The Purity forces arrayed against Jason's team and their adventurer allies numbered in the dozens, although more than half were only bronze-rank. The key threats were the two gold-rank converted, the three silver-rank essence users and, to a lesser degree, the fifteen or so silver converted.

The powers of the converted were less bizarre than those of their Builder equivalent, without the body-horror transformations. Beneath the surface, however, Jason could sense that the cores inside them had caused more internal changes than was readily apparent. In terms of powers, most were predicated on producing flames or conjuring objects. In both cases, the fire or items produced were an ethereal silver.

The focal point of the battle was the two gold-rankers leading the way for the Purity forces as they charged down the broken and sloping street. One opened an aperture on his head, like the empty socket of a third eye. A stream of fire came spewing out of it and towards the adventurers. The fire was eerie, silver and ethereal, as if only an illusion. The heat pouring off it was very real, however, and it was tinged with disruptive-force damage, which was highly effective against most magical defences.

The defender from Team Work Saw looked like he'd come off a recruiting poster for defence specialists. Henry Xeller was a leonid and big even for his species, clad in ornate heavy armour, lacquered blue and gold with a lion motif. In one hand was a heavy mace, the stylised lion head matching his armour. His hefty shield completed the set, the lion's head image having its mouth open in a roar.

Henry held up his shield as the magical fire came pouring in and let out a roar. He had already evolved racial gift roar power that leonids possessed, and his version diminished the magic in area attacks. The silver flames became dull as the disruptive force they contained was diminished but the heat was unaffected. Henry held up his shield and the flames were sucked into the mouth of the lion head on it, preventing them from reaching the rest of the front line.

The gold ranker didn't let up, pouring out more of the fire. The shield continued sucking it in, the metal starting to visibly heat up. Henry was unfazed, not even looking at the heat glow of the metal slab strapped to his arm.

The other gold-ranker conjured translucent armour over her entire body. Despite having the look and coverage of heavy armour, it didn't slow down her gold-rank reflexes

at all. Along with the armour, she conjured a short-handled, double-headed axe into each hand. The weapons and armour both were wreathed in ghostly fire.

Unlike the first gold ranker, who stood back to spew out flames, this one charged in and was intercepted by Sophie. While the gold-rank converted had many lacking areas compared to an essence user, her basic attributes were not among them. She had the full strength and speed that demonstrated just how big a jump gold rank was even from the already formidable silver.

When all of that speed and power was brought to bear on Sophie, she didn't flinch. If anything, the gold-rank converted was an ideal enemy; one with the speed and power to push her limits without a dangerous slate of fancy powers. Instead, she just hit hard and fast, which Sophie was well-equipped to handle.

Sophie was normally the most mobile one in a fight but she let the converted juke around her as she dodged and blocked while standing mostly in place. She moved fast but on the spot instead of repositioning. The twin axes were a barely discernible blur as they came down on Sophie again and again, yet she was completely a match for the gold-ranker's speed. Both combatants were blurs to the people around them, with Sophie especially flickering like a figure in corrupted video footage.

Ability: [Between the Raindrops] (Swift)

- ➢ Special ability (movement, dimension).
- ➢ Cost: High mana per second and high stamina per second.
- ➢ Cooldown: None.

- ➢ Current rank: Silver 3 (17%)

- ➢ Effect (iron): Increased reflexes and spatial awareness.

- ➢ Effect (bronze): Increase speed through spatial distortion. More effective at improving short, erratic motions than straight-line speed.

- ➢ Effect (silver): Dodge using spatial distortion.

Between the Raindrops wasn't the only speed-increasing power Sophie possessed but it was the most effective for the quick movement of a duel. The silver-rank space-distorting effect was essentially the same as the one Jason's cloak picked up at silver rank, causing even hits that seemed to land miss. It was a difficult power to use effectively but Sophie had mastered it much more quickly than Jason.

Unable to outpace her, the converted attempted to take advantage of Sophie's decision to not run around by body-checking her. It did not go well.

