

2\_KONTROL

BY

JOHN M NIMERC

## CHAPTER 1 – 2\_KONTROL

2\_Kontrol stood out, salient against the infinite blackness of space. It sparkled, a slowly rotating skeletal drum, coated with a myriad sources of light. Slowly spinning in the dark infinity, the station was like some tiny sea creature hovering within the inky blackness of some fathomless sea, isolated within the beam of a lonely submersible.

Functionary stared intently out at 2\_Kontrol through the porthole of his cabin, watching it grow steadily larger and reveal new aspects of itself, as the ship which carried him moved closer and followed its final curved trajectory towards the space station. Gradually, the initially indistinct drum encrusted with sparkling lights became more focused and each individual light source could be made out. Thousands of lights shone from exterior beacons and from windows and portholes, which Functionary imagined as living quarters, offices and various social spaces. He pictured people briefly looking back at the approaching ship as they momentarily punctuated their daily lives to stare out into space at the incoming ship.

The station was now awe-inspiring in its enormity. Every part of the station architecture was formed of massive matt black tubes. The tiny sea creature had suddenly transformed into a leviathan threatening to instantly uncoil its arms of steel and irresistibly clutch its helpless prey in a grip of iron. While it was possible to examine the entirety of the station, Functionary carefully examined every aspect of the structure. The station comprised approximately fifty circular rings which were attached to a much thicker central spine, each by four spokes, evenly spaced at ninety

degrees to each other. The rings were unevenly spaced along the length of the station and Functionary could imagine that the station had been constructed incrementally as its functions and the demands upon it had changed over its long life.

This was 2\_Kontrol, the place to which Functionary had been reassigned after his relative short stay on the deserted planet of Pristine, on the edges of outer space. By contrast, 2\_Kontrol was a station floating peacefully in space, far away from any planet. Edging forwards slowly now, the ship upon which Functionary stood, had come too close for him to take-in the entirety of 2\_Kontrol at one glance. Soon, Functionary had to regularly reposition and carefully angle his head to inspect all of the station. Then most of the station structure completely moved out of sight as the ship swooped towards the space dock at one end of station's central spine and the gaping rectangular mouth colonised the field of view with increasing speed. Now, there was no blackness of space to be seen, just the harsh, bright lights of the space dock and the strongly reflective light grey internal metal walls of the station, a view which stung the eyes as they struggled to adjust to the illumination after the predominant darkness of the spatial landscape. The ship continued to inch forwards under automatic control from the space station's guidance systems. Dead slow now, the ship was manoeuvred into the wide rectangular dock. Then, in a blaze of white light, the ship was within the station. With one jolt of finality, it had clearly completed the docking process, being grabbed inescapably by one set of the huge metal arms that intermittently extended from sides of the wall of the space dock. The engines of the ship slowly ceased their hum and the regular background noise of the ship almost ceased. All Functionary could now hear was the excited voices of passengers milling around waiting to disembark. Now corridors were concertinaing outwards from the dock walls towards the ship, providing a thin, transparent,

apparently vulnerable bridge between the respective sanctuaries of ship and station through the unforgiving, lifeless vacuum of outer space. Mentally wearied by the months of space travel, Functionary eagerly reflected that soon disembarkation would begin.

But, Functionary discovered that it took frustratingly long to disembark from the ship and pass through the procedures demanded of anyone about to join the station population, no matter for how short and transitory a period. Fingerprints and iris scans were meticulously taken from each person leaving the ship and stored and immediately compared with existing Service records where they existed. DNA material was also taken for subsequent analysis and, again, storage and comparison with existing data. Where records did not exist, as in the case of species and persons originating from the outer edges of System or even beyond it, this material was submitted to the central Service to contribute to their ever-growing database on everyone and everything in the universe. Seemingly nothing was to be left to chance in ensuring that everyone was fully and accurately categorised, recorded and indeed monitored. All sentient beings were to be known, their risk ascertained and controlled. Functionary had met all these procedures before, if he had never seen them implemented so thoroughly and scrupulously. But, the next procedure was a considerable surprise of itself. He was asked to remove his leggings down to his knees and was then he was injected with a computer chip. When he winced as the gun injected the small module into his flesh, the operative explained with pride that the injection was well worth the pain. The chip meant that his whereabouts would always be known and recorded throughout the day and night and, indeed, if he were to become ill or suddenly die, the central computer would be able to alert the authorities as to where to find him. The system was apparently integrated with the

