

We're ten feet from the bus stop now. Close up these dealers and addicts look exhausted, burned out.

Leave them alone, I think. Haven't they got enough to deal with? They'll be gone by the time the daytime people arrive. Why can't they have their hour at the bus stop? Plus, aren't we prodding a hornets' nest? Couldn't this be like the Taco Incident times a thousand?

The Taco Incident. Ever since Phoenix burst onto the scene some weeks ago with a short item on CNN extolling his acts of derring-do, the wider superhero community has been rife with grumbling. Many of the two hundred real-life superheroes out there, evidently jealous of Phoenix's stunning rise, have been spreading rumors about him. The chief rumormongers have been New York City's Dark Guardian and Washington state's Mister Raven Blade. They say Phoenix is not as brave as he likes people to believe, and he's in it for personal gain, and his presence on the streets only serves to escalate matters. For this last criticism they cite the Taco Incident.

"Tell me about the Taco Incident," I ask Phoenix now.

He sighs. "It was a drunk driver. He was getting into his car so I tried to give him a taco and some water to sober him up. He didn't want it. I kept insisting. He kept saying no. Eventually he got kind of violent. He tried to shove me. So I pulled out my Taser and I fired some warning shots off. Then the police showed up . . ."

"I didn't realize he was a drunk driver," I said. "The other superheroes implied it was just a regular, random guy you were trying to force a taco onto. But still" — I indicate the nearby crack dealers — "the Taco Incident surely demonstrates how things can inadvertently spiral."

"They're in my house," he resolutely replies. "Any corner where people go — that's my corner. And I'm going to defend it."

We walk slowly through the drug dealers. Nothing happens. Everyone just stares at each other, muttering angrily. It is 5:00 a.m. Our first night's patrolling together ends. I'm glad, as I found the last part a little frightening. I am not a naturally confrontational person, and I still have all my luggage with me.

When I was growing up in the 1970s and devouring Batman comics, introverted geeks like me tended not to actually patrol the streets