


# Silent Waters: *A Blackfoot Journey*





This graphic novel was created on the traditional territory of the Niitsitapi or Blackfoot confederacy, comprised of the Kainai, Piikani, and the Siksika First Nations, as well as the Tsuut'ina, the Stoney Nakoda Nations, as well as the Métis Battle River District 6 territory and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.

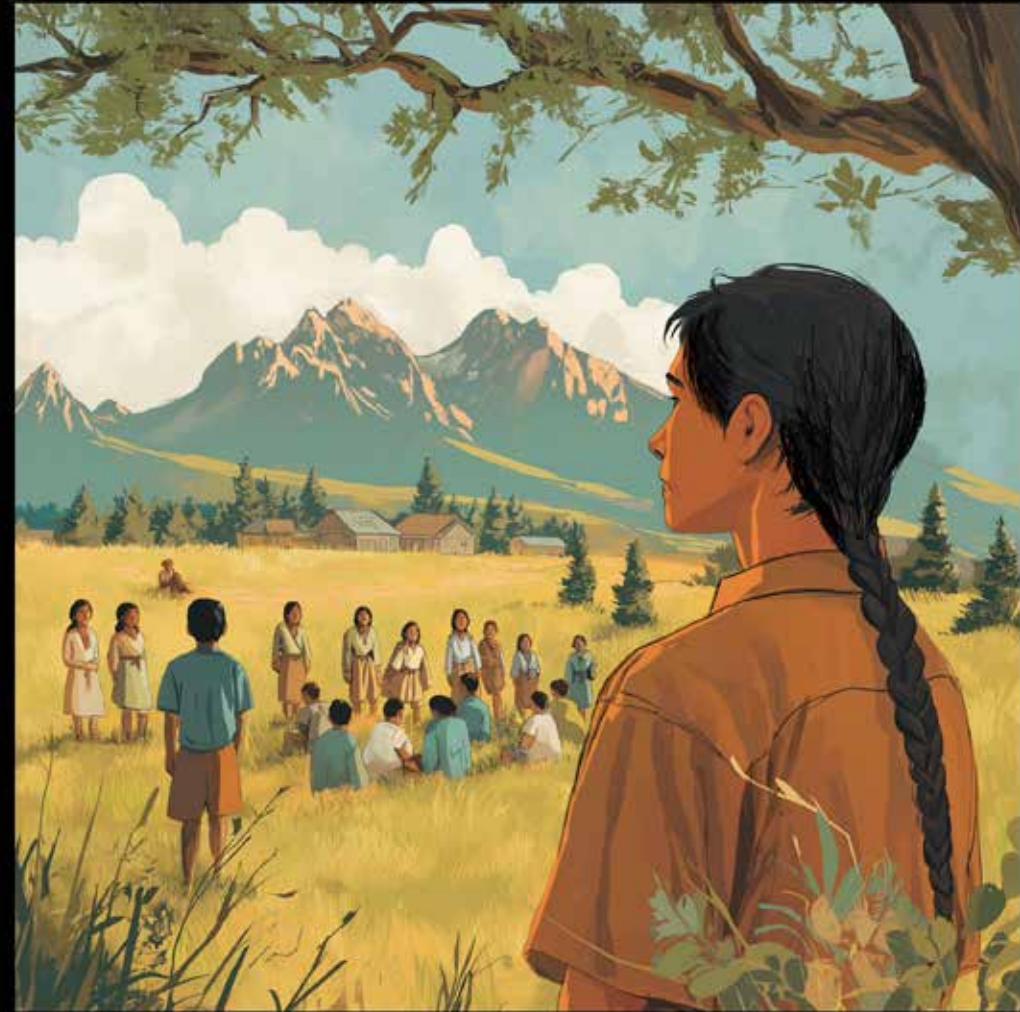
This is the story of Kimi, a young Blackfoot man from a reservation in Southern Alberta, who struggles with internalized stigma and shame after contracting HIV. Despite the diagnosis and treatment options available, Kimi avoids treatment. Unable to face the fear of judgment from people in his community. The story follows Kimi as he grapples with his sense of identity, the teachings of the Blackfoot culture, and his challenges in seeking help. Through the support of his community and reconnecting with his heritage, Kimi begins the painful but necessary journey of self-acceptance and healing.



