

There's a silence. "It happens to the best of us," he says.

Does this guilelessness make him delightfully naive or disturbingly naive? I wonder. He is, after all, planning to lead me into hazardous situations this weekend.

4:00 a.m. We finally locate his crew on a street corner near the train station. Tonight there's Pitch Black, Ghost, and Red Dragon. They're all costumed and masked and, although in good shape, shorter and stockier than Phoenix. He stands tall among them, and more eloquent, too. They're a little monosyllabic, as if they've decided to defer to their leader in all things.

They have a visitor—a superhero from Oregon named Knight Owl. He's been fighting crime since January 2008 and is in town for an impending comic-book convention. He's tall, masked, and muscular, in his mid-twenties, and dressed in a black-and-yellow costume.

They brief Phoenix on a group of crack addicts and dealers standing at a nearby bus stop. A plan is formed. They'll just walk slowly past them to show who's boss. No confrontation. Just a slow, intimidating walk past.

We spot the crack addicts right away. There're ten of them. They're huddled at the bus stop, looking old and wired, talking animatedly to each other about something. When they see us they stop talking and shoot us wary glances, wondering uneasily what the superheroes are covertly murmuring to each other.

This is what the superheroes are murmuring to each other:

KNIGHT OWL: "I've discovered a mask maker who does these really awesome owl masks. They're made out of old gas masks."

PHOENIX: "Like what Urban Avenger's got?"

KNIGHT OWL: "Sort of, but owl-themed. I'm going to ask her if she'll put my logo on it in brass."

PHOENIX: "That's awesome. By the way, I really like your black-and-yellow color scheme."

KNIGHT OWL: "Thank you. I think the yellow really pops."

PITCH BLACK: "I just want a straight-up black bandana. I can't find one for the life of me."

PHOENIX: "You should cut up a black T-shirt."

PITCH BLACK: "Hmm."