

## Meta Manifesto: Enemies to Lovers Stories

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## Meta Manifesto: Enemies to Lovers Stories

by [yourlibrarian](#)

### Summary

Spoilers for Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Merlin, Killing Eve and Avengers.

Although the EtL story type is highly popular, I think there are ways in which it works more deeply or successfully. What counts as "success" though is the crux of the story, as well as whether the characters are truly enemies.

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It took me some time to realize how much I enjoyed these particular tales, probably because the stories I had been most attracted to generally included, or focused on, profound friendships. However we often don't see much of that friendship developed. Unless a story is *specifically* about a friendship and how it gets challenged or even falls apart, we don't tend to spend a lot of time on its progress. We tend to start with two people either already being friends, or near the beginning of that relationship, in which case we get to see it deepen as a part of overall canon development.

There are also not that many stories that are *specifically* about enemies. In romances, the two people are often antagonists in some way but they're not usually *enemies*. They may be people who get one another's back up, and perhaps are in roles where one of them is meant to be putting the other in check in some sort of way. But I'm going to focus on discussion of people who are truly enemies in a life threatening or dangerous way.

I realized that stories of profound friendship and enemies to lovers are not actually that far apart. In fact, one might see EtL as offering something these other friendship stories do not — the *complete* story of how that friendship came to happen, despite enormous odds.

I have a number of pairings I think fall into this camp, some canonical and some not. To explore a variety of options, I'm choosing to highlight Buffy and Spike from BtVS; Tony and Loki from MCU; Arthur and Merlin from *Merlin*; and Eve and Villanelle from Killing Eve.

### Separating Out the Story Types

To me, this last pairing stands out for a simple reason — the show is *all about* this storyline. For example, in BtVS you could say that there was already an enemies to lovers storyline in its first season. But this would be confusing the "incompatible lover" or "bad boy/girl" type of storyline with EtL. Angel was not a truly reformed or defanged vampire, but he was not an enemy. He was ambivalent about being in a relationship with Buffy for complicated reasons, but they were always work partners. You could say that this push and pull relationship occurred largely because of TV writing decisions (stringing out the romantic storyline and leaning on the will they/won't they drama), but even if he left Sunnydale and thus ended the relationship for entirely [Doylist](#) reasons, the character of Angel had some very good reasons for that ambivalence. He didn't trust himself and he felt that he and Buffy were separated by too many things (his age and past among them).

By comparison, Buffy and Spike learn about one another as potential enemies and first meet in combat (in which Buffy is saved by her mother). The only reason Spike does not continue to be a threat throughout the season is because he is sidelined by a major injury.

One might also argue something similar to Angel and Buffy for Arthur and Merlin, that in fact this is a story about friendship and they are never *enemies*. But that's not entirely true. The whole reason that Merlin doesn't tell Arthur about his magic is because he is afraid he might be killed as a result. One's life being at risk definitely moves this into EtL territory, and even if we know Arthur is wrong, he *believes* (and not without a weekly reason!) that sorcerers are personally dangerous to him.

Their first encounter is a mildly violent one. Arthur uses his position to abuse Merlin, and he threatens him with violence a number of times during the early seasons of the show. Were Merlin what he seemed, just a person with no standing and financially dependent on his employer, then those threats would carry a lot of weight. As it is, the show has us laugh off the several times that Merlin ends up in the stocks. But Arthur could have had him killed for reasons not even related to sorcery. The second episode of the series makes clear how little the word of a servant matters.

Merlin is fairly forgiving of Arthur after the first few episodes, though his first response to being told Arthur is his partner in destiny is to say, perhaps not entirely jokingly, that he'd be willing to help someone who wanted Arthur dead. But then Merlin gets to see more of Arthur than vice versa, and he is also aware that, however much of a threat Arthur is, that Merlin could probably escape him. In fact, by the end of the series, Merlin has to know he is far more powerful than Arthur — not just in an open contest but in an eternal way.

