The words trigger a fresh wave of tears along the memory of their night spent together. Carlos telling him stories about his home country in his thick, endearing accent. The ukulele forgotten in the snow. The warm ramen. Carlos begging Robert to let him stay so he can fight Joe. The tears keep falling.

Carlos is so kind as to pass the box of tissues on the nightstand to Joe. He takes one and blows his nose rather unceremoniously, which amuses the other man.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you, Joe," he tries.

“I’m so very fucking lonely. I’ve never told anyone this but... you... God fucking damnit!”

He breaks down in front of Carlos like a child. Yes, Joe thinks, like a child that has been pretending to be an adult for too long.

“It’s okay, Joe. I understand. You don’t have to explain yourself. I understand very well.”

They sit in silence for a while with only the occasional sobs from Joe to fill it. Carlos places a tentative hand on the small of his back and when the man leans into the touch, he starts rubbing his backside in soothing motions.

“Come with me?”

“What?”

“Well, I did visit your country and stayed behind just for you, didn’t I? It’s only fair that you come see my country. You don’t have to stay much, but I’d love to have you there for my match with Mendoza.”

The situations are very different, Joe wants to say; Carlos didn’t come to Japan specifically for him — or maybe he did, courtesy of Yoko, but he didn’t know Joe. It’s totally not the same thing as going to Venezuela because Carlos asks him to, because he takes pity on the poor, lonely slum kid.

Joe's pride tells him to refuse and move on. He never needed anyone's pity and he certainly won't start now. But then he looks at Carlos, who in turn looks at Joe expectantly, so full of hope and anticipation, as if he actually wants him there.

"I'll... think about it," is all Joe can mutter.

"Ok. Don't take too long, though."

"I know."

Neither of them knows what to say any more so they let the silence engulf the room once again. Joe lets himself lean into Carlos without much thought, and the man wraps his arm around him. It shouldn't feel this good, but for once Joe feels how every broken piece of himself gets glued back together by some mysterious force. It's not love, he reminds himself. Just the fact that he's no longer crushed by loneliness when he's with Carlos.

"Do you think it's weird that I haven't fucked anyone?"

Carlos lets out a giggle, and Joe gets ready to show him just how funny he thinks a punch in Carlos face would be, but the man tightens his embrace and keeps Joe in place.

"No. I don't think it's weird. You've been busy with boxing, haven't you?"

"I guess. Sometimes I wonder, though. What's it like?"

"I could show you, if you'd still like to."

Joe places his hand atop Carlos', sliding his index finger over the golden ring that decorates his finger. He remembers seeing a similar one on Robert's hand, but decides against asking about it. Maybe it's a Venezuelan thing, maybe it's something more. Either way, it's none of his business.

"I'd like that."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Carlos says and leans in to meet Joe into another kiss.

And another. And yet another. Each kiss gives Joe permission to dream, just this once. Just for a little bit.

He dreams of having a home, somewhere that's neither Tange's boxing club nor Venezuela. He dreams of waking up next to Carlos who smiles at him when he's not looking, who makes him feel wanted and hopeful.

A lonely, belated firework explodes outside their window, and Joe pretends it's a shooting star. Carlos strips him of his trousers with rehearsed grace and gentleness, and Joe wishes that the night would never end.

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