

Slinger: The Equilibrium of Stars by Ben Bedard

Beauty Ain't Always Nice.

On the distant planet of Damodara, a group of pioneers struggles across the plains. Made up of old miners, prostitutes from pleasure ships, grizzled outlaws and outcasts, the pioneers search for a place to call home. But life isn't simple. The pioneers find themselves caught in a political web. As several powers come to bear on their fragile group, they meet the Slinger, a mysterious woman, equally beautiful and deadly, who, for reasons they do not understand, leads them on their trek across the plains, toward the mountains, toward home. If they can make it.

Written in a western dialect, *Slinger* tells the story of a group of pioneers caught in the machinations of powerful corporations, distant nations and vicious mercenaries on the distant planet of Damodara. In a universe divided between China and India, a fragile peace is being held together by Brazil. But the pioneers know next to nothing of the schemes of the powers fighting above them. *Slinger* is the future told from the point of view of the exploited, the poor, the helpless, pushed across space for no reason but survival. Trundling across the plains to the sanctuary of the mountains, the group comprises grizzled miners, outlaws, and outcasts: Catherine, the leader, who harbors a terrible secret; Colt who believes in her; Calder, a bitter man who sees Damodara as his last chance at happiness; Anna who flees her past; smoldering Tina, angered at her fate; the orphan children Chrissy and Leo, who want only a home; the Kid, who desperately seeks a reason for his existence. When they meet the Slinger, renowned equally for being deadly and beautiful, they do not trust her but need her skills to deliver them to the mountains. They find themselves caught deeper and deeper into the schemes of the powerful, inextricably weaving them inside a fate they do not understand. They must learn to rely on each other, and must put their faith and trust in a woman no one understands, the Slinger, if they are to survive the coming conflict.



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CHAPTER ONE

Slinger lay by the fire with her hat tipped over her eyes and her legs crossed in front of her. Her leather chaps steamed in the heat. Sparks from the fire spiraled over said fire and into the dark sky over the wide plain. The sparks illuminated only her figure and that of her horse. The horse pawed the ground for a minute and then looked off toward the west where just a moment ago, a comet had set. The horse blinked, chewing on the moist chub grass of Damodara, the fourth planet in the Qing Mei system. Then it bent its long neck down again and began to grind its teeth on the grass. The smooth Slinger pulled up the rim of her hat to look at the young man who had suddenly appeared by her fire, his gun trained on her.

"If you're looking for some grub," said she, "you'll have to cook it yourself."

The Kid held out his gun. "Don't be cute."

The woman tipped her head up so that the lower half of her face shined through somewhat. "That's going to be tough," she said. "I been cursed with beauty, they say." Her

oval face was the color of cinnamon, smooth as caramel. Her dark hair was a cool fall of shadowed water.

“Just do what I say,” the Kid said, his grip on his gun tightening.

“Don't think I will.” She pulled the brim of her hat back over her face and set to thinking.

The Kid was quiet for a spell. “Look,” said he. “I ain't wanting to shoot you, but I guess I will.”

“Shoot then,” she said.

“I will.” He swallowed. “I aim to.”

There was quiet again. He pushed his gun forward. The gun didn't tremble, but his finger was lightish on the trigger. Finally, he made a groan and his arm dropped. He looked up at the sky as if there was someone there who was a mite disappointed in him. Then he holstered his gun, took off his hat, and let it fall to the ground where the dust puffed upward. He sat down cross-legged amid that puff, taking a deep taste of it with a sigh. The woman lifted the rim of her hat, watched him. Sulking, he stared in the fire.

“You ain't no bounty hunter, Kid,” she said finally.

“Should have shot me last night.”

“You knew I was there?”

“Hell, Kid,” she said. “You been following me since I landed.” Slinger sat up. “I been watching you. You don't act like no bounty hunter.” She rose to a crouch and picked at the fire. Sparks commenced a-spinning over the fire. Since

the Kid didn't say anything, she stood up and rummaged through her saddle bags. She came back to the fire and put an old black kettle on it. She opened a tin of curried beans. They slurped as they exited the can. She set the can to one side. "I suppose you had a dozen chances to kill me in the past two weeks."

"A dozen? Really?"