Ability: [Mirage Step] (Mystic)

➢ Special ability (dimension, movement, illusion).
➢ Cost: Low stamina and mana.
➢ Cooldown: 40 seconds.

➢ Current rank: Silver 2 (81%).

➢ Effect (iron): Move instantaneously to a nearby location, leaving an afterimage behind.

➢ Effect (bronze): Can be used a second time. Cooldown reduced to 35 seconds, with a use regained every cooldown period. Attacking an afterimage creates a disorienting, short-lived, dimensionally distorted illusion space that traps the attacker.

➢ Effect (silver): Can be used a third time. Regain one use every 30 seconds. Afterimages and dimensional distortions fire dimensional blades throughout their duration at random enemies, inflicting sharp and resonating-force damage.

The gold ranker slammed into the afterimage Sophie left behind, becoming trapped in a spatial distortion that looked like a wobbly soap bubble from the outside, while the inside was filled with disorienting kaleidoscopic images. Blades of force shot off at other converted and while the gold-ranker was only trapped for a handful of seconds, Sophie made the most of them, leaping high into the air.

Ability: [Eternal Moment] (Swift)

➢ Special Ability.
➢ Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
➢ Cooldown: None.

➢ Current rank: Silver 2 (37%).

➢ Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.

➢ Effect (bronze): Time increases to 2 seconds.

➢ Effect (silver): Time increases to 3 seconds.

Sophie's Eternal Moment power was potentially her strongest, but also her least exciting to rank up. It was incredibly formidable nonetheless, giving her critical time to act.

In the air above the battle, she accelerated her personal time stream until everything around her seemed to freeze in place.

By this point, the frontline was a mess of converted and adventurers, lined up and clashing on the street. Sophie fired off a rapid stream of attacks with her Wind Blade power, the blades freezing in place until she slowed back down into the normal flow of time. She aimed the blades into the crowd of converted, not at the one she was fighting.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- ➢ Special attack.
- ➢ Cost: Low mana.
- ➢ Cooldown: None.

- ➢ Current rank: Silver 2 (97%).

- ➢ Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.

- ➢ Effect (bronze): Blades increase in length while travelling and track targets.

- ➢ Effect (silver): Blades explode on impact, detonating a horizontal ring of cutting force from each penetrated enemy.

Sophie's power wreaked havoc amongst the enemy as time unfroze. It wasn't especially powerful, although it didn't feel that way to the bronze-rank converted. It served as more of a distraction to the silver-rankers, while acting as chum in the water for the leech swarm amongst them as Sophie's power drew blood.

Dropping back in front of the gold-ranker just as she was freed from the illusion space, axe blows once more rained down on Sophie. Most of them were not dodged, Sophie instead choosing to block them directly. She didn't use weapons of her own, intercepting attacks mostly with her hands, forearms and shins, but with whatever worked – even her head. So long as she was actively intercepting the attack, her power took effect.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- ➢ Special ability (magic).
- ➢ Cost: None.
- ➢ Cooldown: None.

- ➢ Current rank: Silver 3 (21%).

- ➢ Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed

Immortal Fist was one of Sophie's signature abilities and the one that allowed her to intercept weapons with her bare hands. As it ranked up it gave her a couple of options to enhance her weak attacks, either by saving up for a big hit using the momentum buff or by rapid-firing attacks. Against the fast and tough gold-ranker, she chose not to counterattack, saving up for a big hit.

While the gold-ranker's powers were largely straightforward, that did not mean she was without additional tricks. Every time Sophie intercepted an attack, the silver fire wreathing the weapons attempted to crawl onto her body.

Sophie's unarmed fighting style wouldn't work if she was subjected to the deleterious effects of every object she touched. The other ability that was quintessential her fighting style helped shield her from such effects.

➢ Effect (silver): After intercepting a magical projectile you may make a disruptive-force projectile attack.

