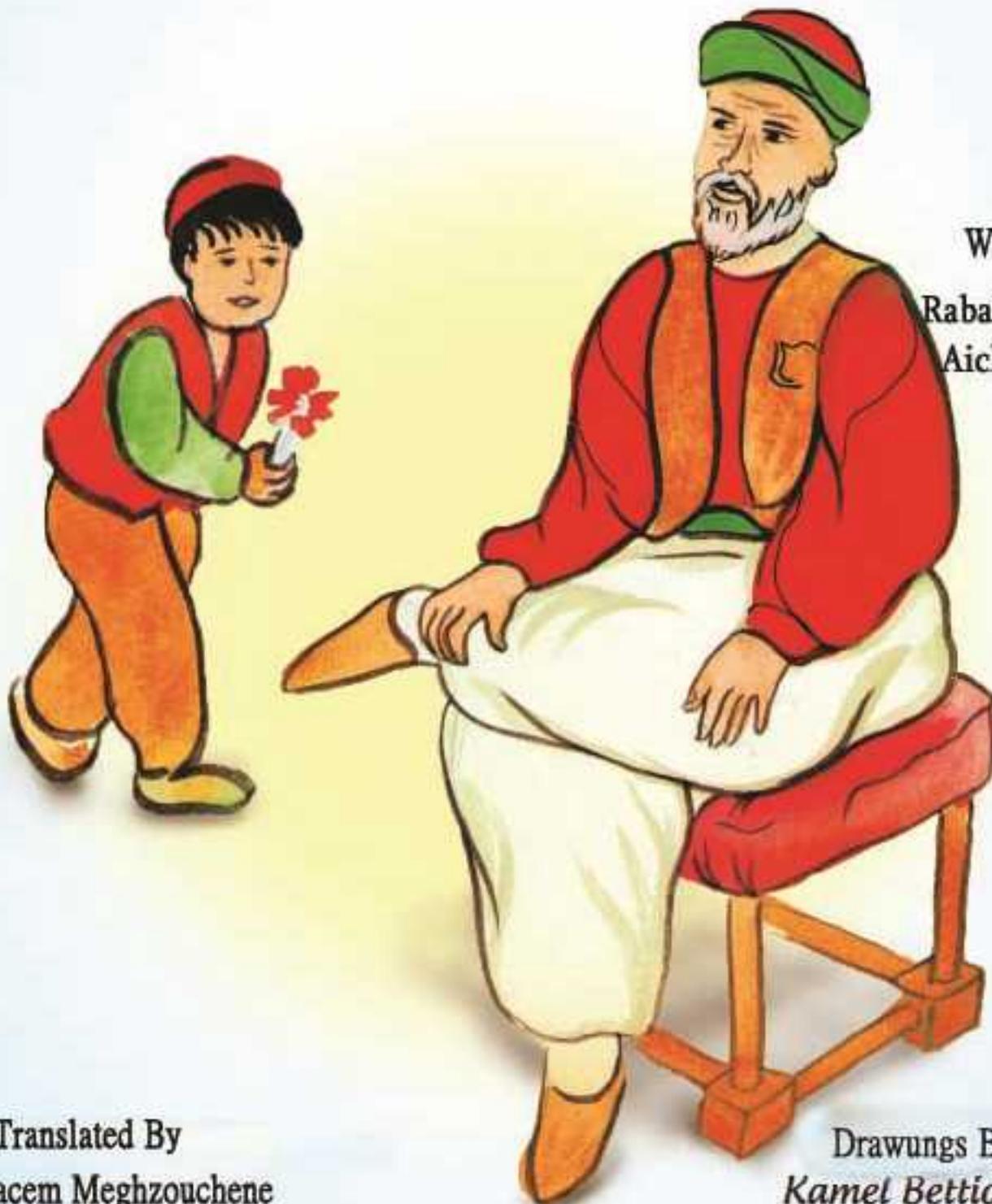


SHEIKH DIAB

Written By

Rabah Kheddouci

Aicha Bennour



Translated By
Belkacem Meghzouchene

Drawings By
Kamel Bettioui

A thrilling folk tale of Algerian heritage about the premeditated exchange of two newly-born children. The two fathers were left confused in their respective parentage. How were the two swapped sons recognized at last?