She stirred at the beans. "I know a lot of low down people who'd kill for a chance like you had."

The Kid thought about that. The woman poured the hot beans into the can and passed it to him. He took it and bowed his head toward her. "Obliged," he said. "I got a hunger on me like a garuda." He took out a pocket knife and began eating the curried beans. The Slinger sat back against the log and stared into the fire. The light played across her face and shined in her wide brown eyes. She picked up a log and tossed it on the fire. They didn't say anything for a long while, just sat and looked up at the wide sky and the distant green circle of the nearest gaseous planet and the fine thin ring of ice lassoed about Damodara.

"What do we do now?" the Kid asked. "I reckon you ain't going to kill me."

The woman shrugged. "Killing ain't something I do for the convenience of it." She scratched her leg. "I don't see much danger in you."

"I guess I'm ashamed of myself a little."

“Well, you ain't much of a bounty hunter,” she said.

“But that’s a fair thing to say of a person.”

“Still, I reckon whatever work you do, you should be good at it.”

“Reckon so.”

He thought about it. “Matter of pride,” concluded he.

They sat quiet again. Finally he picked his hat up and put it on. He looked at her. “You ain't what I expected. I guess I'd've killed you otherwise.”

Slinger hadn't much to say to that.

So the Kid continued: “They say you ain't got no heart in you nor any kind of feeling god gave a dog. They say you kill children and snakes just as equal as anything.”

The Kid waited but there was no comment on that neither. So the Kid continued.

“They say you might be a woman, but you got the heart of a killer dog. They say you as vicious as anything that ever walked on solid ground or swam in any waters, fresh or otherwise. Now I see you, I can't hardly believe what I heard.”

“Hard to believe most you hear and half you see.”

“One thing is true though,” he said. “You sure are mighty kind to the eyes.” He couldn't help linger over her face and felt a twinge in his heart at the dark river of her hair.

The Slinger pulled her hat back down over her face. Then she lay back in the dirt and put her head against her

saddle. The Kid felt his face blush and was surprised at how he had talked.

“I reckon that was terrible forward of me,” he said. “I apologize.”

“Yeah well,” she said. “I'm used to it, Kid.”

The Kid sat back and felt strange to be where he was. He looked up at the sky and saw the flicker of a starship in orbit. He blinked at it. “Well,” he said. “I don't know what I'm going to do now. I reckon you're right, I ain't cut out for a life of bounty hunting. I never knew what I was going to do when I finally caught up with you. Guess I thought it'd be easy to pull that trigger. Seems I ain't the kind for blind killing. I thought it'd be like shooting them things you see around here, I don't know what they are. Rats or something. I mean, all the stories I heard about you, I thought maybe you deserved to die, you know, like you had it coming, but when it came time, I just locked up inside. Like I weren't even the boss of myself. I guess I ain't nothing but a failure from one end of the galaxy to the other. I ain't cut out for nothing.”

The Slinger looked up at the singing-bright stars. Her horse shook her mane behind her and stamped the ground.

In this stunning starlit silence the Kid continued: “I been everything in this life it seems. I been a cook. I been a miner. I been a worker in a factory, I been a waiter. After a space, I just can't stand it. I get to hating the job, I get to hating the people, and I get to hating life in general. Then I find

myself on a whole other planet with some damn job or other and the cycle starts all over again. I just don't know what to do with myself. I ain't got but this one life to live, you know. I ain't set on wasting on it."

"It's a puzzler," said the smooth Slinger.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Yes it is."

They were quiet under those stars. The Kid set to thinking and looking time on time Slinger-wards, her jeaned and chapped legs crossed one over the other, graceful as you please. Hat over her eyes, hair splayed back and trickling dark over her saddle, enough to give pain, heart-wise. There thought he on his place amid things, life in its generalities, and what fortune had in store for him. He pondered and ruminated and chewed on it until it became a pleasant kind of grazing. Lightly fluttered his eyes and he slept. When the Kid woke, the Slinger stood over him with the reins of his horse in her hand. For a second he was puzzled. Then he smiled.

He rose up from the hard earth and took the reins from her.

