

Chapter 64 - Equipment Appraisal

It didn't take long for Misha's energetic mutterings in Gryplik to fill the air, her voice an intense mix of concentration and enthusiasm as she rummaged through her extensive collection of equipment.

"{Hmm... No, no. Too long for Ela... This one? Maybe. The weight seems off. Definitely needs fixing; better put that in the 'needs-work' pile...}"

Whenever Misha found something for the "needs-work" pile, I knew that I had to watch out, as that pile was apparently synonymous with the whole entire store, as far as I could tell.

It seemed to be basically equivalent to "anything-but-right-here-in-this-very-moment".

Just as expected, I saw a throwing knife abruptly fly out from behind a row of cabinets, drawing a high-arc before accurately landing in a nondescript pile of other equipment pieces with a resounding thud.

It was quite relaxing to listen to the Gryplik's mutterings, as the strange, alien language had a certain cadence to it that was almost therapeutic once you had gotten used to it. As a result, I simply stood around and waited for Misha to finish her search, enjoying the brief moment of respite in my otherwise hectic day for once.

Over the next several minutes, her exclamations varied from, "{Oh, yes! This one's perfect for Ela! Ela will surely love this one, Misha guarantees it!}" to more items joining the burgeoning "needs-work" pile, resulting in an increasing number of tools and blades casually tossed across the room.

Surprisingly, though, Misha seemed acutely aware of my location; none of the thrown objects came anywhere near me, although I still didn't stop looking out for them—just in case.

It was reassuring, in a way, to know that her chaotic method had a kind of precision—likely honed from ensuring that her less Gryplik-savvy customers didn't end up inadvertently caught in a surprise juggling act of sharp objects.

Finally, after around ten-or-so minutes, Misha's face emerged from behind a precarious tower of equipment, her wide, green-toothy grin visible as she enthusiastically waved her elongated arms at me.

"Misha has done it! Misha has found the perfect selection for Ela, Misha guarantees it!" Her agility was impressive as she nimbly scaled the heap of gadgets without causing a single item to tumble.

'I guess that explains how she manages to keep the store like this... She's surprisingly nimble and careful,' I mused, appreciating the newfound answers to the quirky setup of her shop.

Thinking about it, I was 100% certain I could not even get close to that level of agility, no matter how hard I tried in my current state. If I had tried, the pile of equipment would definitely have ended up in a bit of a landslide, with me somewhere in the middle of it.

Misha bounded over with a stack of cases balanced precariously in her arms, which she dropped in front of me with a thud. Her expression was one of pure joy and pride, reminiscent of a puppy presenting its owner with a fetched stick.

Trying to maintain composure and not burst out laughing at the adorable comparison my mind had drawn, I felt my Ego Attribute nudge me back to seriousness. Naturally the absurdity of needing such a boost from my Attributes for such a light-hearted moment was not lost on me, but I couldn't help it.

Misha was just too freaking cute!

She gracefully picked up the first case and presented it to me, while giving information about the item inside—somewhat of an impressive feat, considering that I couldn't tell the cases apart from one another at all.

They were all sleek, black-grey rectangles, with no discernable marks or lettering on them at all. They simply looked like standard-issue mil-tech transport cases, like the ones I knew from the game that were often used by the developers to dish out random loot—one size fits all, kind of deal.

Misha enthusiastically explained as I opened the sleek case, "This knife is weighted for no-spin, as requested. It is made by JarX, weighs in at 311 grams and is 25 cm long. Misha made sure to select only the finest for Ela! The weight distribution on JarX knives is superb for various throwing styles—be it for spin, no-spin, or even just for stabby stabbing!"

Inside the case, I found four identical knives.

Each was 25 cm long from hilt to tip, featuring a dark-grey blade accented by an ocean-blue streak along the spine—JarX's aesthetic touch was undeniable.

Picking one up, I instantly noted the weight distribution Misha had mentioned.

The knife had a substantial heft in my hand, but the tip felt almost too light to be effective for stabbing. However, for no-spin throwing, which was my intention, it felt downright perfect.

Despite never having thrown a knife before, my [Throwing] Skill, enhanced by the System's various downloads, confirmed its suitability. The weight was concentrated towards the centre and handle, ensuring a solid impact follow-through on any successful throw.

