



Friends in Strange Places

The team was back on the Avengers plane. No one spoke. Everyone was unhappy. Stark called Agent Hill for a report.

"The news loves you guys," Agent Hill said. "But the people don't. They're very angry, and they want Hulk in prison. You need to stay away from here."

"Well, that sounds great," said Stark. "So run and hide?"

"I'm afraid so," she answered. "There's nothing that we can do now. And they're looking for Hulk."

Barton was piloting the plane. "Why don't you get some rest?" he suggested to Stark. "We're only a few hours away."

"Away from where?" asked Stark.

"A safe house."

They arrived early in the morning. Barton landed the plane in a field, in the middle of the countryside, and took the team toward an ordinary family home.

He opened the front door and called, "Laura, I'm home!"

A pretty young woman came out of the kitchen. It was clear that a baby was on the way—soon. She kissed Barton.

"Everyone," Barton said, "this is my wife, Laura. And my children ..."

Laura smiled and said, "I feel like I know all of you."

"This is a surprise," said Stark. "We had no idea about this place—or you."

"When Nick Fury brought me into S.H.I.E.L.D., he found this safe house for me and my family," Barton told him. "Then S.H.I.E.L.D. ended, I joined the Avengers, and Fury kept the secret."

Thor suddenly remembered his dream. He turned and walked out of the house. Rogers followed him.

"Thor!" Rogers called.

"There was something in that dream," Thor told him. "I need answers. I won't find them here."

He lifted Mjolnir above his head and flew up and away. Rogers stood there for a minute, watching him. Then he walked out into the fields, alone.

Laura and Barton were upstairs, getting beds ready for the team.

"It's bad, isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, we're fighting the usual bad guys," said Barton. "Someone's going to have to teach them a lesson."

"And that someone is you?" she asked. She followed him to the window and they looked out at the Avengers. They were all outside now, lost in their private thoughts. "You know how proud I am of your work," Laura continued. "You're all so brave. But look at them. They're a mess."

"But they're *my* mess," answered Barton.

"You need to be sure that the team is really a team," Laura said. "And that they'll protect you. Things are changing for us. In a few months we'll have a new baby. Just be sure, please."

"Yes, ma'am," answered Barton, and kissed her.

In Seoul, Korea, Dr. Helen Cho was busy as usual. She left a meeting and walked quickly to her laboratory. When she turned on the light, Ultron was waiting for her. He was holding the scepter.