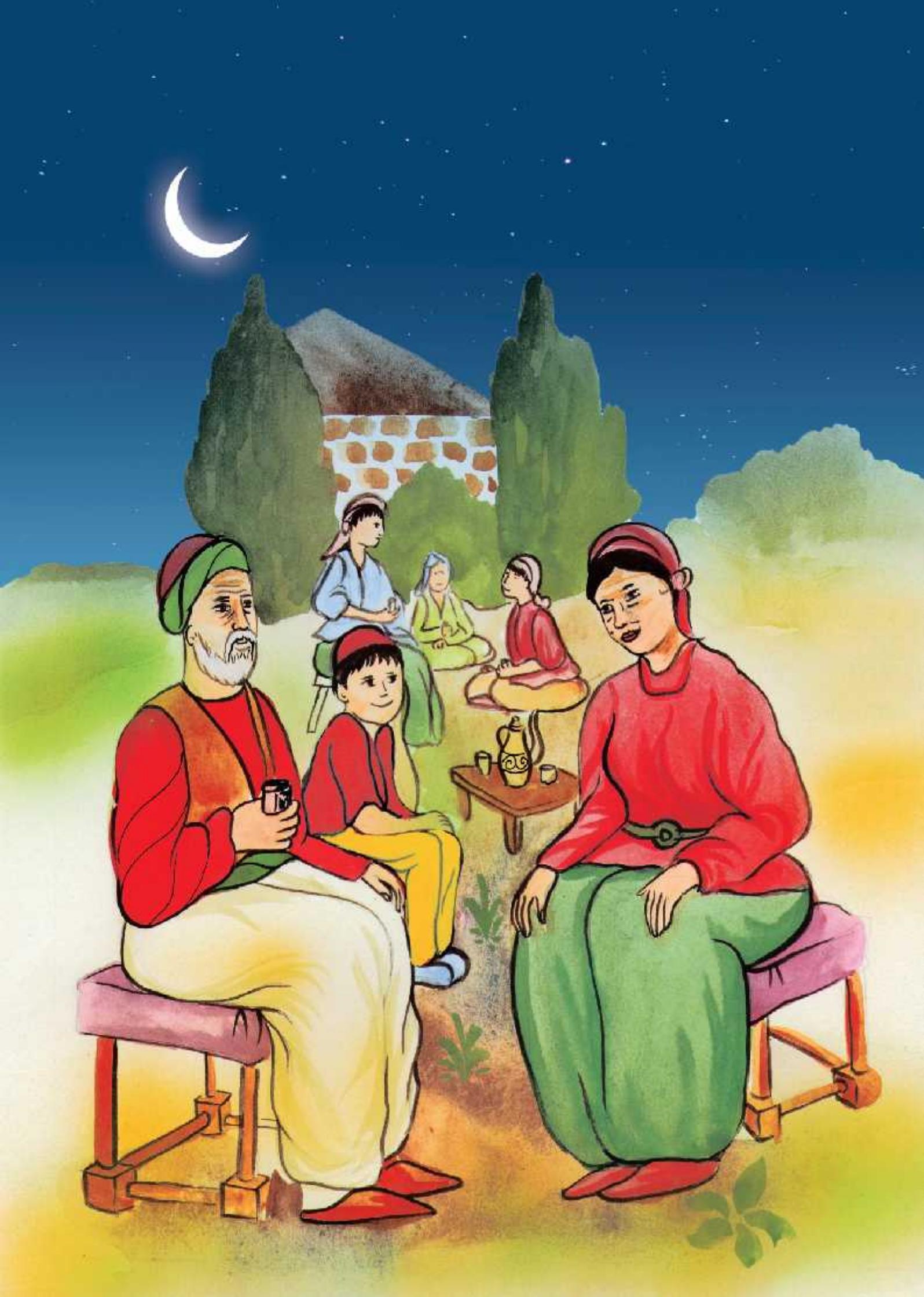
SHEIKH DIAB

One family evening, the grandchildren gathered around their grandmother Radia, as it was their custom every night before going to sleep. The grandmother said:

- Tonight's tale, my dear grandchildren, is full of sayings and proverbs and lessons and riddles, which we inherited from our forebears. This tale depicts us the simple life and the good morals, like generosity, fairness, forbearance, broadmindedness and moderation, and other good behaviors. The story of tonight is entitled *Sheikh Diab...*

It is a tale about a wise old man named Sheikh Diab, his words were sayings and proverbs, his acts were attitudes and lessons. As he was the chief of his tribe, he ensured its protection and unity, and ran its affairs, both minor and important ones.

Sheikh Diab had married three women with the intention of having children, but they all failed to procreate. He then asked a fourth woman for marriage, and after many years of hesitation the woman's parents accepted him as a husband to their daughter.



Sheikh Diab had many sheep, guarded by a shepherd who resided with his wife at the house of Sheikh Diab. It happened that the wife of the shepherd and that of his master got pregnant simultaneously, and they even gave birth during the same night. Sheikh Diab was very happy of his first-born son whom he named Said, and the shepherd called his child Messawud.

Sheikh Diab's son was born weakly built, whereas the shepherd's son was strongly built. The maid noticed this big difference and she thus interchanged between the two babies; so, switching the offspring, she took the shepherd's son and gave him to the wife of Sheikh Diab, while the son of the latter the maid put him in the arms of the shepherd's wife. The two children grew up without knowing the truth, for only the mad did hold it. Maybe the following years would uncover the hidden fact.

The grandmother Radia narrated on:

“So, as the years went by, the two children were reared quite peacefully. I let you know, my treasured grandchildren, that our ancestors were used to talking with riddles and sayings and wisdom. Sheikh Diab was recognized by people to be proficient in this kind of talking, which the child Messawud did not understand, contrary to Said who grasped well the meaning the expressions uttered by Sheikh Diab. Said's cleverness and awareness astounded Sheikh Diab.



One moonlit night garlanded with stars, the noblemen of the tribe enjoyed a pastoral soiree, sipping tea in the tent of Sheikh Diab who spoke out, as usual, with conundrums and insight...

Then, Sheikh Diab stared at Said and Messawud, looked around him; they all kept silence...

Actually, Sheikh Diab owned a beautiful mare, cherishing her a lot. One day, his wife told him jokingly:

- My darling, grant me your mare, either in recognition of your love toward me or as my share of wealth!

He replied her:

- I agree on your wish, provided that you answer my three questions: What is the best name? Which is the best food? Which is the best clothing? If you respond well, you have my mare!



His wife went to her tribe looking for the right answers. Her parents told her:

- The best name is Omar. The best dish is date. The best clothing is the red.

On her way back marital home, she ran across Said (known as the shepherd's son, though her real son), pasturing the flock. She told him the story of the riddles and the answers her parents had given her.

He said:

- They are false! Listen well to the true answers: Best name is Muhammad. Best food is that we eat after hunger. Best clothing is the decent one!

The wife hurried up to Sheikh Diab, providing him the very answers she had heard from Said. He was astonished, mumbling in confusion:

- These thoughts stem from my semen! Nobody can find the true answers!

His wife did not tell him the truth. He then decided to test her through a ruse. So, he asked a man called The Shouter to stroll between the tents and yell out: “*Camels are missing and the shepherd's son is dead!*”

Sheikh Diab hid behind the curtain to find out what would his wife say upon hearing The Shouter...

Indeed, she wept when she heard bad news. She said to the man:

- But I found him happy a little while ago! He has even spoken to me.

Sheikh Diab concluded that Said was the source of the correct solutions to his riddles. He told himself: *“If Said failed to answer me frankly, I would expel him with his parents from my house!”*

The son Said (known as the shepherd’ son) came back in the evening and he was told about the decision of the Sheikh Diab. Said approached the sheikh and asked him:

- Are you going to expel us either we succeed or fail to crack your riddles?