However, this configuration was bound to pose a challenge for longer distances.

The handle-heavy design would likely lead to imbalance in mid-air over extended ranges, causing the knife to veer off-axis and potentially fail to injure a target. Given this limitation, the JarX knives would be most effective within 15-20 metres at my current level—a strictly close-range tool in my arsenal.

The last thing I noted was that it was a single-edge design, almost like a kitchen-knife of sorts; which allowed for a substantially more beefy spine along the entire knife's back for added heft and durability.

Next, Misha eagerly presented the second case.

"These knives are from Blades'N'Knives—a newer manufacturer, but Misha can vouch for their quality. Customers have been really pleased! They're a bit smaller, at 24 cm and lighter, around 280 grams. Despite their weight, the double-edged design ensures surprisingly good penetration, Misha assures!"

Opening the case, I found another four identical knives.

These were almost silver in colour, with a distinctive yellow-gold streak in the centre, and the letters "B'N'K" randomly engraved along the blade. The random engravings gave the knives a unique, almost handcrafted appearance, contrasting starkly with the usual factory precision of most equipment in Neon Dragons like the JarX knives I had just looked at.

Misha was also right about the design differences.

Unlike the single-edged JarX knives, these were double-edged, resembling traditional kunai more than the utilitarian, almost bladed rail-spike like style of the JarX.

Lifting one from the case, the difference in weight was instantly noticeable as well.

Though it was primarily handle-heavy like the JarX, the B'N'K knife had a more balanced distribution, with quite the noticeable heft in the centre. This balance would reduce the follow-through impact but increase stability when thrown over longer distances.

According to my [Throwing] Skill, these knives were suitable for use up to about 30 metres, significantly extending my effective range compared to the JarX models.

'I'm starting to see where this is going... I'll have to make a choice on range vs power, won't I?' I thought to myself with a smirk. This almost felt like equipment selection in a video game, except it was real life instead.

I slid the knife back into its case, already anticipating Misha's next offering, which came swiftly; her enthusiasm to display her vast collection was palpable.

"These are from Rockefeller Inc., highly esteemed in Operator circles. They're pricier due to licensing, but Rockefeller excels in weapon craftsmanship. Each knife is precisely 25 cm and weighs 303 grams. They feature a unique blade profile that enhances penetration—a blend of the previous styles. Misha felt it would be best to present extremes first and then a compromise, to give Ela good options across the board!" she explained with a strategic flair.

Grinning and nodding in appreciation, I opened the case to reveal what could only be described as *the* archetype of throwing knives. Clad in sleek matte-black with the Rockefeller Inc. logo elegantly engraved on each handle, they seemed to beckon for a trial throw.

Handling one, I instantly recognized the 'compromise' Misha had referred to.

The weight distribution straddled that of the earlier two models, and the blade design was indeed a hybrid: Predominantly single-edged like the JarX, with the tip and a small portion extending backward double-edged, enhancing its penetrative capability on softer to medium-hard targets.

What puzzled me, however, was my [Throwing] Skill's assertion that these Rockefeller knives were effective up to 40 metres—surpassing even the B'N'K which I had assumed would be superior for longer distances.

'How...? The B'N'K should be better for range, yet the Rockefeller is supposedly more effective? Is it because of the blade profile? Or maybe something else...?'

Examining the knife closely, I tried to deduce the reason behind this unexpected advantage.

Without a background in manufacturing, engineering or even something like blacksmithing, however, my efforts felt somewhat in vain. The nuances of its design eluded me, leaving me to trust the unexpected yet promising capabilities provided by my System's insights.

In the same moment, however, the System itself seemed to come to life, almost as if summoned by my resigned trust in it.

[System]: *100xp gained for [Appraise] Skill.*

[System]: *[Appraise] has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *[Appraisal] Ability unlocked.*

Instantly, a surge of new knowledge coursed through me, and I was particularly thrilled to see the [Appraisal] Ability now at my disposal.

The knowledge upgrade refined my ability to discern quality in materials and craftsmanship, sprinkled with insightful nuances that hadn't occurred to me before, though nothing that dramatically altered my life's course at the moment.

With the knife still in hand, now I knew without a doubt it was of superior quality—a fact I had suspected but still appreciated confirmation on, I guess.

