

# WITHIN MY CLUTCHES

## A Supervillains' Lament

a roleplaying game for 4 to 6 players

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using terms Lust and Chains (as “suffocating attachment to desires”)

### I. Your clutches are weak

My favorite Marvel supervillains have always had a certain tragic dimension to them. Spider-man has scores of foes who start out wanting money, and then lose all the money they've stolen in obsessive attempts to show Spidey up. (See *Astro City's* “junkman” issue for an homage to this!) Thanos and Doctor Doom become gods, and then some quirk of their psychology allows them to be deposed by a good punch. What's with these people? Are they psychos, narcissists, schizophrenics, or regular folks with a few neuroses and some death rays? Are their stories comedies, tragedies, or morality plays?

Let's find out.

In *Within My Clutches*, you play a single-powered superhuman pursuing the things that every villain wants: **control, status, wealth, respect, and adoration.**

You have been **unscrupulous in using your power**, and that is what makes you villainous. You need not be generally destructive or malicious, though. How you self-identify is up to you -- you can call yourself a superhero if you want!

You're not in any danger of starving, going homeless, or being imprisoned or killed. This is not a game about overcoming anything external. *It's all about what you want and what happens when you go after it and get it.*

In addition to this **Protagonist**, you also play a **Supporting Character** who's the object of other Protagonists' desires. *Within My Clutches* has no GM.

### II. Materials and Play Length

You will need a bunch of six-sided dice. 15 of them is best, though 10 is probably sufficient.

You also need paper or character sheets, and pens or pencils.

With 5 players, I'd guess it'd take about 3 sessions to get to a good stopping point.

### III. Setting up your game

#### **Scale:**

You can seek the rule of galaxies and the adoration of billions if you want, but this text is written to facilitate more small-scale tales, which is recommended for first-time play. Think stealing the mayorship or inspiring a small fan club.

#### **Protagonist compatibility:**

For first-time play, all Protagonists should be on the same scale. They'll be focusing their interactions on the same Supporting characters, and that needs to make sense. Conquer galaxies and boardrooms side by side at your peril.

#### **Tone:**

Each Protagonist needs to be relatable, and not a mere shtick or punchline. Within that, though, there's plenty of room to be either extremely zany or extremely mundane. A heartfelt exploration of Bob the telekinetic janitor's quest to date the girl in reception may not go well with Captain Calamity's posing and monologuing. Discuss tone as a group before making characters.

#### **Wants:**

You need a number of wants equal to the number of players. Here they are in order. Trim from the bottom as needed. (Or you can pick and choose, but read carefully and discuss thoroughly first.)

**respect**

**adoration**

**wealth**

**control**

**status**

**belonging**

**self-actualization**

**meaning**

#### **Respect:**

This is not about who is obligated to kiss your ass because of your job title. This is about esteem that you know is genuine. Who do you want to awe, impress, or just win a firm handshake and nod from?

Example goals: acknowledgment from peer or adversary, online fan community, legacy in photos/film/museum, family member's pride, fair victory in a competition, stage for demonstration of valued skill, redress past error or misdeed

#### **Adoration:**

Who do you want to love you? Your estranged dad? That hot co-worker? We're not talking about your Thursday night poker buddies here. We're talking about love and intimacy, or sex and romance, or worship.

Example goal objects: estranged parent, teenage child, co-worker, crush, ex, escort, cult, acolyte, mentee, henchman, new pet

#### **Wealth:**

This is a broad category, encompassing everything you can buy with money. A job gives you money which lets you buy cars -- any of job, money, or car could be your goal. You already have enough to feed, clothe and

house yourself, so think big.

Example goals: great food, elite prostitutes, high-end electronics, luxury cars, tanks, jets, security robots, mansions, heated pools, nukes, fine clothes, private islands, prime land, laser defense grid

Note: don't overlap with Control and Status if they're in your game. If they aren't, then see their examples for more stuff you could buy.

### **Control:**

What do you wish you had more influence over? What process that's currently outside of your control do you want to own, and who does that involve? Don't use internal stuff like addictions. Pretty much every facet of the world you interact with is an option, though.