According to national HIV estimates, 6,472 Indigenous people were living with HIV in Canada in 2020. This represents 10.3% of all people with HIV in Canada.

*"The land is sacred to us. It holds the stories of my people, the lessons we are meant to carry. But now, I feel far from it—lost, disconnected."*

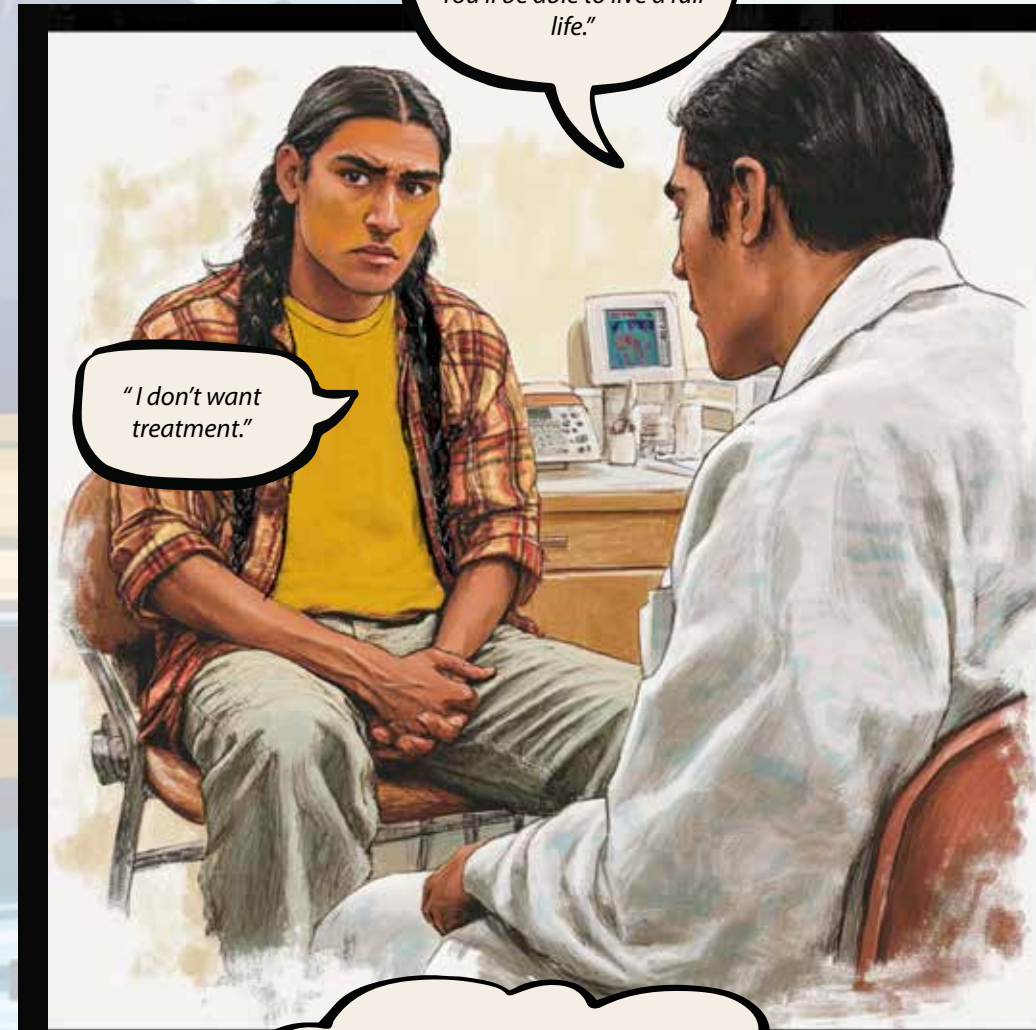
# The Land and the Struggle Within



**HIV** stands for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV is a virus that can weaken the immune system, the body's built-in defense against disease and illness.