They both rode on side by side into the plains. They didn't say anything for a long while, but let their horses clip lightly through the chub grass or graze on the lithe amber chatter grass clacking under the twin suns. About them were the wide yellow plains of Damodara and the brilliant sky so blue it hurt to look upon, especially for eyes accustomed to

the dismal light of ships in spacebound darkness. Twisting in the sky above them were strange lines of yellow and orange clouds that combed through the sky. The breeze rippled that sea of grass and made it a joy to breathe so light it was and full of life. The hills about them waved like a swelling of seas to the utter horizon which were awful beautiful to contemplate as if it gave the liberty to go running and have no one put a stop to it. The Kid had a lungful of it and was feeling the rightness of his wandering ways, letting the various pleasures of living belly up to him as metaphors of the high spirit.

They came up over a hill and stopped. Their horses chomped at the chub grass while they watched a battered caravan stutter across the plains on minimal solar power. To conserve energy, most of the people walked next to the caravan or rode horses. The Kid counted eight people all together, including two children. It was an old caravan, a battered old Tocha, it looked like to him, made by the Luz da Estrada company. The Kid looked down at them and then leaned over the neck of his horse and spit.

“I guess you're set on robbing those folks,” he said. He didn't look at her, his hands crossed on the pommel of his saddle. “I ain't going to stop you, but I ain't helping neither. If I ain't a bounty hunter, I reckon I ain't a bandit neither.”

She didn't say anything. She leaned forward and watched the caravan. Then she turned her head to the left

and squinted. The Kid turned. There was another group approaching. They were on magsleds and were coming fast.

“That there's trouble,” the Kid said.

The Slinger didn't say anything. She watched the caravan and then she watched the approaching magsleds. “Sure is trouble,” she said finally. She turned to the Kid. “You stay here,” she said. The Kid said okay and then Slinger looked at him. “Now I know how this works. I tell the you to stay put and then things go sour and you show up and make it all worse or get yourself killed.” She looked at him and her eyes were hard. “Hand over that gun.”

The Kid looked at her and knew she was serious. He was afraid of her for the first time. He took out the weapon and slapped it down in her hand. “I guess you got difficulty in trusting a man's word,” he said.

“Guess so,” she said.

Then she shook her reins and said ha! There was an explosion of sod and the Kid watched as she rode down the hill toward the caravan.

The caravan came to a sharp halt, sputtered and clunked, its mechanisms decades old and deteriorating, having seen one too many planets and one too many migrations. A clean cut, golden-maned, sober-looking man by the name of Colt watched the sole rider come down off the hill. He walked out toward the rider holding his rifle. The children climbed up into the caravan and he waved two other men to

him. They carried rifles as well and they stopped and watched the lone rider approach them.

“Coming down off that hill awful fast,” Lazer said.

“Ain't no need for that speed,” said Calder. He put his rifle to his shoulder, but kept it pointed at the ground.

“Keep your cool,” Colt said. “Ain't but one person.”

The Slinger reined up her horse tight and swung off the saddle, landing steadily in a patch of chatter grass. Her boots scared up a sparkbug. It flittered across her vision for an instant, glimmering with brilliance, and made a sharp snapping sound before it folded its wings and dropped back into the grass. The Slinger walked forward through the grass, keeping her hat tilted low over her face. Her easy walk took the nerve out of them, so they raised up their rifles at her.

“What do you want?” the sober-looking man named Colt asked, looking at her through his sights.

“You keep your hands where I can see 'em,” said Lazer.

Keeping her hat down, the woman lifted her hands, palm up. “I'm not the one you should be thinking on,” she said, and then, her hands splayed out before them, she pointed with both index fingers toward the magsleds kicking up dust and grass speeding toward them. They all turned and gasped and knew trouble when they saw it. “It's the Laycrofts!” Colt exclaimed. The other two men were stunned. The Slinger put her hands down to her pistols. None of them noticed.

“It's the Laycrofts!” Colt said again, this time toward the caravan. “We have to make a run for it!” The three turned away from her and ran for the caravan. She followed at a lazy walk. There was some shouting and then a man they called Gregory leapt out of the caravan and dived under it. She leaned down and plucked a piece of chatter grass and put it in her mouth. The Slinger commenced chewing it, watching the caravaners at work getting their pep up. “You ain't going to out run magsleds,” she said to Gregory under the caravan.

