

## Tied With a Red Ribbon

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# **Tied With a Red Ribbon**

by [Ghost\\_Ness](#)

## Summary

He says "I love you" with painted beads and intricate braiding.

He simply loved the mere *atmosphere* of Gan Ning's room—it always smelled of musky incense and foreign perfumes, with various trinkets and baubles littering the shelves. Gauzy curtains hung loosely over the paneled window, and a silk comforter embroidered in exotic patterns accented the bed. Ling Tong had been in this room so many times that he nearly had it memorized--which stick of incense was burning in the wooden holder currently, and where every odd treasure and decoration was placed among the cupboards. Between two miniature carved animal figurines was an ink-painted wooden box that he didn't recognize. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, he drew the box into his lap and lifted the patterned lid to look through its contents.

The interior was lined with dark fabric and divided into small sections by small wooden planks. A small mirror with a thin frame was placed within the bottom of the lid. He was sure that the objects inside were supposed to be more neatly organized--however, the items were tipped over and scattered about (no doubt, Gan Ning had probably put the whole thing messily upon the shelf and forgotten about it). So, he looked more closely at the contents, curiously looking them over as he attempted to organize the interior.

The box was filled with thin spools of colored, woven ribbons and small hand-painted beads, with small metallic charms and miniature glass balls.

“What're you looking at?”

The pirate's tone wasn't sharp or angry, but it caught him off-guard, and Ling Tong slammed the box's lid shut.

“Nothing--I just hadn't noticed it before...why were you late?”

“The old man wanted me to train some new kids for awhile--they were slower at picking up than we expected, is all. They'd be more promising if they weren't so nervous. They could barely hold their own weapons up!”

He smirked in response, but couldn't say much more--even some of Wu's greatest warriors couldn't strike a steady target their first few practices.

Gan Ning crawled up behind him while he was lost in thought and snatched the jewelry box away.

“Hey!”

“You're looking at this?” he asked, opening the lid of the box.

“Yeah, I didn't recognize it,” Ling Tong huffed, as he switched to sit more comfortably. “What is it?”

“This?” He crossed his legs beneath him, and began to shift through the contents, scattering the beads about and making it as disorganized as it had been to begin with. “I got this...was it three months I was gone? When was that?”

From his lover, a nod. "It was this year--I remember it was still cold out when you left." He moved to sit halfway in Gan Ning's lap, curling his long legs up across the comforter. "You never did tell me what you did--how did you get this? It's beautiful."

"Yeah, I guess I forgot about it--but, anyways, long story short--"

"No," Ling Tong scowled, elbowing him softly. "No, tell me the whole thing. I want to hear every detail."

"Well, let me try and remember...we had been traveling on foot for some time, and had fought off several thieves a few days before--but it wasn't hard, they were very unskilled, very tribal. *Anyway*, we took 'em out easy. Finished all of 'em. Nothing left. A couple of days later, we were getting ready to move camp in the morning, and a girl came to ask if we had killed those other guys.

"Apparently, they had been picking on her own tribal group for years--we had basically saved their lives. So she invited us back and they threw this fantastic party, with a huge bonfire, and we stuck around for a few days more. And in return for saving them, they gave me this--and they worshipped us as gods until, reluctantly, we had to come home."

Ling Tong held one of the clear glass beads between his fingers and let the sunlight pass through it, casting long, multi-colored patterns across the wall.

"Somehow I doubt that you're telling the truth towards the end, there..."

"You're just jealous that you're not a tribal god, that's all!" Gan Ning protested.

"Jealous... *that's* it. What is this thing, though? Looks like they just gave you a box of junk."

"It's not *junk*-- it's special. Look, I'll show you." They separated, and Gan Ning sorted through the objects, pulling out a length of ribbon and a long, wooden rod that had been held to the lid of the box with a thin, leather strap. "When we stayed with them, they showed us a few of their customs--some of it was strange stuff, but it was really neat. They had this custom of doing each others' hair, and they had boxes like these to keep everything in--they used all sorts of ribbons and beads and string."

Ling Tong couldn't see what was so strange and new about hair ribbons. "Girls *here* put stuff like that in their hair."

"I haven't even gotten to the good part!"