Example goal objects: weather, traffic, taxes, co-tenants, politician(s), laws, noise, violence, smoking, travel; anything annoying at your home, job, or commute

Note: don't overlap with and Status if it's in your game. If it isn't, then see its examples for more ways to control stuff.

### **Status:**

This is not about who really likes or admires you, or whether you make seven figures or secretly own the mayor. This is about planting your stake high in the social ladder and walking around with a strut while peons lower their eyes or kiss your ass.

Example goals: fame, title, recognition as expert, leadership or authority position, elected office, prove lineage; trophy spouse, perfect kids, nice car, nice house, nice lawn

### **Belonging:**

Who could really know you and accept you for who you are? What's your ideal community?

Example goals: villain team, sports team, activity group, fan group (books, TV, etc.), family, siblings, reunited old friends

### **Self-actualization:**

How would you like to express yourself? What would you like to be better at? What experiences do you crave?

Example goals: write a novel, learn to cook, climb Everest

### **Meaning:**

Where might you find purpose? What could be your reason to get out of bed in the morning? A fulfilling job? A hobby? A long-term project?

Example goals: work for a good cause, cutting edge research, role in big-time villains' lifelong world domination plot, funding to do personal art projects full-time

For purposes of explanation, the following text assumes 5 players playing with the 5 Wants of Respect, Adoration, Wealth, Control, and Status.

## IV. Protagonists

**1. Write down all your group's Wants, in the order listed in the rules.**

**2. Pick one of them to be your area of supremacy.** You have a super power that has already gotten you everything you want in this arena. It's been rendered a complete non-issue and will not be threatened in play. You're bored with it now.

Each player must have a different area of supremacy.

Define your power. It's fine if it's something that will help you pursue your other Wants, but it can't make any of them trivially easy. You may want to revise it as you fill out your Goals.

*Example powers by area of supremacy:*

*Respect:* You can exude pheromones that put people in a state where they're impressed by any action you take. It works best when you show off.

*Adoration:* Your mesmerizing eye beam makes people love you.

*Wealth:* Your supercomputer brain has allowed you to pioneer the world's biggest tech firm, making you a billionaire.

*Control:* You can cast spells to prevent any occurrence you want, but you can't target individuals.

*Status:* You're a shape-shifter who's killed a celebrity and taken their place.

**3. For your other Wants, come up with a Goal for each.** Make these as interesting as you can; this is what will frame scenes in play! Feel free to ask for help or feedback. You'll only be pursuing one Goal at a time, so if you have to leave one a little vague for now, you'll have time to refine it later.

Make sure you aren't starting play trivially close to any of your Goals. Create a character for whom the Goals themselves aren't trivial either (if you have more money than you can spend, any Wealth goal will be lame).

**4. Give your Protagonist a name and short description.** Figure out what they look like and what they do with their time. Write only what you need to help your own memory.

**5. Once everyone's done with the previous steps, share your Protagonists, including Goals, and then decide as a group how they meet periodically.** This meeting should be ostensibly friendly, but socially competitive and insecurity-fostering. Members provide updates on what they've achieved since the last meeting (whether a formal or informal policy, this must happen at every meeting).

*Example meeting concepts:*

monthly local supers meet-up group  
world domination plot  
potluck  
board game night  
villainy rehab  
stifled supers support group

addicts anonymous  
book club  
sewing circle  
evil inventions work date  
any of the above in an underground volcano lair  
IRC chat room

## V. Supporting Characters (& Goal/Achievement Responsibilities)

**1. Decide on a seating arrangement for all players.** Where you sit will determine the roles played by your Supporting Character (SC) with respect to the other players' Protagonists' Goals.

For each player, roles are assigned clockwise from left. The player to your left is responsible for your first Goal, the player to their left is responsible for your second Goal, etc.

Responsibility for a Goal begins with portraying the SC who is key to that Goal. Thus, the key SC for your second Goal is also the key SC for the first Goal of the player to your left.

With 5 players and 4 Goals per Protagonist, that's 5 Supporting Characters who are each key to 4 different Goals.