Sheikh Diab was taken aback by the kid’s question, and did not respond. Then the kid quizzed the sheikh with four enigmas:

- Tell me, sheikh: what defeats the women? What overpowers the horses? What impedes the water? What overcomes the camels?

For the first time, my dear grandchildren, it happened that Sheikh Diab could not come up with the right answers. Therefore, Said gave him the solutions:

- Women are defeated by their children, horses by their knights, water and camels by steep road! Sheikh Diab doubted that the child Said was the shepherd’s true son. He spoke to himself: *“I presume that Said would be my real son, and Messawud would be the shepherd’s son.”*

Things began to get clearer for Sheikh Diab. The wise man he embodied, he thus bent upon taking all his time to avoid drawing heedless conclusions. He pondered over putting to the proof the two equivocal children.



So, Sheikh Diab sent Said and Messawud on a journey in search of water sources and green pastures, and he provided each with bread and sword and horse.

The two boys were away from home several days and night, finding only a barren land and traces of caravan of nomads. Said (known as the shepherd's son) learned from the traces that the caravan was composed of two camels, one one-eyed and the other tailless, a pregnant woman, and a bitch with her puppies...

The two boys came back to Sheikh Diab and told him what they had seen. An assembly was convened by the tribesmen to talk about the matter of the mysterious caravan. They asked the two teenagers about the caravan.

Messawud, the real son of the shepherd (known as the son of Sheikh Diab):-
During my journey, I have only seen the tracks of a caravan.
But Said (known as the shepherd's son, yet Sheikh Diab's) answered more elaborately:

- I learned that the unknown caravan consisted of a one-eyed camel, because he had grazed on the right side of the road and left the grass of left side. The other camel was tailless, for he threw his dung out scattered... As to the proof that the woman was really pregnant, I infer it from her uprooting of the sagebrush when she crouched down... The bitch had puppies, because I observed only the tracks of her hind legs, as she would stand to glimpse at her puppies put on the back of the camel!

Sheikh Diab was amazed by the clever interpretations of the young Said. He commented:

- My fellow tribesmen... Said is my real son! And I think there might be an error we should patch up altogether. Messawud is not my son, but the shepherd's!

They were all surprised; kept silent, puzzled. After a while, one dignitary wondered:

- How do you know, Sheikh Diab that Said is your own son?





- Don't you see that his qualities could be inherited from shepherds? Another tribesman reminded the sheikh:

- But "*God gives wisdom to whom He wills.*" There is no difference between the sons of rich kids and poor kids!

Sheikh Diab cut in on him:

- Said is my son and I won't give him up whatever it is!

The two kids said and Messawud were baffled by what they had learned. The tribe went confused in front of this new situation set by Sheikh Diab...

After moments of uncertainty, the tribesmen headed for the wise man who told them when he had heard their story:

- Bring me the woman who had nursed of Said and Messawud!

A man went to fetch the woman in question. A little while later, the maid arrived, holding the years-long hidden truth. She acknowledged that she had misbehaved:

- Yes, I did it. Just after the birth of the two babies, I had interchanged between them! I had indeed given the weakly-built son of Sheikh Diab to the wife of the shepherd, and the strongly-built son of the shepherd to the spouse of Sheikh Diab.

The tribesmen gazed at Said and Messawud who looked incredulous...

Said and Messawud withdrew and talked to each other behind the tent for a while, and then came back, saying:

- What the maid said, even if it turns out true, would not change anything for us! We have decided to remain like before! Each of us will go on living with the family that has reared him!

The tribesmen seemed more surprised by this incredible decision of Said and Messawud. Marveling at the wish of two adolescents, the women gave vent to ululations in of their shelters.

Before everyone took his own way, one man asked:

- Who will take over from the head of the tribe in the future?

The wise man answered:

- The most industrious and the wisest of the two!

So, Said and Messawud lived altogether in peace and safety, loving each other like brothers. The story of Sheikh Diab became a fantastic legend passed on back-to-back generation.

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Email: kheddoucir@gamil.com

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