Kimi is on a journey that feels endless, one where he wrestles with the weight of his HIV diagnosis. His family's teachings, the expectations of strength, and his fear of being seen as "weak" in the eyes of his community create an unbearable weight. He has avoided seeking treatment, choosing silence over seeking help.

# The Diagnosis



"With treatment, HIV can be managed, Kimi. You'll be able to live a full life."

"I don't want treatment."

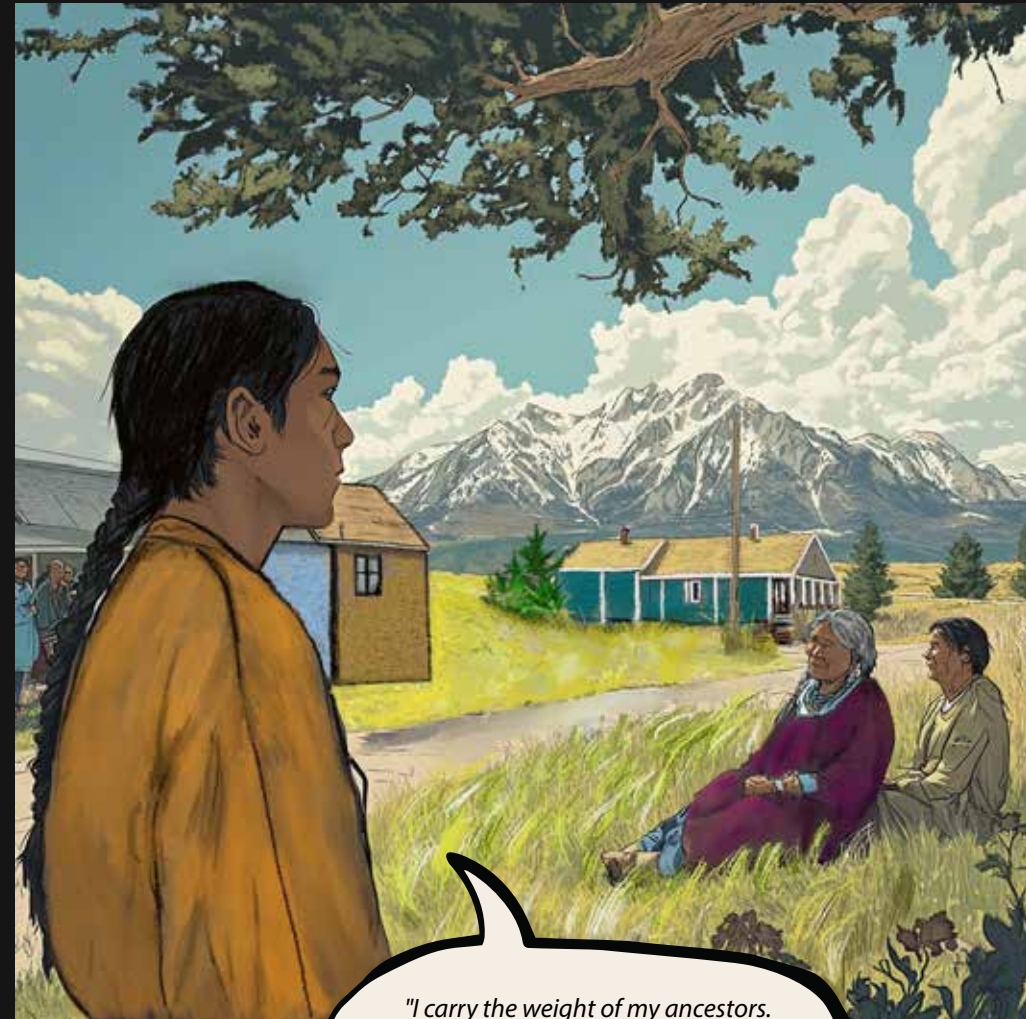
*Kimi thinks to himself... They'll see me differently. They'll see me as weak. I don't want to show weakness."*

Almost one-third (32%) of new HIV infections in Indigenous people were among females in 2020.