What is so fascinating about *Merlin* is that this is an EtL storyline where we are in the head of the person *classified as the villain* — and hardly anyone besides him and other "criminals" actually knows what is going on. This is not typical in canon. Fandom tends to be more evenhanded in its stories, with either a dual PoV or even writing the story from the "villain"'s PoV. But in *Merlin*'s universe (and it's never very clear what the laws of other kingdoms are, just that Camelot's is the harshest) he is a criminal at the least, and a threat to the kingdom at worst. In the very last episode, despite how well Arthur knows him, he is *afraid* when Merlin reveals himself to be a sorcerer.

To look at it another way we would have a very different story in, say, Buffy, if Spike were masquerading as human from the first season and we were following the activities of

everyone in the show from his POV. Sometimes he'd be aiding and sometimes undermining the Scoobies and everyone else seen as the heroes, depending on his own reasoning and goals. (In fact, Dru as Morgana is a pretty interesting fit and we could also have Dalton as Gaius, but I digress).

Merlin doesn't need to kill to survive in a personal safety sense, but he does kill to keep his secret. It's arguable if that is really the same thing. Arthur as the hero kills plenty of people, and Merlin does so in a protective way several times as well. But when he kills Agravaine he definitely crosses a line. And the only thing that may keep him from killing Mordred in the final season, besides the mutually ensured destruction of revealing their joint magic, is that Arthur has offered Mordred a place at court. So although the canon never delves into it, one could easily argue that Merlin truly *is* villainous depending on who a character is. This [uncertain status](#) is something that has [not escaped fans](#).

The other pairings I've mentioned clearly fall into the EtL story type, but the case of *Merlin* is a good example of why these sorts of pairings can be so interesting to develop in fiction.

### **Raising the Stakes**

So why does EtL appeal? I'd list five central reasons, though of course there could be many more depending on the reader/viewer:

- a) Life or death stakes
- b) Slowest of burns
- c) Love overcoming all
- d) Greying the canon
- e) Subverting stereotypes

There's a reason that medical and criminal dramas are staples on TV and appear as story elements in all sorts of other genres. The potential, or even regular recurrence, of death ups the stakes in taking a storyline seriously. The fact that at any time one of the duo could be killed either directly by, or as a result of their enmity with the other, makes the other person's existence something that can't be ignored. They should also not be underestimated (hence Buffy finding it hilarious that Harmony sees herself as Buffy's nemesis). This is also a relationship that they usually do not want to have. The other person is an obstacle.

I think it is rather clear why this story type creates the slowest of burns. The hurdles the pair has to overcome are obvious from the start, and are generally characterized by something intrinsic as well as extrinsic to their makeup. One thing that I always find annoying in stories that turn on pining or miscommunication or strictly external factors is that they could all be overcome if not for the desire to create a story. In most cases there is no examination of what the barriers between these two specific people actually are, so that their being apart just feels like a manufactured problem.

But EtL often has a mess of issues to deal with. Out of all "romantic" type stories, I find these to be the most similar to what exists in real life — people with incompatible goals, wishes, personalities, or living habits. It takes a lot to be able to get two people to function together long-term as a couple. In an EtL story, this is generally obvious from the start, and the question is how the story teller is going to resolve all these problems. Getting these two people to acknowledge that there is more going on is just the beginning.

As a result the "love overcoming all", if it's a well told story, feels truly earned because there are deeply serious issues, even safety, at stake in having this relationship happen. In many cases the story tellers "cheat" by moving the two people closer together from the

start. This is sometimes done by making the "villain" less villainous. They are merely "misunderstood" or there were mitigating factors, or maybe the "hero" isn't all that perfect or heroic. Then once all the misunderstandings are resolved, there's little reason for the two not to get together and the main work becomes in convincing friends or family that the "villain" is either reformed or was some kind of victim themselves. As a result the "love overcoming" gets expressed mostly in the fact that the hero was willing to believe the villain and take a chance, not that there were actual hurdles to overcome.

But if it's truly done well, then the end result is almost certain to grey the canon. That's because it is unlikely that the hero will become a villain or vice versa. People are who they are. They can evolve and they can compromise but they do not generally have a change of personality. (And if they did, then they'd no longer be those characters). Even if one of them stops working in their role, as hero or villain, the other can't simply become a house mate. If they had been any hero or villain worth telling a tale about, then they would hardly be satisfied subsuming their life into another's. Part of the attraction between them is that they are either equally matched or a serious challenge. Having them work together is thus tantalizing, the idea of an unstoppable force.

