

The El Dorado Saddle

Description: a handsome, hand-tooled, knot-fringed leather saddle in the *charro* style. The saddle looks to be roughly twenty years old: well-used, well-maintained, and in very good repair. The El Dorado Saddle boasts an interesting, seemingly abstract set of attached silver ornaments, several semi-precious stones arranged in an interesting pattern, and a somewhat obscure six-line poem in archaic Spanish etched into its underside.

To mangle the philosopher: this saddle has gotten more good men killed than Cecil B. DeMille. And a powerful lot of bad ones, too. The Saddle has shown up in any number of murders, bushwackings, hijackings, and at least one flat-out massacre: once it gets in somebody's hands, things progress inevitably to the point where the Saddle is later found, carefully packed away, in the skeletal arms of yet another poor damned fool who tried to find a golden city in the Mexican desert.

There's nothing magical about any of this, by the way. Sensible people can easily avoid the lure of the Saddle, and many have. For the rest... it's just human greed and stupidity, all the way down.

The allure is kind of understandable, though. The silver ornaments **could** be a map of an area, if it's squinted at just right, see. And the stones **could** be a star map. And the poem *definitely* sounds like a sort of "riddle to the treasure" that one would expect out of a soap opera, dime novel, penny dreadful, and/or romance (depends on the time that the El Dorado Saddle shows up).

But here's the kicker: actually, yes, on the Saddle is a map to El Dorado. Which is, by the way, supposed to be in *South America*. And it is! And the Saddle will absolutely show how to get there! All someone has to do is read the *quipu* knots that make up the fringe of the El Dorado Saddle, and they'll then know how to get within a mile of the place (which is usually close enough to find a functional city with a living population). Of course, that would imply that somebody has the ability **to** read *quipu* knots, but the people running El Dorado are not exactly falling over themselves to make it easy to find their city. As witnessed by the fact that they deliberately set it up so that the best result for most people who **do** try to find El Dorado is to end up dying of thirst in a Mexican desert.

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