“What choice do we have?” He edged out from under the caravan to face her and then his face lightened and then darkened and then lightened again. “You're a woman,” he said.

“Got me there,” said the Slinger. She tipped her hat back and then turned to him. “Well,” she said. “I tell you what. I'll take care of these magsleds if you'll let me have the pick of your supplies. I'm running low.”

“What?” He looked at her.

“Food and supplies. All I'm asking.” She held out her hand.

“You must be crazy,” said he, and then dived back under the caravan. Slinger pulled her hand back from the space where she'd been expecting a return clasp and twisted the chatter grass in her mouth. The caravan started up and then puttered away, leaving her standing there. Slinger looked down at it and there was a red creature there shaking its head,

its eyes rolling back. She flicked the grass away. She stood there and measured the shrinking distance between them and the magsled and did not move. Leaping from the caravan came then a woman with a severe face, carrying a rifle. Her name was Catherine. She landed in front of the Slinger and then gave her a quick look-see.

“You’re the one who warned us about the magsleds?” asked she.

Slinger nodded. Behind her came the three men, all carrying rifles. They dug themselves under the caravan, imploring Gregory with much profanity to be swift in his machinations. Slinger looked at the tallish woman. “You ain’t going to outrun them,” said the Slinger.

“I know it,” said the woman. “But we won’t go down without a fight. Damn Laycrofts.”

Slinger looked off toward the magsleds. They were coming in fast, but still weren’t more than a cloud shadow in the distance. As she watched, two heads poked out the door, both children. The boy pointed at the Slinger and said, “Who’s that?” as he hadn’t looked upon another person in some time. The girl smiled behind a rage of yellow curls before both of them were tugged back inside. Slinger looked back at the magsleds and then at the closing doors of the caravan that went *kathunk* closed as she watched. The tallish woman, rifle-ready, flung herself under the caravan next to the other men.

“Hey,” said one of those men. “You best get out of here while you got a chance.”

Slinger eyed the oncoming Laycrofts. She walked over to the caravan and then crouched down in the grass so that five heads looked at her with expressions from irritation to anxiety. “Like I told this one here,” Slinger said, jabbing a thumb toward Gregory. “I’m low on supplies. If you let me ride with you for a spell, I’ll take care of those sleds for you.”

One of the men laughed, but the serious one by the name of Colt, he looked over to the tallish woman and said something. Catherine squinted up at the Slinger.

“If you can get rid of those Laycrofts,” said Catherine. “We’ll provide you with a feast.”

Slinger touched the brim of her hat. “Don’t need nothing fancy,” said she. She stood up so that those caravaners could only see her legs walking to the front of the caravan, all agreeing without a word that she were crazy to go up against a magsled full of Laycrofts. Yet all agreed without saying so in the crass language of out loud that she were a comely one for being so crazy. Even her walk had something to it that made a heart bleed.

The Slinger took a walk up past the caravan and through the chatter grass and stood there among those belled shoots awaiting. The hard seed pods of that grass clicked together in the slight breeze so that they seemed to be talking to one another in a language full up with clicks. The two suns were off

to her left set to their slow waltz down to the horizon. On the far crest she could see the Kid on his horse, watching. Streaks of clouds shot across the blue sky. It were mighty pleasant on the eyes.

Slinger eased out her pistols as the magsled come into view. There weren't but four or five men on them altogether, she counted. A good sign that they were scouts mostly, set to finding any unauthorized passages across these plains, report back to the Laycrofts, and then come coursing back with rifles and grenades and fire bombs of all kinds to lay waste to the caravans, the reason being they owned the land. Such a thing not being legal, of course. Outlying planets had no ownership until said land was bettered in some fashion, be it mining or cattling or farming. People like the Laycrofts, however, had a way of reasoning with people they owned a whole planet, the argument of fire and gun shot being mighty convincing. The magsled shuddered out of shadow and began to gleam with their shine of metal, and the men upon it, in their Neegoh leather, lifted their rifles up toward the caravan, for it were fun to shoot off a few dumb folk in passing before they did a turn back to base to come back later. Two or three shots rang out toward the Slinger as she stood cool in the chatter grass, but those bullets were nothing but noise so off target were they.