Eager to test out my new [Appraisal] Ability, I focused intently on the knife, mentally flicking a switch similar to the one I used for [Blademaster's Throw], but this time for the newly added option.

'Appraisal.'

Immediately, my cerebral interface lit up with a System Window, overflowing with detailed information about the knife.

[== RI-05 Throwing Knife - Basic Information ==]

[Rarity: Common]

[Tier: 1]

[Price: 30-45{c}]

[Length: 25.00cm]

[Weight: 302.98g]

[Manufacturer: Rockefeller Inc.]
[Materials: Durasteel, Plasteel, Erium (Coat)]

[== RI-05 Throwing Knife - Combat Information ==]
[Durability: 399/300]
[Pierce: 32.67]
[Slash: 13.43]
[Blunt: 3.11]
[Effective Range: 0-50m]

[== RI-05 Throwing Knife - Misc Information ==]
[Passive: Gryplik Maintenance - Increases Durability characteristic by 33%. This can cause Durability to exceed the maximum.]
[Passive: Erium Coating - Increases Range characteristic by 20%.]

My eyes went wide at the sheer depth of the information displayed before me.

The System not only listed details I was previously unaware of, like the knives being composed of both Plasteel *and* Durasteel, but it also revealed they were coated in Erium—a rare material from Neon Dragons known for imparting a wide variety of unique properties to items based on their type.

Even more astounding was the listing of passive benefits that the knife brought with it.

*'Holy shit... This is a game changer! And there's the [Gryplik Maintenance] I was hoping for! This confirms that some game mechanics **actually** translate to real life, to some extent. This is fucking amazing!'* I marvelled internally, thrilled by the implications.

Seeing the Gryplik maintenance perk represented in real life was a significant clue that I had not expected to stumble across today.

It suggested that more of my in-game knowledge about item enhancements, possibly even including other racial bonuses from different demi-human craftsmen and even rarity-based enhancements, might prove applicable. The fact that rarity was also noted only increased the likelihood of these features being relevant in some way.

I clearly failed to hold back my excitement over this newfound revelation, as Misha sagely nodded and said, "Yes, yes. Misha knew Ela would enjoy this one a great deal. It's a really popular knife. Very good!"

Holding back my amusement at Misha's words as best I could, I handed back the knife momentarily and asked, "Are there any more that Ela should look at?"

With Misha shaking her head, I continued, "Ela is happy with the current selection and would like to check them over again before making a decision."

Misha quickly provided the relevant cases and I went over the other two knives as well.

'Appraisal.'

[== JarX-TK Mk.3 - Basic Information ==]

[Rarity: Common]

[Tier: 1]

[Price: 15-25{c}]

[Length: 25.08cm]

[Weight: 311.08g]

[Manufacturer: JarX]

[Materials: Durasteel, Plasteel]

[== JarX-TK Mk.3 - Combat Information ==]

[Durability: 333/250]

[Pierce: 36.83]

[Slash: 16.13]

[Blunt: 9.52]

[Effective Range: 0-20m]

[== JarX-TK Mk.3 - Misc Information ==]

[Passive: Gryplik Maintenance - Increases Durability characteristic by 33%. This can cause Durability to exceed the maximum.]

'Appraisal.'

[== B'N'K Gen 1 Throwing Knife - Basic Information ==]

[Rarity: Common]

[Tier: 1]

[Price: 20-30{c}]

[Length: 23.98cm]

[Weight: 280.02g]

[Manufacturer: Blades'N'Knives]

[Materials: Durasteel, Plasteel]

[== B'N'K Gen 1 Throwing Knife - Combat Information ==]

[Durability: 226/170]

[Pierce: 27.61]

[Slash: 11.31]

[Blunt: 2.42]

[Effective Range: 0-35m]

[== B'N'K Gen 1 Throwing Knife - Misc Information ==]

[Passive: Gryplik Maintenance - Increases Durability characteristic by 33%. This can cause Durability to exceed the maximum.]

With the full, detailed rundown on each type of knife now at my disposal, I realised just how much time I had previously wasted trying to figure things out on my own.

'The RI-05s are clearly the best option here,' I thought, though a twinge of anxiety flickered through my mind. *'Their price is the only real hiccup—understandable, given their quality. No wonder they're a staple among Operators who use throwing knives.'*

The knives were priced from 30 to 45 Credits each, which definitely ruled out purchasing the six I initially wanted. Moreover, splurging on these would mean no budget left for the spinning knives at all, further limiting my equipment options.

