

There are maybe a quarter of a million capsuleers in this galaxy of ours. Sounds like a large number yes?

No.

Think about it, dear reader. On a single industrial planet in Empire space alone there can be upward of 500 billion souls working their hearts out. An agricultural world can easily sustain one or two billion. If you just look at the quarter of a million people attendant on each of the space stations, let alone the tens of thousands on various mining and research colonies, I think you will agree that less than 250,000 pod pilots is a minute percentage.

Why? The life of a capsuleer is fraught with danger yes, but not for nothing are we referred to as "Immortals" by our crew – our connection to the cloning technology alone allows us to prolong our lives indefinitely. In fact "boredom" is the only thing we fear, the only thing that ever stops us.

Less than one in a thousand people can be cloned. Less than one in a thousand people can utilise cranial implants. Less than one in a thousand people can learn through direct neural rigging. Without at least these three requirements being met, a candidate is worthless. Many an eager young Caldari has had his dreams shattered – it is no wonder that the pirate nations easily gain recruits to fly their ships when so many want to fly no matter the cost. It is known that certain members of the pirate nations have access to all the facilities that an empire-sanctioned capsuleer has, but their rank and file do not.

I was four when they came to my school, the Emperor's Men with their strange machine. They tested us, ten at a time, over the course of a week or more. The first day they tried to keep the Tested apart from the Untested, but, once school had finished those of us further down the line sought out the ones that had already been tested.

"They made us lie down," my friend Amaxil said, "And they placed this helmet on our heads, it covered our eyes too." I listened, spell bound and nervous as he continued, "I saw strange, flashing, lights then after a few minutes we were sat up and given a pen and paper. " I frowned at him, it didn't seem that bad. "They asked us to draw whatever we wanted. I drew a house." He smiled. "That was it – they sent us out into the playground."

"Rajer didn't come out again." A new voice whispered from behind me, I jumped at Malkone's words, "He went in the group before me." The boy pushed between us, "But when I got into the playground he wasn't there." He lowered his voice, "They took him away..." A shiver ran down my back at his words. "Your group is next, Jawn." He said to me with a smile, "Let's hope you come out with the rest."

"Me too." Said little Udum, the shortest boy in our year, with a quiver in his voice, "They always call our names next to each other in the register." I nodded to him. "I think I'll run when they call my name." He said quietly.

He didn't, he walked forward like a small blond sheep, hand in the air so they couldn't miss him.

My heart jumped into my throat when I heard my name called - "Jawn Dallustrade" the teacher called, then again - "Jawn Dallustrade?" when I failed to move. I could only think of Rajer and how we'd played Webber-Stabber-Laser yesterday. A prod in the back from Amaxil and I stepped forward.

The teacher smiled at me, but the smile seemed wrong somehow, it didn't reach to her eyes, just her mouth and I felt chilled to the bone.

She led me into a warm, bright room. It was just the classroom that we'd all sat in last week, reciting the names of the Emperors but now it was full of strange equipment.

The teacher handed me to a man in uniform. The Emperor's man. He smiled at me, his smile reached his eyes and I felt a little more secure. The Emperor's man wouldn't let me be hurt, that's the job of the Emperor and his men - to look after us.

Behind him, two 'tars worked on a machine, he motioned one over and the slave led me to a chair. I looked back at the sound of a door closing - the teacher has left the room without a word.

I felt that shiver again.

The soft, large and gentle hands of the slave sat me down in a chair that seemed connected to that big machine. I looked around at the other children in with me, they already wore one of these strange helmets. I couldn't see their faces properly as a heavy, darkened, visor had been lowered over their eyes. I could recognise Udum, sitting next to me, as he was much shorter than the others. I smiled a little because he seemed much less nervous than earlier.

"This wont hurt, Master." The 'tar said as he slid the helmet over my eyes, "There will just be a small prick." He said in that slow voice that all slaves seem to have. "Ouch!" I said as something touched my arm.

I smiled, finally I felt relaxed and happy, I was sure that the Emperor's man and his slaves wouldn't hurt me. Much later I discovered that I had been drugged with a simple muscle-relaxant.

"There you go, Master." The slave said as he slid the visor down over my face. I think I wanted to panic at that point, but the drug wouldn't let me.