station's ubiquitous cameras and microphones, so should there be a need to trace him, monitor him, interact with him, see what he was doing or find out what others were doing to him, then these actions would all be simplicity itself. The operative, obviously convince of the unalloyed good of the system, smiled and suggested that this system should be particularly comforting to Functionary in his new role of Chief Security Officer as, wherever he was, back-up would always be at hand. For his part, Functionary felt like some pet injected with a chip, so that it could always be retrieved by its owner should it going missing, purposefully or otherwise. Reflecting his frequently macabre sense of humour, it also crossed the mind of Functionary that the most likely outcome was that, should the system ever be used to find him, it would probably be to retrieve his decaying, lifeless body from some remote Station locker.

Finally, Functionary was released from the reception centre and able to find his rooms. To his pleasure, he found that he had been allocated a spacious and well-appointed suite of rooms reflecting his increasing status in the Service. The otherwise ever present unyielding metallic surface of 2\_Kontrol, with its perpetual riveting and sharply protruding nuts and bolts, was here hidden beneath fairly tasteful layers of reasonably convincing ersatz wood, leather and cloth. It was solely at the back of a cupboard or a wardrobe that the authentic cold metal structure of 2\_Kontrol was once more to be found exposed, if economically disguised under several coats of rubberised pastel coloured paint. It was as though the lurking leviathan of 2\_Kontrol was still present, but like some deadly sea creature hidden away in some dark oceanic cave, it waited hidden to pounce upon its errant prey. The monster was still there ready to impose itself upon the forgetful who thoughtlessly became blind to its power and will. Indeed, this veneer of luxury did somewhat diminished the former

sensation of Functionary of being an animal owned, controlled and constantly monitored by the Service. Distracted by the warm, padded surface of his rooms, the luxury fittings and the broad sweeping views out onto space he began to feel self-confident and in control. Functionary, became a little like a little fish swimming a little too close to the monster with perilously little concern for the powerful force that lay concealed nearby and which at any moment might impose itself totally.

Having checked his messages, Functionary quickly washed and changed before stepping out into the station and taking the express lift to the lower public decks with their busy corridors and spaces. Functionary found 2\_Kontrol was an exciting place packed full of many individuals and types drawn from across the wide expanse of the galaxy controlled by the Service. A seemingly relentless procession of colours, noises and smells titillated the senses. There was a gaudy juxtaposition of contrasting species, races, classes, skin colours, body shapes, facial protuberances and fashions of dress. Across several of the lower decks a wide range of entertainments, eateries and traders existed and from their establishments wafted the smells of enticing foods and, shouts and gesticulation beckoning the individual towards intriguing entertainments and tempting bargains. This, thought Functionary, was going to be an interesting place to work and live. Functionary mentally salivated that there would never be a dull moment.

The nature of the population of the Station reflected its spatial and functional positioning within the System and the Service. What was accurately known as 2\_Kontrol, was one station amongst many stations which formed a protective sphere around the heartland of the System and where each station was formally known as Kontrol but differentiated by a number. Where possible, these stations were placed upon appropriately positioned planets, but where no such suitably placed celestial

body existed, a space station such as 2\_Kontrol, floated in isolation in a void in space. Inward, from the spherical boarder formed by 2\_Kontrol and its sister stations was the homeland and base of the System and of the Service, which supposedly served the former, but which in truth, governed this geographical and social entity largely as it chose. From here on in, was a relatively uniform population living a relatively orderly and, to their perspective, conventional existence under the unequivocal control of the Service. Out, beyond the globe of stations, life, society and governance all became more complex and less easy to précis in a few sentences. Certainly, the influence and activities of the System and the Service stretched far beyond the sphere of stations, but from here on outwards, the role of the Service was more contested and more subject to question while the existence it oversaw and sought to control was more precarious, tougher and far less uniform. From the point of view of the Service and the population living with the heartland of the System, from here on, was a zone of mining and other primary economic activities. These remote areas of universe were seen as comprising rough, dangerous, risky worlds, which were nevertheless essential to the security and prosperity of the System. Seen from the perspective of the ancient seafaring maps of many a world, radiating from here outwards there were places with monsters, where there existed the potentiality that “the world” as one now understood it, might come to a sudden and very savage end.

