Asylum: The Setting

There is more to Asylum than just the rules. The rules are flexible but we created them to tell stories about a particular world that we hope will inspire many amazing characters and stories from you and your fellow players. With that said, much of what we provide here is kept intentionally general and flexible to work with your own characters and stories. We also provide optional in-depth setting cannon for players and Narrators who want it, but don’t be afraid to collaborate and adapt the game your own needs.

# Genre, Themes, and Mood

The setting of Asylum is defined by a number of distinct and complimentary themes and moods. It also draws strongly from the genres of **Hard-Boiled Noir** and **Urban Fantasy**. If you can imagine gritty crime stories like *The Wire* mixed with the modern magic of the *Dresden Files*, you’re catching our drift.

## Genre: Hard-Boiled Urban Fantasy

The supernatural Outsiders of Asylum are inspired by our myths and legends, but times have changed since those stories were first composed. With that in mind, many of the Outsiders are not exactly what you might expect from superstition. Keep in mind that millennia have passed and both humans and Outsiders have had a lot of time change and adapt.

Long ago, dwarves, dragons, and leprechauns often coveted and accumulated grand caches of golden treasure. These days they might be more likely to collect an extensive art collection or stock portfolio. The faeries of old might have typically dwelled in fortresses magically hidden inside remote barrows, tree trunks, and caves. However, in this modern age their kids are moving to the city and renting apartments.

These modernized myths create the Urban Fantasy aspect of our theme. The Hard-Boiled Noir aspect is a little subtler and requires a bit more cooperation from the Narrator and players. Dark tones and morally complicated characters traditionally characterize Noir. Hard-Boiled protagonists sometimes have unsavory motivations and employ less than heroic tactics. Everyone has a price and total innocence is a rare virtue.

## Theme: Action and Intrigue

Action and intrigue are probably the broadest appealing themes that you can emphasize in your Asylum game. They need not be antithetical to our genre or other themes, but some Narrators and players are expecting there to be routine mysteries or action scenes. When a player that trades a portion of his character’s soul for a dragon’s fiery breath, there’s a good chance he’s hoping for a chance to use it. Each player’s choices of Aspects and Foundations are a good indicator of their expectations, but it never hurts to talk openly about it. As a table the Narrator and players need to decide if the story is about supernatural spies work quietly and subtly like Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy or if they’re loud and bold heroes like James Bond or Jason Borne. It’s perfectly okay to be a bit of both, but it’s good to know ahead of time if violence whether violence is considered an inevitable expectation or not.

## Theme: Crime and Punishment

One of the major themes of Asylum is the constant struggle and occasional collusion between various legal and criminal elements. If you want to you can easily run Asylum as a procedural mystery similar to *Law & Order* or *Dragnet*.

If this theme is important to your players and Narrator then the characters should probably all be members of Cirque or closely connected with regional police conspiracies. However, most of the factions have some motivation to work with law enforcement, in case you want an eclectic cast for a one-shot or an episodic campaign involving an Asylum task force.

# The Main Factions

Firms of the Red Market is like the modern day black market, except instead of drugs and guns they sell magical things. There are several Firms that are dedicated to buying and selling magic on the Red Market. Their agenda is profit. Their methods are trading in and smuggling dangerous magic. Their flaw is that they’re amoral and suspected in unethical practices. Working for the Red Market you could be a go-between, bagman, acquisition expert, thief, bodyguard, smuggler, salesman, enchanter, or antiquarian. Your character could be the head of their own Firm, or work for a larger one. Multiple PCs can be from the same Firm, or represent a single Firm. If PCs from multiple different Firms cooperate, they usually have a formal partnership or consulting relationship.

The Mission is like the Knights Templar in that they are a secret conspiracy of religious zealots that has been excommunicated by the Vatican. Their agenda is to understand the Outside in search of God, which they call Gnosis. Their methods are exploration and concealment. Their flaw is that they interpret the Outside through the lens of mainstream modern religion, and as a result distrust and misunderstand most outsiders. The Vatican also persecutes them – since the Mission philosophy of studying the Outside to understand God is an official Heresy by the Holy See. Unlike Templars, they have embraced other faiths, and incorporate other seekers from Abrahamic religions (Muslims, Jews, and Protestants) and even the rare righteous non-believer. Working for the Mission you could be an explorer, mystic, priest, missionary, diviner, scholar or templar. They also have some degree of tradecraft, so you could be a safe house operative, counterespionage expert, or money launderer.