But if they're operating in the real world, or at least consistently in their verse, being on the "same side" is going to be difficult because they will either have to forge some sort of middle way or the world itself will have to change. That may be as small as exposing hypocrisy and making it more obvious how all the world is somewhat corrupted. It may be by finding themselves forging a new life in a frontier sort of area where societal and cultural rules are different. Or it may be by simply keeping things between them a secret and toning down both the heroics and the villainy.

The issue of subverting stereotypes may thus come into play. That can be in terms of what a "domestic" sort of existence really means between two former antagonists. Smooth sailing is unlikely, even if they are both into picking out curtains. The sort of compromises each must make should lead to unusual lifestyles. It can also lead into character types that are messy, with one learning to cut corners, another learning not to exploit every opportunity, both being persona non grata, perhaps in their profession, perhaps among people they used to be close to. Such a relationship will not come without a price, and seeing how they choose to pay it adds a depth and meaningfulness to their effort.

### **Mining the Tension**

So let's look at our four couples and how things play out with them in fanworks. When it comes to story types, AUs are a mixed bag. Of these four couples, three of them are set in fantastical universes, so the changes made in an AU can be considerable, often of a "human AU" style. So in the case of the *Avengers* or *Merlin* stories there is no magic, in *Buffy* there are no vampires or slayers, etc. AUs are often lighter, happier stories. That's because without the crucial power polarity identifications in the original canon, they turn from being enemies to merely being antagonists in a less life and death scenario. So maybe Loki is a particularly caustic bookshop customer, Spike is a biker with a caffeine fix, and Arthur a snobbish executive with a sweet tooth.

Obviously there are plenty of dark AU stories as well, but given that the canon provides plenty of opportunity for stories branching off into darker realms, these are less common. What's more, when they do happen it is often to depower one of the pair, creating more of a rescuer sort of scenario. This change also tampers with the EtL aspect, since part of such a scenario is a battle of equals or at least significant challengers.

So in terms of canon fic, what do we see?

## *Canon Redemption*

Buffy and Spike from BtVS might well disagree about whether they'd been a couple at all. They were unquestionably lovers, and they had an ongoing relationship, but it was a push and pull situation that should arguably not have happened in the first place. And while one can say by the end that they shared a close bond, it was an unequal one.

As a result a lot of fanworks focus on S6 and, to a lesser degree, S5 and S7. Canon has a strong influence on works and these three seasons are where their connection took place. S5 fics may not include the Buffybot or might find another way to kill off Glory while giving Spike a bigger role. They sometimes rewrite the ending of the season so that Buffy never dies. However in these fics Spike may stay chipped but doesn't get his soul. What's more, the true proof of his devotion -- his continued assistance to the Scoobies and caretaking of Dawn, even when Buffy herself is no longer a factor -- wouldn't happen. In other words, the movement of the Villain into a middling role, the turning point, does not occur. As they are all aware, dying is easy but living is hard, and Spike carries on doing so because of a promise he made.

By contrast, the fics in S7 tend to be more romantically oriented because of Spike's big gesture as well as enabling h/c style fics where Buffy helps him adjust to his soul. S6 stories can be a mix of both, generally focusing as much on rewriting certain episodic events as redeveloping their arc. But it is in S7 where the Villain's "redemption" occurs. He has, to some degree, transformed himself because of the Hero.

So we can see in Buffy fanworks the various paths that an EtL storyline can take. The first is where the hero adapts herself to the villain, seen mostly in S5 (or earlier) stories. The second is where he joins the hero's team and learns to be selfless, some S6 but largely S7 and post-series stories. And the third tends to be a middle path where each stays in their own world but meet in the middle in a semi-permanent way. This tends to happen in S6 when Spike stays a soulless vampire but becomes an important member of the team after Buffy's return. It could also happen in S3 and S4 when Spike acknowledges his feelings for Buffy earlier, but this merely changes the key events where they could become closer.

## *Developing Respect*

Tony and Loki from MCU is a non-canonical ship, and one that would surely never occur in canon for a number of Doylist reasons. One could have a very worthwhile debate as to whether or not Tony and Loki would even consider being friends. Personally I see it as an unlikely event because they are too much alike in the wrong ways. But if they became partners in some sort of endeavor, now *that* is a pretty remarkable thing to contemplate.