**2. Write down the Goals that target your Supporting Character.** There will be several of them and they will have nothing to do with each other.

**3. Enlist the full group's help to connect the Goals and flesh out the SC.** Some revising of Protagonist Goals will be necessary, but it's more important to keep the Goals exciting than to make the SCs perfectly sensible.

The SC's player has authority over their SC in play, but *not* during SC creation.

**4. Write down the Supporting Character's name and description.**

**5. Be aware that your responsibility for a Goal extends beyond your SC.** If you can best portray the keys and obstacles to a given Goal without using your SC, then do that. (Use your SC when you can, though.)

**6. Once a Protagonist achieves a Goal that you are responsible for, you will then play any Contingencies or Expectations attached to that Achievement.** You will need to narrate the costs of maintaining a Contingency plan, and invent Obligations that the Protagonist must fulfill to sustain their Expectations of their Achievements.

## VI. Scenes and Turns

Scenes go around the table clockwise, with the active player choosing a Goal for their Protagonist to pursue and going after it.

Optional rule: Pursuing a Goal means “until you get it”, so if you fail in one scene, you must pursue that same Goal in your next scene.

A **Scene** is simply the term for one player playing their Protagonist. That can involve any number of jumps in fictional time and place. A Scene ends when the dice are rolled and the Protagonist player opts not to Commit.

A **Turn** means one turn around the table: every player has played one scene.

A **Group Scene** comes at the end of each Turn. All the Protagonists meet and chat. Lie, brag, ask for advice -- whatever interaction for however long you want. No dice, though. No using other Protagonists to further your own Goals, either.

## VII. Creating and Resolving Scenes

### 1. Pick a Goal and set a scene to pursue it

Choose one of your Goals. Think of a way to pursue it. Narrate a place and what you’re there to do.

Grab 6 dice.

### 2. Sacrifice

Ignore this step until you’ve authored a Contingency.

If you wish to sacrifice an Achievement to avoid losing dice to a Contingency, narrate the sacrifice now.

### 3. Impose Contingency penalties

Ignore this step until you’ve authored a Contingency.

Each player who controls one of your Contingencies narrates how maintaining that Contingency has cost you or stressed you out since your last scene. Each such player takes 1 die from your group of 6.

### 4. Roleplay until an Attempt crystallizes

The player responsible for this Goal and the Supporting Character attached to it will portray that SC and/or whomever you interact with. It is up to you to decide how long you want to spend developing and revealing your character before you make a concrete Attempt at your Goal.

When you decide that you’re about to make an Attempt, do not narrate the Attempt. Narrate only your intent: what you’re about to do, but haven’t yet begun.

## 5. Introduce Obligations

Ignore this step until you've authored an Expectation.

Each player who controls one of your Expectations rolls a die. If the result is 3 or higher (or if the Expectation is Touchy -- no roll needed), the player must narrate how a related Obligation interferes with or distracts from your current Attempt. Each such player then places their Expectation dice on the table in front of them.

## 6. Allot dice

Split your dice between each Obligation you face and the Attempt you're going to make. You can give all or none of your dice to any of these.

No dice for an Attempt means that you don't make the Attempt.

No dice for an Obligation means that you cannot outright win, but you may still have options.

Narrate your choices and efforts accordingly.

## 7. Roll dice

Everyone involved in the scene rolls their dice.

## 8. Compare Obligation results (& form Contingencies)

Each roll of 4-6 is a Success. Each of your applicable Contingencies also counts as one automatic Success.

**For each Obligation, compare your number of Successes with your opponent's.**

**If you have more,** you manage to satisfy your Obligation with no consequences.

**If you have fewer, If you have no Contingency for this Obligation,** you can either author a Contingency or lose the relevant Achievement.

**If you have a Contingency for this Obligation,** you lose the relevant Achievement.

**If you are tied, If you have no Contingency for this Obligation,** you can either author a Contingency or let the object of your Expectation become Touchy.

**If you have a Contingency for this Obligation,** the object of your Expectation becomes Touchy.

Once the dice and subsequent choices determine each outcome, all involved players narrate accordingly.