The cool Slinger leveled her dual pistols up at the sleds and placed one of her feet in front of her, nestling her boot

down amid the base of the chatter grass. She leaned a touch back so that her gaze were level with those outstretched guns of hers. She took a deep breath and held it just a moment before she started to ease it out. Then her cool gaze flashed as her guns did a quick thaa thaa, thaa thaa! So spoke her guns. And it were a language that must be heeded, all filled up as it were with heavy lead glyphs. Weren't no need for verbiage in that language, true enough! For each noun had a way of naming and each target had a way of learning but one thing. Thaa thaa! spoke those pistols in the smooth hands of the Slinger.

Two of those Laycrofts tumbled down, instant dead, not having even the time to think a bit on their lives before they weren't in it no more, which was a blessing on their part for they hadn't much to look back upon with pride. Mostly those neatly extinguished lives had been spent a-whoring and a-killing and sometimes the difference between the two weren't always a clean line. Weren't many that would weep for those men, and even those that might would have to swallow bitter the knowledge they had it coming. The other two shots made their demanding impact upon the sled itself, and it sparked and sputtered and then heaved forward, diving nose first into the earth. Thus soared and spun in the air two more Laycrofts, these having a moment or two to contemplate their lives under Damodara's wide sky before they struck the hard earth, breaking their lives to pieces and leaving the world of

breathable air for all time. What thought they as spinning they came to the quick? A feeling of unreality mostly, for it were strange to them they could die, mighty strange, like peacocks in a pig pen. But die they did and more miserably than their fellows, for their rush to the earth but broke them up and left them breathing for a minute or two before their spirits said the hell with it and skedaddled. Then there were but one Laycroft left, stunned by the multitude of death about him, and he whirled around to flee from Slinger's guns. But Slinger merely took another breath and prepared to speak again. Thaa! she spoke, but one word. And that word carried its message to the back of the lone Laycroft's neck and then clean through it, stopping for neither bone nor flesh. So that last man died passing swiftly but had the time to think on the blue sky before it rolled out of his view into darkness. The magsled did its dive and crashed and smoked and then there was silence again. The Slinger sheathed her pistols and then walked back to the caravan. She crouched down where the caravaners were staring at her open-mouthed.

“You got any tea?” asked she. “I ain't had a good cup for near on a month now.”

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The Kid were excited at the display of the Slinger's terrible prowess. He'd watched the whole thing from the crest of the hill, whistling with wonder at her shooting. It were almost magic the way those magsleds just spun about and exploded just on account of a few shots from the Slinger. She were a magician almost when it came to the wielding of pistols. An artist of the slinging craft. The Kid had rode down after the battle and now they had set up a camp not far from the caravan. The people of said caravan also milled about, the man they called Gregory set to scavenging the magsleds and the others, Lazer and Calder, took care of the Laycroft bodies and inspected their rifles with interest, arguing from one to the other from time to time. The Kid stood over their fire while the Slinger lay upon the ground with her back to her saddle.

"Dizang!" swore the Kid. "That was some shooting! I seen some shooting in my time, but didn't that just beat all?" He motioned his arm toward the caravaners where now the children lightly ran about and two women they hadn't seen before set to various work about the camp. "They sure are lucky you come along, Slinger," opined the Kid. "If not, those Laycrofts would have them by now, I swear it. They'd either be dead or up in orbit waiting to get sold off. Shit, I reckon you're a goddamn blessing to each and every one of them!" He looked at Slinger. "Ain't that the truth?" But the Slinger said nothing. The Kid's spirits were not dampened. "Di-

zang,” continued he. “Weren’t that something to see!” He took out finger pistols, thumbs cocked. “Bang! Bang!” exclaimed the Kid with his mute fingers. “And then they just dropped. I don’t think you missed a single shot. I know good rifle men who couldn’t have made that shot, and there you were with just them pistols of yours.” “Bang! Bang!” reiterated he and then transformed those pistols into hands again for waving at the wide plain. “Shit, those Laycrofts didn’t have a chance. I tell you though, I don’t feel a lick of pity for those sonsabitches. I hear tell they kill whole packs of people. Even down to dogs and chickens. Ain’t no one as bad them except maybe the Chapels, that’s what I hear. The Laycrofts are awful greedy! Want to swallow the whole planet down themselves! I say it ain’t right. Don’t no one own a whole planet just from saying so. Whoever sets their shoulder to working on that land got the rights to it. That’s the law. No I don’t feel even a touch of sorrow for them sonsabitches.” The Kid looked over the plains and then took up a mighty big pleasurable sigh and sat plunk down. He took off his hat and set it on his knee. “Here they come,” said he, nodding toward the figures of Colt and Catherine, hands full, coming to them.