The doctor goes over his treatment options, including antiretroviral therapy (ART), which would help him live a long life and keep the virus undetectable (Undetectable = Untransmissible).

# The Burden of Shame

*He notices an Elder, Grandmother Ruby, sitting under a tree, watching him. She is known for her wisdom and her deep knowledge of Blackfoot history. Their eyes meet, and Kimi quickly looks away, feeling exposed.*

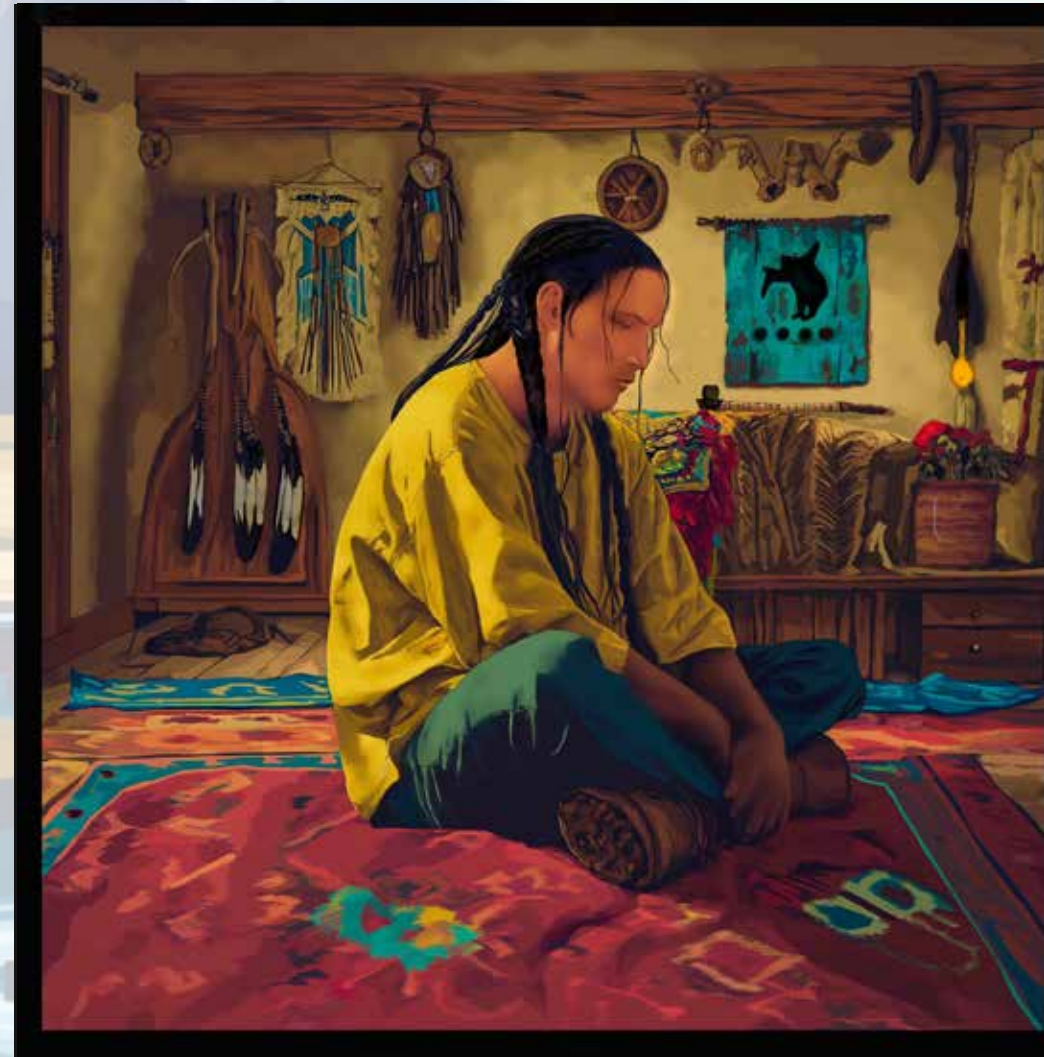


*"I carry the weight of my ancestors. I was taught to be strong. To endure. But now, I am broken. The Blackfoot way teaches us to stand tall, not to bend."*