Therefore, each of the stations in the sphere acted as an entry point and border post both taking plunder from the activity beyond and also shipping to and trading with this apparently wild area beyond the heartland. In so far as they fulfilled these functions, the stations both served the distant outposts of the Service and

interacted with the other species and planets with whom the Service and the System had varying and changeable relations.

Thus, 2\_Kontrol, like its counterparts elsewhere, was both a colourful place, where a wide variety of species and lifestyles mixed, and an edgy, nervy place. The Station, itself, was not the inherently ordered and homogenous society that one increasingly found as one moved inward from the Station into the centre of the System, if the Service and many of its officers and families on Kontrol clearly sought to emulate that style of existence. Instead, beneath the brittle and worn-through veneer of System living, Kontrol was a place where many groups and existences confronted one another and rubbed-up against another, often with significant friction and consequential heat. It was a place where many met who lacked a mutual understanding and, at times, possessed conflicting interests and perceptions of existence. Many of those who came to Kontrol were often even suspicious of the System and its Service and the motives for their actions.

Not entirely separate from this role as intermediary between inner space and outer space, 2\_Kontrol was also like a gateway in an ancient city wall. If at times it was to let outsiders in to trade and to provide for those on the inside, all the while the station was to do so in an apprehensive and controlling manner. So at the same time it was a trading post, the gate was also to act as a defence preventing further onward ingress to the inner system for the majority of individual aliens and alien craft wanting to travel onwards towards the centre. 2\_Kontrol maintained an array of sophisticated sensors pointed out into space. All vessels wanting to enter the heartland of System space had to check-in at 2\_Kontrol first. If a vessel ignored this obligation it would be hailed and, if it still did not obey the commands of the station to dock, it would be pursued by one of the Service frigates permanently on stand-by

in or around the station. If needs be, one of the larger service carriers, always somewhere in the sector, could be called upon to deal ruthlessly with any apparently significant threat to the System and its centre of governance. The Service would suffer no nonsense and, indeed, such was its brutal reputation that few vessels were ever unwise enough not to dock at 2\_Kontrol , or one of its sister stations, before any planned move onwards into the homeland of the System.

The station was a gate that was constant manned and, if the situation so demanded, it was ready to be closed instantly and completely like a portcullis crashing down suddenly on an old medieval fortress. 2\_Kontrol was about dealing with outsiders who, if on the one hand were useful in what they could offer, were on the other hand to be seen as a constant threat and an ever-present source of concern. Thus Functionary quickly observed that many of those who came and lived on 2\_Kontrol from what, from the perspective of the System and most its population, was outer space, readily understood that their presence on the borders of the System heartland, at the metaphorical city gate, was a matter of sufferance and that they were not whole heartedly welcomed and accepted. Much of the population of 2\_Kontrol were aliens in all the meanings of the word.

In summary, the Station was a nery place full of colourful diversity and not completely lacking in goodwill amongst its multitude, but it was also a place where suspicion and fear always lurked and polluted the community of peoples which existed barrelled-up within its structure of girders and metal plating.

Functionary rapidly appreciated that such a place as 2\_Kontrol was going to be a considerable challenge when it came to maintaining security and order. Therefore, it was not surprising to Functionary to see the regular and highly visible

presence of security around the station. Nevertheless, Functionary soon realised that 2\_Kontrol was special in both its quantity and quality of security. In its investment of time, resources and ingenuity, the nature of the security operation on 2\_Kontrol surmounted anything Functionary had previously seen and accurately reflected the name of the station. All possible effort seemed to be applied to the absolute and perfect control of its population. This effort extended from the number of security personnel visibly present throughout the station to the immense application and combination of every conceivable technology of control. Indeed it was the use of technology which Functionary sensed was outstanding and unusual in comparison with anything he had experienced elsewhere. Currently, he wandered the public decks of the 2\_Kontrol as a normal member of the station population with no special stature or behind-the-scenes access, if his status as a senior officer of the Service meant he would never really be a “normal member” of any population. Yet, his previous experience enabled him to perceive and estimate the extent and quality of the security enterprise upon 2\_Kontrol. Perhaps, most unsurprising given his experience elsewhere, was the presence of cameras, if on this station they appeared to be everywhere including the toilets and other intimate zones of existence. Privacy appeared a value neither delivered nor expected. Again, these cameras looked as though they were all under one centralised control. Functionary guessed that there would be facial recognition algorithms comparing the images flitting across the station’s computational retina and there would be the logging of identities and the recording of the whereabouts of persons. Anyone apparently out of place or any movement suspiciously made would be instantly brought to the attention of some human overseer by the ever alert computational brain throbbing somewhere in the upper reaches of this station, far out of harms way. Again, with his professional eye, he thought that most of the cameras were also wired to pick-up sound. Then,