"Oh? Then do go on, oh high and mighty Lord Xingba."

Gan Ning couldn't help but flash him a smug little grin. "That's what I like to hear."

"Well, don't get used to hearing it."

"Look, do you want me to finish or not? What they would do, though, is they would do each others' hair in these specific patterns--mostly braids, but I saw a few variations like twists and buns. And the patterns were all different--there were certain weaves for social class or

status, but couples would do the styles depending on relationship status. Generally, the girls would begin learning how to style on the men they had their eyes on, but older couples would make these ridiculously complicated styles. So, they gave me the stuff to do it, should I ever need it.”

The hand-painted box of baubles and beads suddenly seemed to hold a much deeper meaning.

“ That’s...really interesting, actually--and that rod would be used to thread beads onto the hair?”

“ I think so...probably.” The pirate looked thoughtfully between Ling Tong and the box between them, and then had an idea. “I could try and do your hair like they do, if you wanted me to.”

“ Really? I’d...like that.”

“ Then come here for a second.”

He unwound the band holding his ponytail together, allowing his hair to fall freely over his shoulders before shifting to sit in Gan Ning’s lap.

“So...which pattern would you use?”

“I’m not sure...I didn’t have it all memorized, you know. Besides, it was all pretty original designs, too. Each couple sort of invented their own. So I’ll have to make one up. C’mere.”

He was surprisingly delicate with his large, strong hands, twisting and braiding long strands of hair between tanned, calloused fingers. Ling Tong had expected him to pull while he braided—at least a little—but the pirate was gentle as he attempted to bead and style.

There was little conversation between them, only patient sitting and focused concentration, and a few quick requests in between.

“Give me that ribbon, would you?”

“Pick out a couple of those beads for me.”

“Hold this for a couple of seconds.”

“And...I think I’m done.”

Ling Tong sat up straight and ran his hands back over braids that he couldn’t see, trying to decipher the pattern with tapered fingers.

“Do you have a hand mirror?”

“Yeah, over by the desk, I think.”

The mirror was another ornately carved treasure, and he stood before the large glass panel on the far wall, angling the hand mirror to see the weaves in his hair.

When he finally got a good look at everything, he had no words to describe it. Gan Ning was disappointed by the silence.

“Well?” he frowned, worried. “Do you like it?”

“I...well, *yeah*.” It was hard *not* to sound flustered. “It’s *beautiful*.”

Two loose braids began from where his bangs usually fell, but they grew tight as they wound about his crown to the back. Each was woven with a bright red ribbon, and they were bound into a single, thick plait that slowly gathered the remaining hair into it. It was dotted with wooden beads and golden glass spirals, and finished with a wide red ribbon tied into a knot about the bottom.

“Well, good. I tried hard. Wanna go spar? The old man said he wanted us to get some practice in today.”

“Now?” The change was sudden—Ling Tong wouldn’t call himself vain, but he didn’t want to ruin the intricate style in the middle of a difficult battle. “Won’t this fall out?”

Gan Ning closed the box’s lid and returned it to its former place about the messy shelves.

“Worried about ruining your hair, princess?”

“Don’t *call* me that,” he snapped, though a smile flickered vaguely across his face.

“Oh, it’s fine—it’s all tied real tight. I made sure of it.”

He kissed him softly, quickly, and took his hand in his own.

“Now come on so I can kick your ass.”

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There was something so beautiful about watching that bright red ribbon flutter in the wind that Gan Ning couldn’t seem to place. Something inside of him simply ached with the urge to protect, to hold, and to keep.

The air was cool outside, and the piercing clash of weapons rang throughout the courtyard—it was a good day for training, and most officers were making the most of the opportunity.

“Hey!”

From across the way, Xiao Qiao waved wildly at them, and she deserted a spar with her sister to come skipping over to meet them. Her shoes scuffed wispy puffs of dust along behind her, and she dragged her large fan along by her side.

“*Hey—* your hair’s so *pretty!*” she cooed, twisting the long red ribbon between her fingers. “It’s so cute! Can I get my hair like this? Did you do this yourself? Could you teach me?”

Ling Tong burst into a smile, and shook his head.

“No, I didn't do it myself. Someone very, very special did it for me.”

Behind him, Gan Ning grinned.

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