Stigma is a contributing factor to why the AIDS epidemic continues to devastate societies around the world.

*The next day...*

# Avoidance and Isolation



Stigma remains the single most important barrier to public action. It helps make AIDS the silent killer, because people fear the social disgrace of speaking about it, or taking easily available precautions.

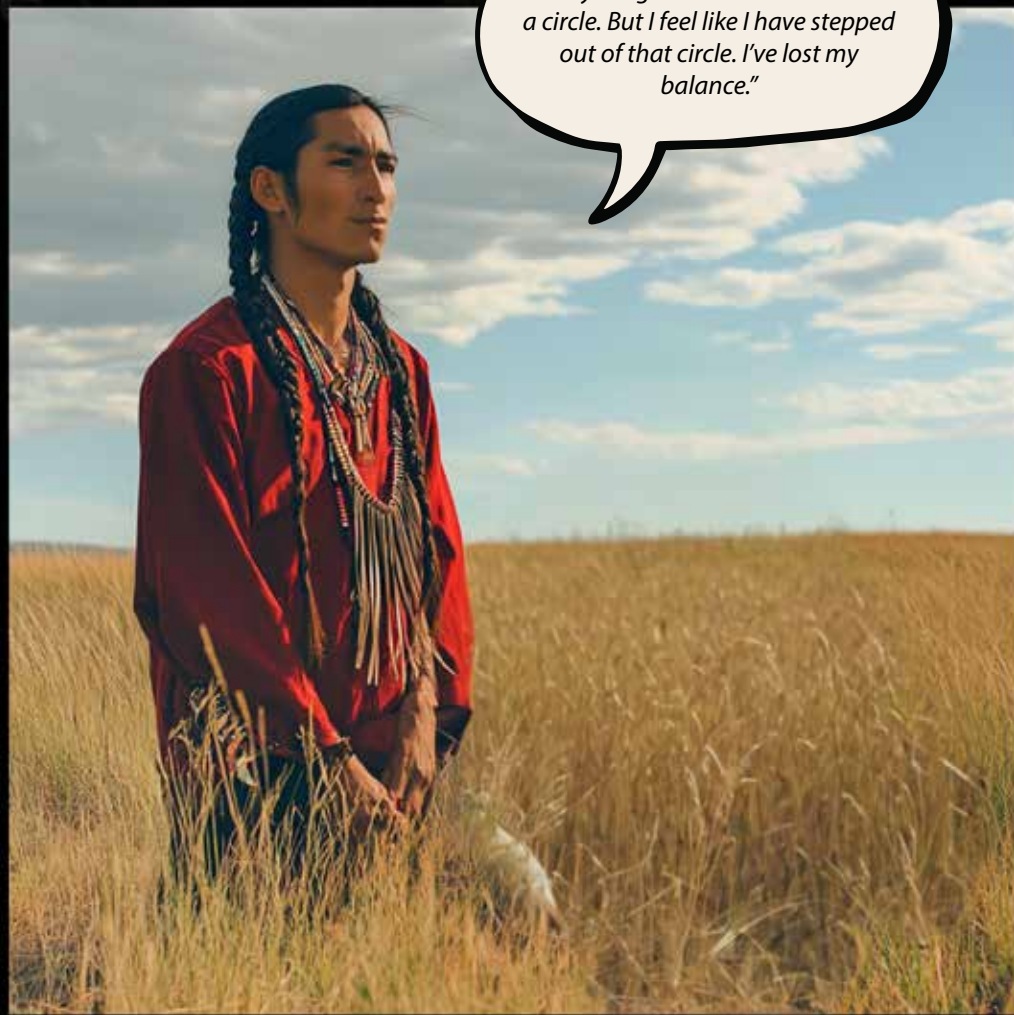
*"I remember what my grandfather used to say: 'To live with honor is to live with courage.' But courage is something I don't feel right now. I've failed."*