'But then, with the RI-05s boasting up to 50m in effective range, maybe I don't need the spinning knives as badly as I thought. The range is decent, and it should only improve as I level up my Body, Reflex, and [Throwing] further...'

Realising there was no point in overthinking it without the actual prices, I turned to Misha. The System's rough estimates were helpful, but ultimately, it was Misha's pricing that mattered.

"Ela is very interested in the Rockefeller Inc. knives. Unfortunately, Ela isn't flush with Credits right now, but would like as many as six, if the price is right. What does Misha want for them?"

Misha's demeanour shifted from her usual bubbly enthusiasm to a more business-like seriousness immediately, locking in intently as she thought about the prices.

Much like the last time I had bought items from her, Misha started her adorable mumbling in Gryplik—a habit I found endearing and extremely useful, considering that I could actually understand her.

"{What should Misha ask for them...? Throwing knives aren't popular, so they're a hard sell... But Rockefeller Inc. knives are top quality. They were expensive to procure, so Misha can't give them away cheaply,}" she mused, inspecting the knives with a critical eye. "{Misha has kept them well-maintained, too. That's worth something. They're still sparkling from the last polish!}"

As she contemplated, she seemed to remember something important. "{But the customer is Ela... Ela promised to come back and Ela *did* come back. That makes Ela a regular, if Misha has understood commerce classes well. What did the teacher say again...? Ah right! *'Regulars are the lifeblood of any store.'* That means Ela is the lifeblood of Misha's Emporium. Very important in human culture, yes.}"

Her gaze narrowed as she edged closer, trying to read my reaction so intensely that I almost toppled backward trying to maintain a comfortable distance. "{Ela looks more stressed than last time... Must need the knives urgently, or else Ela would wait to save more Credits, no? Ela trusts Misha to offer a good price to ease her stress! That must be it!}"

Suddenly stepping back and stroking her chin thoughtfully, Misha finally spoke up with her usual animated flourish. "Misha will ask for 27 Credits per knife! It's a very special price; only for Ela! After all, Ela is a regular!" Her broad, toothy grin was infectious as she declared the price, evidently pleased with her reasoning.

Quick mental math revealed that the price, while exceedingly generous, was just a tad beyond what I could comfortably afford, making me pause to consider my options.

'Maybe I should try to negotiate down to 26 Credits each? That would let me afford five knives, which is pretty good, all things considered. While not the six plus two additional

spinning knives I initially hoped for, getting five high-quality ones might be better in the long run than six inferior ones that I'd need to replace sooner...'

My internal deliberations were briefly interrupted by Misha's rapidly shifting expressions. Her face moved from an initial smile to concern, then to confusion, fear and finally to anxiety.

It seemed my silence in response to her pricing had caught her off guard.

"Ah, Ela apologises! Ela just needed a moment to think about the price. It's very generous indeed! Misha is truly kind," I quickly chimed in with a reassuring smile and a thumbs up, hoping to ease her worry.

It appeared to work as Misha exhaled deeply, her face relaxing into a broad, green-toothed smile as she returned my gesture with her own elongated fingers.

"Ela, however, must be upfront: Ela cannot afford this price. Ela could stretch to 26 Credits, if Misha could be even more generous," I ventured, which prompted Misha to stroke her chin thoughtfully.

"{Hmm... 26 Credits is quite low; it's barely above cost. Especially because throwing knives aren't a one-and-done kind of deal... Customers buy multiple, so lowering the price of one will lower overall income... Misha has already cut the price substantially; Misha cannot keep lowering it just because Ela is kind and a regular. At some point, Misha must stand Misha's ground, or Misha might as well throw open the doors and declare a free-for-all,}" I overheard Misha mutter to herself.

It was clear that my negotiation might have hit a snag, which was understandable.

Trying to score a full set of high-quality throwing knives for a pittance was a stretch. I had inadvertently put her in a tight spot, and though part of me wanted to relent to help Misha out—reciprocating her earlier kindness—I also *desperately* needed those knives; and fast.

So, I held my tongue, giving her space to think, hoping we might still find a middle ground.