Truer words could hardly be said. Here they did come, carrying cups of tea, one they gave to the smooth Slinger and the other they offered to the Kid. They were a dirty pair, like the others, all mud-covered. They were all in denim and leather and patches of the same. They looked like they didn’t

so much as walk on the earth as crawl upon it. Catherine and Colt looked at them with a mix of wonder and distrust.

“Obliged,” said the Slinger.

“Namaste,” said the Kid holding up his tea. “Smells damn good.” He smiled over at the Slinger. “I ain’t had a good cup of tea in, crissakes, I don’t know how long!” He looked down at it, his face beaming.

The Slinger put the tea to her mouth where the cup disappeared in the shadow of her hat.

“Who are you?” asked Catherine. She was a slim woman, but cold of face, like she never had an emotion she didn’t approve of first. Her face was long and slim and beautiful in its way, but her eyes had more cut in them than color.

“This here’s the Slinger,” said the Kid for her. “Don’t you know that? She’s got a bounty on her big enough to buy a whole fleet of starships!”

“Kid,” said the Slinger in way of saying shut yer yap.

Colt and Catherine stared at her. It was Colt that spoke up first. “What do you want with us?” he asked.

“Like she said,” the Kid told him. “We just want to ride with you for a bit. We ain’t got much supplies left. I guess we paid our way by getting rid of those Laycrofts.”

Colt turned to him, his face none too happy. The Kid furrowed his eyes, not understanding why he got such a look from him. Colt were a large man with a square face and corn-colored hair and a golden beard, cut clean and square. His

light eyes gave him a cutting gaze that the Kid didn't appreciate.

"I don't think we're asking much," said the Kid, getting worked up. "If it weren't for the Slinger, you'd be dead. Those scouts would've brought back a whole passel of Laycrofts and you'd be dead as. . .as. . .well, dead is dead, ain't it? Dead is what you'd be anyhow." He threw his hand carelessly toward their camp. "They'd even kill those children if it weren't for us. Shot them both dead, sure as shit stinks."

Dark looks burst over Catherine and Colt's face like blooming flowers.

"Kid," said the Slinger again, turning her shaded eyes toward him.

"Huh?" asked the Kid, turning toward her. There sure were a lot of displeasure coming his way and what for? He weren't sure unless it was speaking the truth and that was his way. He was proud of it. "Well, that's the truth, ain't it?" He looked challengingly back to Colt and thought to himself, I could lick that old man. And the thought excited him and he smiled a lean smile up at Colt.

Then there was a clatter. Slinger's tea cup dropped from her fingers. Slinger slowly began falling to one side and the Kid shot over to her, holding her up, thinking, why she must've been shot and didn't say nothing about it! He searched her up and down, but saw no bullet hole. "What's wrong?" he asked aloud.

“She’ll be fine,” said Catherine.

The Kid looked up at her and blinked and then thought of the tea cup and saw it in the dirt there all glistening with liquid, and he stood up fast, his face going red with fury. Colt stepped forward and his pistol drawn, brought it down hard on the crown of his head and the Kid, so recently the imaginary victor of this exact challenge, now lost his consciousness swift as a stone falls. He crumpled down on top of the Slinger with hardly time for a thought except to reflect on Colt’s face that last he saw before the darkness came. He seemed a decent man. Just shows, thought he, how hard it is to tell folk from their looks. And then he thought no more.

Colt stood over them and looked out over the plain. The blue sky shined bright as a gem. No matter how many days he’d seen it, it still thrilled his heart, so used he had been to the gloom of life the way it was. Yes sir, the wide big sky were a beautiful human thing to see and did a wonder amount of good to every heart who saw it.

Then he and Catherine set to dragging the bodies over to the caravan.