# Cultural Disconnect

*His phone rings, but he ignores it. It's Jared, his younger brother, calling to check in. Kimi silences it, not ready to face anyone, not even his own family.*

Culture is a fundamental part of Indigenous identity, and is the accumulated knowledge and teachings of ancestors. It's a way of knowing and being, and is connected to traditions, values, and spirituality.



*Kimi's health begins to suffer. His energy wanes, and he grows increasingly sick—his body weakens, and he experiences flu-like symptoms. His refusal to seek treatment comes at a price, but he doesn't allow himself to face it.*

*The Blackfoot Circle of Life teaches that each stage of life comes with its own purpose and teachings. These stages are reflected in the changing seasons, cycles of the land, and our spiritual relationship to Creator, the Sun, and all living beings. These stages support balance and wellness.*

*He feels the weight of the disconnect from his own culture and his inability to seek healing. He contemplates how his ancestors have endured so much—colonization, displacement, cultural erasure—and how they survived by helping each other. Yet, here he stands, hiding his diagnosis and isolating himself further from the very people who could help.*

# The Visit from Elder Ruby

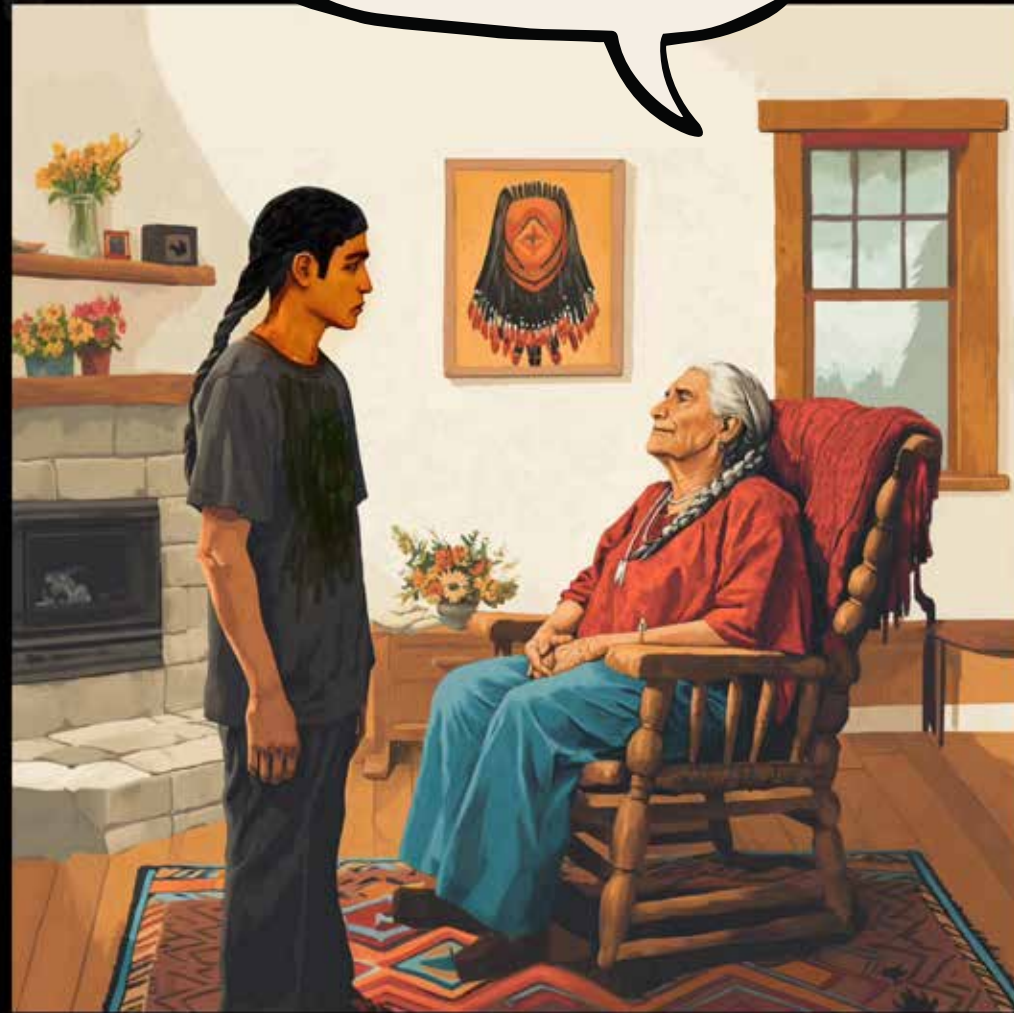


The term "Elder" is bestowed to an individual, by their community because of the spiritual and cultural knowledge that they hold. The term does not refer to one's age, but rather the level of cultural and traditional knowledge they hold.

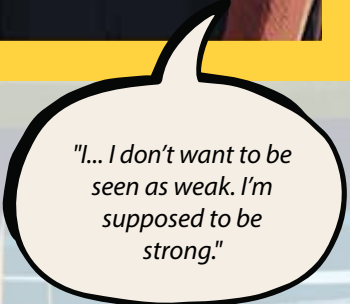
*"I see the pain in your heart, Kimi. You've been carrying it for too long."*



*"The Blackfoot way is not about avoiding the struggles we face. It is about healing, and sometimes healing means asking for help. You are not weak, Kimi. You are human. Even the strongest trees need the rain."*



*"I... I don't want to be seen as weak. I'm supposed to be strong."*



# The Inner Struggle and Revelation

*"It is not your fault, Kimi. What you carry is not shame. You carry the wisdom of your people, and it is time to share it. Heal, and teach others how to heal."*