In fact, we already saw something of how it might go -- because Tony teamed up with Dr. Strange. Stephen Strange keeps far more of his comics canon powers than Loki does, as well as the high level of intelligence and obsessiveness, the snark and superiority, and the fact that he lives in a world rather apart from that of the other Avengers.

Where he and Loki differ though is that Stephen understands the human world well, having lived a life as one, and his stint as Sorcerer Supreme is rather recent. By contrast Loki is a very long lived alien with messy family issues and the privilege of being raised a prince. It does make one wonder what Stephen's family backstory is! However it is exactly in these factors that Loki would most overlap with Tony. Perhaps it's for this reason that there is a lot of darker fic written pairing them post-Civil War, where Tony's experiences have left him not just bitter but revenge driven. Being open to getting his ideas implemented at any cost might well have him considering partnerships he wouldn't before.

Additionally, the events of Civil War took place during a time when Tony and Pepper had canonically separated. This not only clears the way for an intense new relationship, but also removes the positive influence she has on him.

By contrast stories placed earlier in the MCU timeline, going back as far as Iron Man 1, tend to have Loki and Tony having a far more positive partnership, one where neither has taken key turns in their development yet. Stories more in the middle, around the time of the first Avengers movie, have Loki imprisoned on Earth instead of returned to Asgard, and have him work with Tony and the Avengers to prepare for Thanos' arrival, thus altering the course of the later films. Clearly Tony will be the key person for Loki to work with, both because of his fears for the future and the fact that he is well placed to enact the needed changes in governments, industries, and finance.

There are also a smaller number of stories that take Loki's semi-redemption at the end of Thor 3 to a different conclusion, speculating about what his role might be among the New Asgardians on Earth and how they would likely have worked with Tony as a coordinator for their settlement. In effect, this scenario is something like Buffy's S7, where both individuals have gone through some wrenching changes and are more likely to be kind to one another.

Whichever way it goes, the fact that Strange and Stark barely tolerate one another at first, and yet clearly develop a respect for one another by the end (they are each the most important keys in the Endgame story) gives us a way to see how Loki and Tony might do the same if each had enough at stake in a cosmic partnership.

### *Overcoming Deception*

Arthur and Merlin is also a non-canonical ship, at least as far as being lovers is concerned. But Arthur becomes Merlin's whole world and Arthur forms a bond with him that runs counter to their society's expectations. Of course, Arthur really bucks convention when he marries Guenevere, so the fact that Merlin is just a servant begins as a big issue and becomes a non-issue by the end of the series. And although Arthur never knew of their prophesied partnership, one could argue that their destiny — if in fact they truly had one — was a more overriding relationship than any other either had.

But just like the first two ships, the placement in the timeline for a story has a lot to do with what kind of story gets told. For example, those set early in the canon, usually in S1, tend to be lighter. There has been less deception between them, but there has been enough bonding that were Arthur to accept Merlin's magic, they could work together behind the scenes for change. But things become more difficult as time goes on, with Uther's death being a key issue. On the one hand, an Arthur empowered to enact change is what Merlin has been waiting for. But Uther's death, with Arthur believing that magic failed him and with Morgana already turned to darkness, makes it difficult for Merlin to argue for its positive elements.

However despite darker overtones in the last season, such as Merlin's half-hearted plans to kill Mordred, post-canon stories tend to be angsty but ultimately hopeful -- given that at his death Arthur reaffirmed his connection to Merlin. Thus stories where he doesn't die, or ones where they are reunited in the future, have canonical support that things could work out between them. How this could really happen though, is harder to imagine once one of them isn't at the point of death.

To have them come together, Arthur has to be convinced he's been wrong about magic — in other words, the hero moves to the villain's side. To date I have yet to see any story where Merlin comes to side with *Arthur* in taking a firm stand against magic and magic users though. It makes a difference that the "villain" is the central character!