The Bureau of Outsider Affairs is a covert American intelligence agency, similar to the CIA. The Bureau acts exclusively by, for and against the supernatural. Their agenda is protecting the interests of the United States and the rest of Inside. Their methods are investigation and tradecraft. Their flaw is hegemony – they see themselves as policing the world, assuming authority everywhere, even where they don’t have it. Working for the Bureau, you could be an investigator, a counter-intelligence expert, a station agent, a computer technician, a counter-terrorism officer, a linguist, an undercover specialist, a human terrain analyst or a Special Forces soldier.

Kommittet 13, or “the Committee” is similar to the Russian mob. They rose from Soviet intelligence and secret police after the collapse of the USSR and now run a shadow government of protection and investment. They operate around the world, involved in illicit vices, but also legitimate investment and power brokering – often a mix. Their agenda is power. Their methods are corruption and power brokering. Their flaw is corruption, as well. Working for the Committee, you could be an enforcer, a power broker, a protection racketeer, an investor, a bagman, a money launderer, a smuggler, a fixer, an asset handler, a hit man, or a spy.

The Pantheons are several organizations. Through strengthening connections to the Outside, the power structures of ancient mythic pantheons are returning. Each Pantheon is different, but reflects its mythic characteristics. Olympus, Asgard, the Ennead, the Celestial Bureaucracy and various organizations from other ancient gods are all struggling to get a foothold here. Their common thread is that they all used to be worshipped and they all used to govern natural phenomena. The pantheons’ agendas tend to be worship and nature. Their methods are generally conversion and contract, but they’re all different: Old gods might be still focused on their old roles, or may have adapted to modern times (work with your GM on what your pantheon is like). Their flaw is that they are disparate, and often out of their league – a priest of Ra in New York could have a cult of sun-god followers, but he’s pretty cut off and isolated. What you do for a Pantheon depends on your character’s origin. The other factions tend to be common for Insiders or well-integrated Outsiders. Less well-assimilated Outsiders are likely to still work for their “old boss.” Human insiders work for pantheons, too: You could be a high priest, contract negotiator, myrmidon, power broker, missionary or archaeologist. An outsider tends to be an integrated member of the pantheon’s mystic structure:

You could play spriggan bagman for the Winter Queen of the Unseelie Court (spriggans guard treasure in faerie legends, so having one run illicit cash for evil faeries is no stretch), a winged sky elf enforcer for the Ljos Alfar (like a valkyrie), a hawk spirit serving as a bounty hunter for Horus (what if Horus, god of the hunt, has opened a worldwide bounty hunting business?), or an ancestor spirit serving as a liaison to the Ministry for the Celestial Bureaucracy (tying together two factions for a complex character).

## Other Factions

The Ministry of Exceptional Citizens is a powerful organization in China that once served as a regulatory force for spirits and ghosts. In the modern era, they were adapted into the Chinese government’s internal security apparatus, but still act as scholars, priests and mediums for dealing with haunting. Their agenda is control. Their methods are containment and consulting. Their flaw is oppression – they are oppressors and oppressed by the Party and the power structure. Swift, harsh, dire consequences await Ministry agents who go rogue or betray the ideals. The Ministry is powerful in East Asia, but also operates internationally. Experts on ghosts and haunting are recruited to act as Ministry consultants across the world, trained in Ministry policies and techniques, and contracted to assist other organizations in dealing with spirits and the undead. They are experts in murder investigations for obvious reasons. Working for the Ministry, you could be a Chinese alchemist, an ancestor shaman, a paranormal investigator, a medium, a medicine man, a spy, a propaganda expert, or an exorcist. *Note: Do not include Ministry PCs in an Asylum game that doesn’t involve Asia or the Undead.*

In the European Union Outside and Inside cultures have already been mixing for centuries. The need to handle these hybrid cultures with a more open and diplomatic hand created Cirque. The Cirque is like the Hague in that it acts as a peace-keeping and refugee services for Outsiders in Europe. They also work for Interpol in an extended capacity, liaising with other organizations and governments on international police investigations. Their agenda is containment and assimilation. Their methods are integration and surveillance. Their flaw is bureaucracy – they’re mired in internal politics and regulations. For a game set outside of Europe, a Cirque agent would be working for Interpol as a liaison, assisting the other characters as they attempt to investigate international criminals. Their ability to liaise with other nations’ police forces adds great value to an international investigation. Working for the Cirque, you could be a rehabilitation specialist, an Interpol officer, a surveillance expert, a case manager, an asset handler, or an investigator. *Note: Do not include Cirque PCs in an Asylum game that doesn’t involve Europe or an international crime.*

## Or No Faction At All

The Independents are not an organization at all. They’re contractors or outsiders who don’t work for or ally with any particular organization. However, they are still subject to whatever organizations exercise their authority over them. If in Europe, Independents are subjects of Cirque. In any nation under American influence, including the US, they are subjects of the Bureau. In East Asia, it’s the Ministry. In South America, they are subjects of the Mission. In Western Asia and Russia, they are under the Committee’s “protection.” In Africa, they may find themselves subjects of a pantheon, or of the Mission. If they are engaged in trade in magic, they are subject to the Red Market.