Suddenly, Misha's expression brightened as an idea struck her, "{But what if Misha sells the whole set...? Misha can't easily sell two knives if Ela takes six. If Misha accepts 26 per knife and Ela agrees to eventually buy all eight, then it works out better financially and Misha isn't left with awkward stock. Misha is a genius!}"

Her poker face was a comical attempt, clearly more theoretical than practised, as her glee at her own cleverness leaked through again and again.

Turning back to me with an offer, Misha proposed, "Misha can do 26 Credits each for the knives, *but* only if Ela agrees to buy all eight eventually. Ela can buy as many as Ela can now, but must come back for the rest later at the same price. Misha thinks this is a fair trade."

I pretended to mull over her proposal, though her Gryplik mutterings had given me ample time to consider my options and I was already completely on-board with it. "Ela agrees. It's a very fair offer! Ela will take five now, and return later for the remaining three. Ela has just 130

Credits, so five is all Ela can manage now,” I responded, bowing slightly in appreciation of her flexibility.

While I was going to end up with two more knives than I initially intended, when all was said and done, throwing knives was one of those weapon types where having extras wouldn't really be a downside.

They were light-weight and could potentially get lost, depending on where I used them, so having backups ready to go would actually come in handy in the long run, even if I had to take on some additional debt in the here and now.

Plus, this arrangement ensured I'd maintain a good relationship with Misha—arguably even more important than the equipment itself, considering her generous streak and the fact that all her equipment came with a free 33% Durability.

With a burst of energy, Misha vanished behind the enormous pile of equipment she had emerged from earlier, only to reappear seconds later with another weapons case in hand.

She handed it over with her characteristic grin, “RI-05 throwing knives, eight in total. Ela should take as many as Ela needs and can afford right now; Misha will stash the rest away so no pesky customers swipe them. Ela will come back and buy the rest once more Credits are at hand, yes?”

I selected five of the knives, appreciating their weight and the precision with which they were crafted, and nodded firmly towards Misha. “Yes, Ela will return, just like before. Ela will bring more Credits to purchase the remaining knives and other items. After all, Misha's Emporium is Ela's favourite shop.”

My words seemed to deeply affect Misha.

She momentarily froze, her large ruby-crystal eyes shimmering with emotion before she quickly turned away and tucked the case with the remaining three knives under a cluttered table, taking a moment to compose herself.

“{Hold it together, Misha! Ela is kind and a regular customer. Of course, Ela would favour Misha's Emporium over others. Misha is doing well. Misha is a successful merchant, no matter what other Gryplik might say! Gryplik can be good merchants too, Misha is living proof!}” she murmured, bolstering herself with quiet affirmations that just about melted my heart.

‘How can she be so incredibly endearing?!’ I marvelled internally, utterly charmed by her adorable mannerisms once more. Each encounter with Misha seemed to reveal more of her endearing nature, and the unique features of her appearance that might seem monstrous to some only appeared as quirky and charming traits to me now.

Without my Ego Attribute working overtime all day today, I was bound to have stepped into a serious number of issues so far. Sending a quick thankful prayer to the System Gods for granting me this social cheat-code, I transferred over the entirety of my Credits to Misha.

[You have transferred {c}130 to “Misha’s Emporium” with the note: “Ela is deeply grateful for Misha’s generosity and vows to return for future purchases and the three additional knives not bought today.”]

I noticed Misha's eyes briefly glow blue as she processed the transaction, then she returned a thumbs up—a gesture she seemed to have adopted from our earlier interaction today.

I couldn't help but beam back at her, not even trying to mask my gratitude as I thanked her profusely while she walked me to the exit.

It seemed that every trip to Misha’s Emporium ended with my wallet empty, but my heart full.

‘Next time, I’ll come with enough Credits to shop without haggling Misha down. She’s worth every penny, and as a regular—as she rightly put it—I’m the lifeblood of the store! If I don’t look out for Misha, who will?!’ I pledged internally, choosing to overlook the fact that my modest purchases probably didn’t make much of an impact on the grand scale of her business, given the store’s vast inventory and the sheer volume of high-quality merchandise.

But, in the end, it was the thought that counts; or so I told myself.

And I cherished the thought of having a Gryplik shopkeeper who, with such adorable earnestness, was navigating the complexities of human commerce to make her mark in a world that wasn't always welcoming to her kind...