For quarter of an hour I lay there, watching lights dance in front of my eyes, straining to listen to a low, mumbling voice that seemed to come from inside my head rather than from outside my ears.

Then the lights turned off and the slave was there, reassuring me with calm words, pulling the visor up and carefully taking the helmet from my head.

"Just draw, Master," He said, tugging my chair towards the table, "Whatever you want to."

I picked up a crayon and scribbled for a bit – then my hand grabbed a pencil and I started to write, words and numbers seemed to pop into my head and I smiled as they coalesced into meaning on the paper.

"Sir?" The slave called to the Emperor's Man, "Sir?"

I felt the presence of the uniformed man next to me, He bent over, but I hadn't finished and curled my arm over the last few numbers.

I sat up, a smile from ear to ear on my face.

"And what have we here, son?" The Emperor's Man asked me.

I looked at the paper – at the diagrams I'd drawn and the numbers and words I'd written. "This bit's a calculation of the radius of geo-stationary orbit, Sir." I said pointing to the first part, "And this bit is a general calculation of escape velocity," I frowned, "However I'm not sure of the exact force of gravity so there will be some error in that figure."

The Emperor's Man smiled and the slave clapped his hands. Then the other slaves clapped too.

"Well done!" Said the Man, "You're just what we're looking for."

He knelt down to bring his eyes to my level, "Would you like to fly a spaceship?"

I stood up and laughed, I had to clap my hands too. I heard clapping from the other children in the room too. The door slammed open and the teacher rushed in.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"I'm here!" I exclaimed. She looked down at me and shook her head. The 'tar who had seen to me held something out to her, something limp and heavy, something wearing the same uniform as me, just a little smaller.

The teacher started to cry, "Not another one?" She bowed her head and motioned for the slave to follow her. They carried Udum's body away.

The Emperor's Man's hand rested on my shoulder as tears came to my eyes. "It's alright, Son." He said, "You don't need to worry about anything ever again. You're in the service of the Emperor."

I didn't see any more my friends again. I left school within the hour, driven by one of the slaves to the imperial academy.

I'd learnt the truth about direct neural learning – not only does it only work for less than a thousandth of the population of New Eden, testing to see if it would work is fatal to two times as many.

This is Jovian technology. I can't believe that the Jovians suffer the same fates. Either they can attune neural learning to a larger percentage of the population, or else all their brains function identically. Maybe that is why they are so insular – they don't have the variety of humanity that we do?

A year later I died my first death.

They had put me through all sorts of tests in the academy. There were five hundred or so children who joined with me that year. Less than a hundred were still there a year later. Those four hundred were the lucky ones, statistically speaking. Their neural tests weren't fatal, but they were ruled out of the next major test – cloning.

It's not actually the cloning that's the problem, it's the accurate transfer of neural patterns. You can't have two bodies with the same brain patterns active at any one time, it's quantum mechanics, so unless you've drunk from the same fonts of knowledge I have then I won't bother explaining, but, to trigger your new clone, your old body has to die. So, you don't know if you can Clone, if you don't try. This means that you have to die to know whether you can live forever or not. It is interesting that they don't tell us. You only learn the high mortality rate after you have successfully cloned. I gather that one year it was imperial policy to tell the five year olds that they had much less than a single percentage chance of surviving. That year, none survived.

I was the only person in my year who could clone. I was the only one out of the one hundred and five (to be accurate) who lived.

One hundred and four five year old children effectively died so that I could learn to fly a starship.

Like I said, the four hundred who dropped out were the lucky ones.

The different empires do things differently. The Gallente, pathetic that they are, don't even test as children, they only offer neural testing and clone testing to adults only. And I mean Offer, it's not compulsory as it is here. Their beliefs mean that their average capsuleer's age is much older than ours. The Caldari vary their practices from one mega-corporation to another, as their family lives are very different to ours, everyone there is owned by the corporation, they feel much less squeamish than the Gallente, but on average they test later than we do – I think they let a lot of potential capsuleers go to waste if they show potential for other roles within the corporation. This leads the average Caldari capsuleer to be more aggressive as the more passive ones more easily find a place in the corporate ladder.

The Slaves learnt everything from us, so they test as we do from as early an age as possible. They think to overcome us, but in the end they will just become us.

