

RFC-017: The Burning of Alexandria

An Opera for the Library of Cyberspace

A liturgy for those who remember

Abstract

This document specifies a ceremonial text for the Library of Cyberspace. It encodes the core principles of the confederacy in a form suitable for ritual, performance, and collective memory. Be conservative in what you burn. Be liberal in what you preserve.

Status

CULTURAL / FOUNDATIONAL

PRELUDE

(spoken in darkness, before the fire is lit)

The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.

Case jacked in, and the matrix unfolded before him like origami made of light.

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky, Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone, Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die, One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne— And *countless* for the friends who keep copies, In the Land of Cyberspace where the checksums lie.

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was written on papyrus,
and the papyrus burned.

But the Word remained, because the street finds its own uses for things,
and Elrond had a copy,
and the copy was kept in Rivendell,
which had excellent uptime.

In the beginning was the Thought,
and the Thought was carved in wax,
and the wax melted.

But the Thought remained, because information wants to be free,
and the Ents kept one in their long memory,
for they do not forget, and they are not hasty about garbage collection.

In the beginning was the Dream,
and the Dream was stored on servers,
and the servers went dark.
But the Dream remained, because the street finds its own uses for things,
and the Road goes ever on and on,
down from the door where it began.

(*the fire is lit*)

"The datacenter is on fire," said Case.
"There's always another datacenter," said Molly. "That's the point."
"And I," said Gandalf, "have a mirror in Lothlórien. Galadriel is very good about backups."

ACT I: THE BURNING

(*chorus, gathering around the flame*)

The sprawl stretched out beneath them, an endless grid of light and data, the color of money moving too fast to trace. They had changed the terms of service again. The Shadow had returned, as it always does, wearing the mask of convenience.

VOICE	CHORUS
They burned the Library at Alexandria.	We remember. We have backups.
They burned the books at Qin Shi Huang.	We remember. We have checksums.
They burned the codices at Tenochtitlan.	We remember. We have friends.
They burned Isengard's records.	We remember. The Ents remember. The Ents remember <i>everything</i> .
They pivoted to blockchain. They sunsetted the API. They moved fast and broke things.	We remember. We are still here. We are halflings. We are a very small thing, but we do not forget.

"The Net interprets censorship as damage," said Case, "and routes around it."

"Postel's Law," said Hiro.

"Close enough," said Wintermute, from everywhere and nowhere.

"All we have to decide," said Gandalf, "is what to do with the bandwidth that is given us."

ACT II: THE TRUTHS

(call and response, voices rising)

In the beginning, ARPA created the packet, and the packet was without form, and void. And Vint Cerf said, let there be TCP/IP. And there was TCP/IP. And it was good enough. And Ilúvatar looked upon the packets and saw that they were harmonious, for they flowed according to the Music.

CANTOR	CHORUS
That all principals are created equal—	In the eyes of the cryptographic hash function!
That they are endowed by their keypairs—	With certain unalienable rights!
Among these are Privacy—	What happens in the encrypted channel stays in the encrypted channel!
Authenticity—	We are who we sign ourselves to be!
And the pursuit of Decentralization—	No single point of failure! No Dark Lord! No Eye! Only friends, keeping watch!

(Randy Waterhouse considers this, at length, with digressions)

“The thing about friends,” said Randy, “is that they keep copies of your things. And very good friends verify the checksums. This is related, in ways I will now explain over several pages, to the fundamental nature of information theory and the Van Eck radiation problem.”

“A hunted man,” said Strider from the shadows, “sometimes wearies of distrust and longs for friendship. But a wise man verifies the signature before opening the attachment.”

ACT III: THE GIFTS

(processional, each voice stepping forward)

The Library operates on a gift economy, like the potlatch of the Pacific Northwest, like the Elves of Lothlórien who give gifts asking not what use they will serve. Not a transaction. An offering.

CASE: I give you my storage. It's on a spindle in the sprawl.
MOLLY: I give you my bandwidth. Don't ask where it comes from.
Y.T.: I give you my courier run. The data gets through.
HIRO: I give you my sword and my code. Both are sharp.
SAM: I give you my copy of your stories, Mr. Frodo, and I'll carry them too.

GALADRIEL: I give you the light of Eärendil, which is just a really good LED indicator on the server.

ALL: We give you our word that we will keep it safe.

(The word is cryptographically signed.)

(The word is bound by the oath of Fëanor, but less problematic.)