➢ [Impervious] (boon, magic, stacking): Resistances are increased and damage reduction is gained against non-physical damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

A major deficit of Sophie's power set was the lack of simple, high-impact abilities. Her few big-ticket powers required specific circumstances, extensive set-up or both. The vast majority of Sophie's powers were minor effects that required high levels of skill to leverage. Fortunately, she had a power that offered a comprehensive enhancement to this style by enhancing many of those minor effects.

Ability: [Child of the Celestial Wind] (Wind)

➢ Special Ability (dimension, holy).
➢ Cost: None
➢ Cooldown: None.

➢ Current rank: Silver 2 (76%).

➢ Effect (iron): Your celestine racial powers have increased effect. You gain damage reduction to disruptive-force damage.

➢ Effect (bronze): All your dimension and wind-related abilities have increased effect. You have increased resistance to dimension and wind-based effects and enemies subjected to your wind-related abilities suffer disruptive-force damage.

➢ Effect (silver): Boons with maximum effect thresholds have their maximum thresholds increased.

Sophie was never going to be a damage powerhouse, but her offensive ability escalated just enough with each rank that she was never safe to ignore. Key to this was the nature of the damage she inflicted, which was a combination of resonating and disruptive force. These damage types excelled at penetrating physical and magical defences respectively, which was highly relevant against the gold-ranker.

The conjured armour of the converted Sophie was fighting proved to be an excellent defensive measure against conventional forms of attack, even magical ones. This was true not just for the gold-ranker but also for the lower-ranked converted with similar powers. The ranged attackers on the adventurer side, pouring attacks into the enemy, were finding that their efforts against the armoured enemies were being shrugged off.

The armour was so effective because it integrated magic and physical defences with high efficacy. Breaching it effectively required either a massive amount of damage or a

combination of damage types that could weaken both aspects. This was another reason that the enemy was a perfect fit for Sophie, who was building up to break her opponent's armour and expose it to the adventurer's attacks.

Sophie's approach to combat, in spite of her speed, was to take it slow. The early stages of the fight were when she was weakest, so she treated battles as a marathon more than a sprint. The longer a battle went on, the harder she was to kill, the faster she healed and the more her damage went from weak but penetrative to a major threat. She also become more and more dangerous not just to fight against, but to stop fighting against once started.

Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

➢ Special Ability (healing, recovery)
➢ Cost: None.
➢ Cooldown: None.

➢ Current rank: Silver 3 (20%).

➢ Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.

➢ Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Good Karma] when healing others, cleansing others or suffering damage. Enemies that attack or take offensive actions against you are inflicted with [Bad Karma]. So long as any enemy has an instance of [Bad Karma], you have [Karmic Sacrifice].

➢ Effect (silver): When an enemy with [Bad Karma] dies or is destroyed, your cooldowns are reduced for each instance of [Good Karma] you have.

➢ [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy): Bonus to the [Power] and [Spirit] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.

➢ [Bad Karma] (affliction, retributive, holy): Suffer a small amount of retributive, transcendent damage when making an attack or other offensive action against anyone without the [Karmic Sacrifice] boon. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.

➢ [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Bonus to [Recovery]. Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.

➢ [Karmic Sacrifice] (boon, holy, heal-over-time): Gain an ongoing healing effect, with strength determined by the amount of [Good Karma] you have accrued. This effect immediately ends if there are no enemies suffering from [Bad Karma].

Karmic Warrior was one of Sophie's most impactful powers, although even that was a slow burn, accumulating over time. The gold-rank converted were trump cards for the Purity forces but this particular converted had been stopped dead by Sophie and effectively deleted from the fight as it failed to make any inroads in taking her down. Even worse, the bad karma affliction it accumulated attacking Sophie meant that attacking anyone else was a bad idea.

The gold-ranker could instinctively sense the nature of the bad karma effect. If she attacked anyone but Sophie, now, she would suffer retribution damage. Even worse, the damage would be transcendent, completely ignoring any defences she possessed. She was stuck facing Sophie until one of them went down and Sophie was on the opposite of her last legs. With every passing moment, she was growing stronger.