Functionary already knew from painful experience that every person had a chip within his or her thigh, which could be tracked as he or she drifted around the station. The station also had a myriad of control points that were colour coded and through which only certain people could pass at certain times. Scanners at these control points meant that doors would rapidly slam on those forgetful or defiant enough to seek to pass through to where they were not permitted. Functionary had also observed guards using handheld devices to check the crowd for those whose presence at a certain place or at a certain time could be seen as suspicious by the station's digital overseer. Clearly, using the product of all these devices and the ever-alert computational sentinel elsewhere, people were frequently stopped and questioned about their whereabouts and purpose.

While observing these policing practices, Functionary became aware that the skeletal cylinder that was 2\_Kontrol was a barrel in which the social liquid contained within separated, with the differentiated elements of the population floating to particular levels or decks according to their status. At the bottom, where people entered through the spaceport, a wide variety of non-Service persons remained, including, those rapidly passing through to other places, small-time traders and, various non-humans. A collection of living matter that, Functionary sensed, many in the Service would actually have seen unapologetically as the dregs. It was the case that in this bottom half of the barrel most of the station's population could effectively circulate if they so chose; however, many of those who lived and worked above consciously resolved not to frequent these lower zones. Then, as one moved up the barrel, the population became more selective and status and wealth increasingly shaped the community of the station's various levels. Until about two thirds the way up the station, the population was still relatively heterogeneous, if one quickly moved

from the hubbub and fast changing environment of the lower decks to a more ordered, sedate world occupied by wealthy traders and professionals owning or working for the various space based companies that effectively facilitated the work of the Service but that were not strictly a part of the Service. A mixture of physical and technological barriers, slightly more subtle policing and social understandings meant that the upper public decks were frequented only by those fortunate enough to live and to do business there and those persons amongst the Service staff who had some purpose in descending to these deck levels. Then, above approximately two thirds of the way up the structure of the station, the nature of the population changed abruptly as one moved into a zone reserved almost exclusively for service living quarters. Even within this zone, things were stratified in terms of ranks with the larger, better appointed quarters being placed on the higher numbered decks closer to the top of the station. Then, above these living quarters, were the final few decks given over to the Service administration of the station and of its dominion in space. These official layers usually admitted only Service personnel and excluded even the dependents bottled-up in the limited strata of decks just below. It was very rare to see any person not of the Service in the top section of the station. Occasionally, someone of considerable social or economic standing might penetrate the technological and social barriers to be welcomed or tolerated in the upper reaches of the station. But, Functionary was to notice that these circumstances were relatively rare. Usually, where the Service had to deal with traders and others not of the Service, official personnel would descend to the lower two thirds of the station.

Thus, Functionary noted that an interdependence of technological, social and economic forces lead to a sorting of society on the station where the various social strata mixed relatively little. Depending on ones viewpoint, each social group could

be seen as keeping to itself or being kept to itself. Either way, everyone passed most of their time in their own small neighbourhood of the station. The dependants of the Service most obviously existed in their own Service-orientated microcosm in the Service living quarters near the top of the barrel. To a degree some Service personnel moved throughout the levels of barrel and some officers and staff did spend most of their working lives on the lower levels, most frequently undertaking some form of security function: customs, immigration, policing, legal adjudication. Nevertheless, Functionary was increasingly to note how much even Service personnel would avoid moving between zones and would communicate and otherwise fulfil administrative functions electronically rather than in person. The technology of 2\_Kontrol seemed to encourage such social isolation.