New Contingencies are written down by both you and the player who controls your relevant Expectation.

Losing an Achievement means you must write a new Goal for that Want. It can be the same as your original Goal for that Want if you like.

## 9. Determine Attempt results (& form Expectations)

Each roll of 4-6 is a Success.

**Each total number of Successes produces a different outcome:**

**0** You damage your chances of ever achieving this Goal. Write down -1 next to it. This will subtract 1 Success from later scenes' rolls toward this Goal.

**1-3** You make no progress toward achieving this Goal.

**4** You make small progress toward achieving this Goal. Write down +1 next to it. This will add 1 Success to later scenes' rolls toward this Goal.

**5+** Success! This is no longer a Goal, it is now an Achievement.

**You can add as many Successes as you want by choosing to Commit.** By Committing, you form an **Expectation** of what you'll get out of achieving your Goal. **This Expectation is assigned a number of dice equal to the number of Successes you purchased by Committing.** This represents how attached you are to your Achievement: how much you prioritize it, how much leverage it has over you, how sensitive you are to it.

**The player who controlled the relevant Goal now controls this Expectation.**

*Example:* roll 3 Successes, Commit for 2; 5 total achieves the Goal, and a 2-dice Expectation is attached to that Achievement.

Once the dice and subsequent choices determine each outcome, all involved players narrate accordingly.

## 10. End the scene (& Narration summary)

Narrate any final details to close the scene.

**The group should have already narrated, if they came up:**

- where the Protagonist has gone to pursue their Goal
- how the Protagonist sacrificed an Achievement to get out from under the stress of Obligations or of maintaining a Contingency
- how maintaining a Contingency has recently stressed the Protagonist
- how the Protagonist means to Attempt their Goal
- how an Obligation interferes with the Protagonist's Attempt
- how the Protagonist Attempts to achieve their Goal
- how the Protagonist attempts to satisfy each Obligation
- how an Obligation is satisfied with no consequences for the Protagonist
- how the Protagonist forms an ongoing Contingency plan to satisfy their object of Expectation in the future
- how the Protagonist employs a Contingency plan to satisfy their object of Expectation right now
- how an Achievement (with or without an Expectation) is lost to the Protagonist
- how a Protagonist's object of Expectation becomes Touchy, prone to interference and dissatisfaction
- how a Protagonist's chance at their Goal got worse
- how a Protagonist's chance at their Goal got better
- how a Protagonist's attempt at their Goal did nothing
- how a Protagonist's attempt at their Goal succeeded
- how a Protagonist passionately and decisively Commits to achieving a Goal, clinging to an envisioned Expectation of how their life will benefit in result



**Pick a Goal and set a scene to pursue it**

(Sacrifice an Achievement)

(Impose Contingency penalties)

**Roleplay until an Attempt crystallizes**

**Introduce Obligations**

**Allot dice**

Narrate your choices and efforts accordingly.

**Roll dice**

**Compare Obligation results  
(& form Contingencies)**

Win:

You satisfy your  
Obligation with no  
consequences.

Tie:

If you have no Contingency for this  
Obligation, you can either author a  
Contingency or let the object of your  
Expectation become Touchy.

Lose:

If you have no Contingency for  
this Obligation, you can either  
author a Contingency or lose the  
relevant Achievement.

If you have a Contingency for  
this Obligation, the object of your  
Expectation becomes Touchy.

If you have a Contingency for  
this Obligation, you lose the  
relevant Achievement.

Narrate outcomes

**Determine Attempt results  
(& form Expectations)**

0 Successes: -1 to future attempts  
1-3 Successes: no progress

4 Successes: +1 to future attempts  
5+ Successes: goal achieved

**Commit for bonus Successes**

Form Expectation (dice equal to bonus Successes)

**End the scene**

## VIII. Group Scenes

Ridicule, advise, conspire and commiserate with each other for as long as it takes you to:

- 1) share everyone's Achievements and Goals, and
- 2) decide which Protagonist you like, or at least hate less than the others

**Once everyone's ready, each player secretly picks a Protagonist to vote for.** You can't vote for your own. Everyone reveals simultaneously, with the **winner of the most votes getting one bonus die** for their next scene. There can only be one winner, so resolve ties with vote-offs.