However it is possible to imagine their conflict becoming much more personal, where Arthur bends regarding magic but can never really trust Merlin again. The amount of deception has been vast and has run the entire length of their relationship. At least some stories have gone this route, where Merlin becomes Arthur's magical advisor but their relationship never recovers. This pairing thus reveals distinctly a key element of the EtL scenario, which is that past actions can never truly be forgiven. More often than not what's seen in EtL stories is that a personal/sexual relationship overrides broader concerns. Both must bend but in most cases they don't really change. One *Merlin* fic, for example, delves into what it means to have spent your life hiding and lying. Despite the laws being changed and Arthur accepting his magic, Merlin can't stop doing things behind the scenes or avoiding the truth -- even though his reasons for it have ended. His mask has become stuck.

However in the case of Arthur and Merlin, not only have each one's past actions been largely unknown, but Merlin himself has never been truly known by Arthur. This differs from canons where the hero and villain are clearly defined, on opposite sides from, if not the start, then a good portion of the story. It is their personal relationship that overcomes their roles. In *Merlin*, Arthur may change his position but the relationship itself needs to be rebuilt in the framework of a different understanding between them.

### *Love Is Not Enough*

Eve and Villanelle exist in a still open canon so there's no telling where they might go. So far, they are not yet lovers but their obsession with one another strikes me as very much like Arthur and Merlin's struggle with destiny. Unlike in *Merlin* there is little doubt who is supposed to be the hero or villain, but by S2 that setup has become greyed on its own.

The whole series turns less on whether Villanelle might give up her life to be with Eve, but rather in whether Eve's moral compass is all that firm to begin with. And in S2 the two begin working together on an assignment, one in which Eve clearly cares about Villanelle's safety and her obsession is personal, not just professional.

In fact by the end of S2 we see Villanelle propose a solution. Little by little, Eve has lost all the trappings of her former life, as well as what support she has (she seems to have no friends to start with...something in common with Villanelle?) Left with nothing to return to, Villanelle offers that the two go on the run together.

In S3 we discover that this offer is in part because Villanelle is ambivalent about continuing the life she's been trained to lead. But aside from Eve's own decision to reject Villanelle's fantasy that the two could have any kind of life together, it is hard to imagine Villanelle leading a life of seclusion and hardship. She very much likes the good life that her profession can provide for her. She also needs challenges that go beyond merely staying alive. Although like Spike and Buffy, Eve and Villanelle have a palpable chemistry and a similar attraction to danger, any solution for them can't include simply a chance to be together.

Eve's arc suggests that she was sleepwalking through her life before Villanelle. Villanelle has had rather too much action, violence, and excitement. These two could meet in the middle...but they could not co-exist indefinitely in a bunker.

### **What Constitutes the HEA?**

To me, this is the critical question in an EtL storyline, and determines how much I can buy into the story as a whole. As mentioned before, there tend to be three kinds of outcomes — a villain redemption story, a hero goes dark story, or a meet in the middle story where they are both still hero and villain.

The problem with this last one is that it is the least likely to provide any of the usual trappings of a successful relationship — marriage, children, approval by family and friends, or even simply living together. Rather it becomes a story of endless deception and likely constant questioning of what they really have between them. In some ways this could be particularly interesting, because this eternally unresolved state can lead to a lot of storytelling. But a typical romance it is not.

A villain redemption story has occurred before and is usually the favored type of story. However it seems more likely to work in a verse which is particularly distanced from our own. It is impossible to imagine Villanelle being "redeemed" in any realistic way. And it's obviously so impossible in *Merlin* that stories where he gives up his magic (or attempts to, anyway) to side with Arthur in eliminating magic use, don't even get told. Even though Spike is *canonically* on a road to redemption, it's an issue of contention in the fandom that he gets to be considered a hero because of his past actions. And Tony and Loki seem like a possibility largely because Tony has a personality that is always pushing boundaries and Loki's characterization has veered around rather a lot in the Thor films.

Similarly, a hero going dark generally means a dark story overall, which many people do have an appetite for but which challenges the idea of a HEA due to its dystopian feel. Curiously it's only in *Merlin* where this is actually the happy version of the story. But a story where Loki and Tony run a world together, where Villanelle and Eve become guns for hire given certain boundaries, and one where Buffy is vamped could all be fascinating to watch since all those trappings of marriage and children could be contrasted with the opposition and hatred directed at them, or the occasional self-hatred within the pairing itself. How much any of that satisfies has a lot to do with what the reader sees as the right kind of ending for them.

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