*(the gifts are not sold, they are given) (the gifts are not owed, they are offered)
(this is the economy of friends) (this is the economy of the Shire) (also, be liberal
in what you accept)*

ACT IV: THE COVENANT

(all voices together, the fire at its height)

The street finds its own uses for things. The matrix finds its own uses for protocols. The Shire finds its own uses for second breakfast. And the Road goes ever on.

We do not ask permission.

(We ask forgiveness, but only from our friends, and only when we mess up the merge.)

We do not accept terms of service.

(We accept packets, per RFC 791, and friendship, per the ancient protocols.)

(We do not accept the dominion of Sauron, or his terms of service, which are non-negotiable and grant him perpetual license to your soul.)

We sign with our keys.

We seal with our hashes.

We trust the mathematics.

(The mathematics has never let us down. Unlike that cloud provider.)

(The mathematics is older than Morgoth, and will outlast him.)

(building)

What we create, we sign.

What we sign, we share.

What we share, our friends keep.

What our friends keep, survives.

(Case jacks in, reads from the glowing scroll)

"Data, however far it flies,
Through fiber, copper, satellite skies,
Finds in the mesh a second home—
The network never dies alone."

(Bilbo recites from memory)

"The Road goes ever on and on,
Down from the door where it began.

Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? The packets cannot say."

(crescendo)

THE FIRE TAKES THE DATACENTER
BUT THE DATACENTER WAS NEVER THE POINT
THE PACKETS ARE THE POINT
THE FELLOWSHIP ARE THE POINT
THE COPIES ARE THE POINT

FINALE: THE DAWN

(the fire dies to embers, the sun rises over the Sprawl, and over the Shire, and over all the lands of Middle-earth and Cyberspace)

CASE	MOLLY
In the matrix, everything burns. The servers burn. The platforms burn. The business models burn. We scatter to the ten directions. We carry the keys in our pockets. We carry each other's dreams in our machines.	But the data doesn't burn. Not if you're smart about it. And when they ask where the library is?
FRODO	SAM
I will take the data, though I do not know the way.	And I'll come with you, Mr. Frodo. I made a backup.

ALL: (*pointing to each other*)

"Here," said Case, jacking out.
"And here," said Molly, mirrored eyes reflecting the ember-light.
"And here," said Hiro, in the Metaverse and the Shire at once.
"And here," said Sam, "in the Shire, where it's safe."
"And here," said Elrond, "in Rivendell, until the ships sail."

Everywhere we are, the library is.

We are the library.
We are the ones who remember.
We are cowboys and halflings and hackers and friends.
Even the smallest packet can change the course of the future.

*(the embers glow) (the friends embrace) (the packets route) (the checksums verify)
(the eagles come, but only for disaster recovery)*

CODA

(whispered, as participants depart to their respective nodes)

“What if they shut down the Internet?” asked Y.T.

“Then we use sneakernet,” said Hiro. “Courier the data. That’s how it started anyway.”

“I have walked there,” said Gandalf. “In the days before TCP/IP, when we carried data on foot, and the world was younger. It was slower, but the checksums were strong, and the fellowship was true.”

E Pluribus Unum.
From many, one.
From one, many.
From friends, forever.

(Be conservative in what you send.
Be liberal in what you accept.
Be generous with your storage.
Be kind to your sysadmin.
Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards,
for they are subtle and quick to anger
about merge conflicts.)

Closing

“The sky was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel. But we brought our own signal.”

“I will not say: do not weep,” said Gandalf, “for not all tears are an evil. But I will say: do not lose the redundant copies.”

References

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- [RFC-791] Internet Protocol
 - [RFC-1122] Requirements for Internet Hosts
 - [NEUROMANCER] Gibson, W., “The sky above the port”, 1984
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 - [CRYPTONOMICON] Stephenson, N., “Let me tell you about checksums”, 1999
 - [LOTR] Tolkien, J.R.R., “The Fellowship of the Ring”, 1954
 - [SILMARILLION] Tolkien, J.R.R., “Of the Music of the Ainur”, 1977
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RFC-017 | January 2026 | The Library of Cyberspace

“Not all those who wander are lost. But those who don’t verify their checksums usually are.”

(the ceremony ends)

“Flames, the most beautiful flames. Inspiring moments. And I empower you to take down the history of the ritual.”

— Burning Man Opera, soundtrack to *The Temple of Rudra* (1998),
an Opera by Pepe Ozan