The winning voters should then narrate how their Protagonists act to raise the winning Protagonist's self-esteem during the remainder of the meeting. Feel free to be subtle -- e.g. a grudging nod of approval -- as long as it's beyond what play has established as the norm for these meetings.

## IX. What if I Achieve all my Goals?

When it's your scene, you have two choices:

- 1) Declare a Final Scene
- 2) Set a scene of your daily life, narrate as you wish, and then ask the other players, "So how does an Obligation come up now?"

## X. What if I don't want to Attempt a new Goal?

You *do* want to. That's why they're called Wants.

## XII. Final Scenes

Play is about exploring how pursuing and achieving their Goals effects these Protagonists. Once you've gotten as much out of that as you feel you're going to, you can declare a Final Scene for your Protagonist on your turn. This is a signal to the group to start wrapping up their stories as well.

**Note on genre:**

This game's dice system isn't supervillain-specific. I think it'd work well for:

Soul-crushing office mundanity

Perfect suburban families

Beauty pageants

'80s "Greed is Good" big business

Social outcasts and misfits of various stripes (Dexter was a major inspiration)

End of innocence, growing up tales

*Within My Clutches* is largely a product of those supervillains that remind me of all of the above.

**Alternate rule:**

Any time you're faced with losing an Achievement, just author another Contingency for it. This costs you more dice, but you only ever get one automatic Success per Obligation, no matter how many Contingencies you've stacked on the relevant object of Expectation.

This would be a nice option for a constricting tangle of obligations, but taking Achievement loss off the table would seem to break the incentives that make dice-allocating interesting.

I guess I could split the difference and set a number of Contingencies per Expectation. 2 or 3, probably.

# Protagonist

NAME:

DESCRIPTION:

SUPREMACY: \_\_\_\_\_ -

SUPER-POWER:

<u>WANTS</u>	<u>GOALS</u>	<u>ACHIEVED</u>
_____	- _____	_____
_____	- _____	_____
_____	- _____	_____
_____	- _____	_____
_____	- _____	_____
_____	- _____	_____

## ACHIEVEMENTS

_____	EXPECTATION: _____
_____	CONTINGENCY: _____
_____	EXPECTATION: _____
_____	CONTINGENCY: _____
_____	EXPECTATION: _____
_____	CONTINGENCY: _____
_____	EXPECTATION: _____
_____	CONTINGENCY: _____
_____	EXPECTATION: _____
_____	CONTINGENCY: _____

# Supporting Character

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NAME:

PROTAGONIST:			
CONTINGENCY:	_____	<u>DICE</u>	<u>TOUCHY</u>
EXPECTATION:	_____	—	—
<u>WANT</u>	<u>GOAL</u>	<u>SC's KEY</u>	
_____	—	_____	

PROTAGONIST:			
CONTINGENCY:	_____	<u>DICE</u>	<u>TOUCHY</u>
EXPECTATION:	_____	—	—
<u>WANT</u>	<u>GOAL</u>	<u>SC's KEY</u>	
_____	—	_____	

PROTAGONIST:			
CONTINGENCY:	_____	<u>DICE</u>	<u>TOUCHY</u>
EXPECTATION:	_____	—	—
<u>WANT</u>	<u>GOAL</u>	<u>SC's KEY</u>	
_____	—	_____	

PROTAGONIST:			
CONTINGENCY:	_____	<u>DICE</u>	<u>TOUCHY</u>
EXPECTATION:	_____	—	—
<u>WANT</u>	<u>GOAL</u>	<u>SC's KEY</u>	
_____	—	_____	

PROTAGONIST:			
CONTINGENCY:	_____	<u>DICE</u>	<u>TOUCHY</u>
EXPECTATION:	_____	—	—
<u>WANT</u>	<u>GOAL</u>	<u>SC's KEY</u>	
_____	—	_____	