*"We are of this land, Kimi. Our strength is not only in enduring, but in healing and passing that knowledge forward."*

Of the estimated 62,790 people with HIV in Canada in 2020, an estimated:

90% of people with HIV had been diagnosed with HIV (56,200 people)

87% of people diagnosed with HIV were on HIV treatment (48,660 people)

# The Decision to Heal



Of the estimated 62,790 people with HIV in Canada in 2020, an estimated:  
95% of people on treatment had achieved viral suppression (46,100  
people)

*The next morning...*



*To heal is to walk the path of strength.  
To ask for help is not weakness; it is the  
act of a warrior who knows when to  
face the storm.*

*He's ready to take the first step, both for himself and for his community. He remembers the words of Elder Ruby. He knows the road won't be easy, but he understands now that healing is part of being human. He is no longer ashamed of seeking help.*

*As he walks into the health center, he reflects on the teachings of his culture—the importance of community, support, and the interconnectedness of all things.*

# Reclaiming His Strength

Many people living with HIV can expect to live as long as their peers who do not have HIV. Studies show that a person living with HIV has a similar life expectancy to an HIV-negative person.

*Months later...*



*"I carry the strength of my ancestors. I walk with honor, and I no longer fear the help that can heal me. The Blackfoot way teaches us to be whole—to care for one another and ourselves."*



*He is on medication now, his health improving. He's also begun to share his story with others in the community, breaking the silence surrounding HIV and healing from within.*



**The End.**

Disclaimer: Production of this resource has been made possible through funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Public Health Agency.

# Resources:

**SafeLink Alberta:**

<https://safelinkalberta.ca/>



**CAAN Communities, Alliances & Networks:**

<https://www.caan.ca/>



**CATIE:**

<https://www.catie.ca/>