## The Host

The Host is a conservative, secret organization of men and women dedicated to keeping the Outside out. They have eyes and ears around the world, and if they get wind of Outsider influence, they often show up and destroy it. It is believed that The Host cast the Outsiders out millennia ago. As the influence of the Outside grows, the Host has been showing up more and more. The details about The Host are a secret for GMs to determine and players to learn in an Asylum game.

## Asylum

Finally, Asylum … Asylum is a movement within the supernatural community – just like Independents, members of Asylum are subjects of other organizations. They’re dedicated to the idea that Insiders and Outsiders can live together on Earth in peace and harmony. While others fear the Host or fight it, Asylum openly opposes the Host. They not only disagree with the Host, but they also promote the idea that the Host has it backwards: Don’t suppress the Outside; integrate it. Consequently, Asylum is popular among Contractors and Outsiders that like humanity or human society. Asylum has an Inner Circle of secret leaders – secret because the Host is so dangerous and hostile to their ideas. The Inner Circle recruits secret Agents, who are often also members of other organizations.

A character’s association with the Asylum varies:

* Suspicion and rejection: The character doesn’t want to be associated with these ideas. This doesn’t work for most PCs, since it assumes some hostility toward Outsiders.
* Acceptance and alignment: The character likes the ideas of the Asylum and promotes them. She might describe herself as pro-Asylum, but not committed to their ideals. PC members of The Mission might be members of Asylum because of the message of peace and goodwill.
* Promotion and politics: The character actively promotes Asylum’s ideas and considers herself an adherent of the philosophy: An Asylum member. She may be recruited to be an Agent of Asylum if the Inner Circle deems her valuable. Some PCs, especially Outsiders, may not be actual Agents of Asylum, but strong allies of those agents.
* Agent of Asylum: There is an inner circle of Asylum proponents, and it employs agents in a secretive cell structure, protected from their Host enemies. Asylum Agents get information, equipment, and missions from the Inner Circle. PCs are usually Agents of Asylum.

The PCs are assumed to be proponents of Asylum, actual operatives working for the Inner Circle of the Asylum movement, or allies of Agents of the Inner Circle of the movement. The Asylum’s agenda is peaceful integration. Their methods are covert investigation and clandestine operations. Their flaw is secrecy – agents in an Asylum cell don’t know any other official Agents other than their handler, and must keep their affiliation secret. Asylum agents can be any character cable of covert investigation and clandestine operations – basically a modern fantasy adventurer.

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| **Organization** | **Agenda** | **Methods** | **Flaw** | **Concepts** |
| Firms of the Red Market | Profit | Trading and Smuggling Dangerous Magic | Amoral and Unethical | Go-Between  Burglar  Bodyguard  Businessman  Smuggler  Enchanter  Antiquarian |
| The Mission | Gnosis | Exploration and Concealment | Distrust of Outsiders; Branded Heretics by the Vatican | Explorer  Missionary Priest  Knight  Diviner  Scholar  Counter-Intelligence  Money Launderer |
| Bureau of Outsider Affairs | Protection | Investigation and Tradecraft | American Hegemony | Investigator  Station Agent  Computer Tech  Undercover Operative  Human Terrain Analyst  Special Forces Soldier |
| Kommittet 13, or “the Committee” | Power | Corruption and Power Brokering | Corruption | Enforcer  Power Broker  Racketeer  Investor  Money Launderer  Fixer  Hit Man |
| Pantheons (various) | Worship and Nature | Conversion and Contracts | Disparate and Isolated | High Priest  Contract Negotiator  Myrmidon  Missionary  Archaeologist  Power Broker |
| Ministry of Exceptional Citizens | Control | Containment and Consulting | Oppression | Medium  Alchemist  Paranormal Investigator  Propaganda Expert  Exorcist  Shaman |
| The Cirque | Containment | Integration and Surveillance | Bureaucracy | Rehabilitation Specialist  Interpol Officer  Surveillance Expert  Case Manager  Asset Handler  Investigator |