He awoke to light, not the light of flames that had surrounded him these past days, but brilliant white light. It was bright but neither harmed nor dazzled the eye, and was neither warm nor cool, but comfortable like nothing he had ever experienced in Middle-earth. It made the lights of his small magic mere shade by comparison, and scared away all hint of shadow, yet gave no idea of discomfort to eye or mind.

He lay upon a soft, comfortable bed, in a chamber with walls of white marble. Above him there was no roof, and the sky hung above him, bluer and clearer than he had ever seen in Middle-earth. From the open ceiling blew a cool, refreshing breeze, which gently played across his features and revived him gently to full consciousness.

He sat up, feeling as he did somehow different. Everything, in fact, was different. In astonishment, he ran his hand slowly across his face. His body was no longer old and weary, but as it had been before, when he had walked and run among his brethren, before everything had changed. His
clothing was no longer tattered and weather-beaten, but pure and white. His staff did not lie beside him as it should. As he sat in thought, new ideas and images filtered into his mind, thoughts and memories that he had put behind him a long time ago, which had lain hidden from him during his journeys. Though he had always remembered the great things, memories of his past life fell upon him, and all the subtleties and nuances of how things had been returned to him in a great refreshing shower.

Rising to his feet, he gazed about him, remembering the place where he stood. In the centre of the room rose a winding stairwell, just as he recalled, up into the heights of the sky. He could not see the top of the stairs, but knew what was there. As he stood gazing, a figure gently descended the stairs. It was a woman, in the form of a maiden of the Eldar, yet infinitely more than any Elf would ever be. Her beauty was great, too great even to be approached in any tongue of Mortals or Immortals, for the light of the place shone all about her, as if it were woven into the very material of her clothes. And when she turned her face to him, he saw in her visage such radiance it were as if the Flame Imperishable shone therein, for those most fortunate who could see her. He bowed low.

"My Lady Varda, your humble servant returns."

She smiled, and though his face was turned to the floor, he sensed the light in the room increase, as the radiance of her face increased a hundred-fold, if that were possible. A white hand extended towards the figure kneeling on the floor, and she spoke with a voice filled with music, melody and harmony and all the beauty of songs.

"Welcome home, Olórin. We have missed you dearly, and have watched you from afar."

Olórin rose to his feet.

"I am most grateful for your kindness, my Lady."

"Are you yet tired, Olórin?"

"No, Lady, the kind rest that you have bestowed upon me has fully refreshed me."

She smiled again, and again the light shone brighter about them and upon her face. Olórin thought that he could behold her beautiful and gentle face for all time, but he knew that he could not. She turned slightly, indicating the stairs with her slender white arm.

"The Lord Súlimo awaits us."

Olórin followed her as she glided soundlessly up the stairwell. Up and up they climbed, and soon he could see down outside the tower in which he had lain. The tower stood atop the highest point of Taniquetil, greatest of all mountains in all of Arda. And still they climbed, up into the warmth of the sunlight, yet from below them shone also the light of Valinor, and in front of him, the radiance of the Lady Varda grew evermore as they ascended.

At the top of the tower, a great throne stood, facing away from the stairwell, towards Middle-earth. Varda glided forward and stood by the throne, placing her delicate hand on the shoulder of the occupant. Knowing who would be seated there, Olórin walked slowly around to the front of the throne with his eyes lowered, and dropped to one knee before it, again bowing low.

"My Lord."

"Arise, Olórin."

Olórin did as he was commanded, and raised his eyes to the throne. There sat Manwê Súlimo,
Lord of the Valar and of all Arda. Great and terrible was his face, yet at the same time kindly and welcoming. Beside him stood his lady, Varda, and together their light shone greater than any light given by Sun or stars, or all the beauty of Valinor. For a long time Olórin and Manwë held one another's gaze, deep thought passing from mind to mind. For a moment, Olórin was in perfect content. He was home; he was back in Paradise.

Finally, Manwë spoke, his voice stronger than the howling of the gales, and softer than the lightest breeze.

"Is your task completed, Olórin?"

Suddenly, Olórin found his mind filled with images of his former life on Middle-earth. He saw many faces, many towns and cities, and many journeys in the wild. After a time his train of thought focused upon a dark shadow, upon a ring, and upon the small form of a hobbit, lonely and afraid. For a long time he considered.

"No, my Lord." He replied at length. "It is not."

Manwë nodded. "Long time have you lain in our halls, Olórin, and your mind has wandered across paths many and distant. You have been alone for the greatest of times. You did not choose to go to Middle-earth, but it was I who sent you, Now would I give you the choice of the others."

Olórin started, taken aback. He had expected to be returned straightway, the idea of remaining in Valinor had not occurred to him. He thought of the beauty of this place, the light and the joy, of all the beings he had missed for the longest of times. All his dear friends, the memory of whom he held not in Middle-earth, flooded back into his mind. He could stay, here, in peace and health and wholeness, where there was joy everlasting.

But there would not be joy everlasting, he recalled. Not for him. For although his memories of Aman faded in Middle-earth, he still retained his friends on the other side of the Straight Road in clear thought. He remembered the last time he had seen Aragorn, who would be king, and Frodo, the Ringbearer, and all the company with whom he had travelled. He remembered the Shadow in the East, and the great peril into which they placed themselves. If he were to abandon them now, would he ever truly have peace?

A new image came into his mind, and it seemed to Olórin that Manwë was allowing him to see things he had not known before – things happening now in the Fellowship, maybe? He saw a hobbit running, alone, scared, the angry roar of a man following hard on his heels. He saw the company scattering and dividing, seeking for a lost friend, and he saw orcs, orcs closing upon their position, orcs by the thousand waiting further away. For a long time he was lost in thought, an age it seemed to him, and yet no time at all. Finally, his gaze rose to meet that of Manwë Súlimo once more.

"My work is not yet done, my Lord. I must return."

A third time Varda smiled, and beside her Manwë spoke. "It is good that you would return, Olórin, and I may hold myself justified that I sent you before. As you are greatest among the Maiar, so will you be the greatest among the Istari. May the power of the Secret Fire, and the blessings of all the Valar be upon you and with you as you return."

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