# EXCLUDED FOREST MINORS AND THE ERDŐS-PÓSA PROPERTY 

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#### Abstract

A classical result of Robertson and Seymour states that the set of graphs containing a fixed planar graph $H$ as a minor has the so-called Erdős-Pósa property; namely, there exists a function $f$ depending only on $H$ such that, for every graph $G$ and every positive integer $k$, the graph $G$ has $k$ vertex-disjoint subgraphs each containing $H$ as a minor, or there exists a subset $X$ of vertices of $G$ with $|X| \leqslant f(k)$ such that $G-X$ has no $H$-minor (see $N$. Robertson and P. D. Seymour. Graph minors. V. Excluding a planar graph. J. Combin. Theory Ser. B, 41(1):92-114, 1986). While the best function $f$ currently known is exponential in $k$, a $O(k \log k)$ bound is known in the special case where $H$ is a forest. This is a consequence of a theorem of Bienstock, Robertson, Seymour, and Thomas on the pathwidth of graphs with an excluded forestminor. In this paper we show that the function $f$ can be taken to be linear when $H$ is a forest. This is best possible in the sense that no linear bound is possible if $H$ has a cycle.


## 1. Introduction

Let $\mathcal{F}$ be a finite set of graphs, which we will typically think of as a set of excluded (or forbidden) minors. Given a graph $G$, an $\mathcal{F}$-packing (or simply packing) in $G$ is a collection of vertex-disjoint subgraphs of $G$ each containing a member of $\mathcal{F}$ as a minor. The maximum size of such a collection is denoted $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$. A dual notion is that of an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal (or simply transversal) of $G$, which is defined as a subset $X$ of vertices of $G$ such that $G-X$ contains no member of $\mathcal{F}$ as a minor. The minimum size of such a set $X$ is denoted $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$.

Thus if $\mathcal{G}$ is a proper minor-closed class of graphs and $\mathcal{F}$ is the corresponding set of minimal forbidden minors (which is finite by the graph minor theorem [28]), then $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ is the minimum number of vertices to remove from $G$ to obtain a graph in the class $\mathcal{G}$, while $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ is the maximum number of vertex-disjoint forbidden minors in $G$.

These two graph invariants generalize some classical invariants in graph theory and combinatorial optimization: If $\mathcal{F}=\left\{K_{2}\right\}$ then it is easily seen that $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ is the maximum size of a matching in $G$, while $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ is the minimum size of a vertex cover in $G$. Similarly, if $\mathcal{F}=\left\{K_{3}\right\}$, then $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ is the maximum size of a cycle packing in $G$, and $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ is the minimum size of a cycle transversal (also known as a feedback vertex set) of $G$.

Clearly $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \geqslant \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ for every $\mathcal{F}$ and every graph $G$. If at least one graph in $\mathcal{F}$ is planar then the two parameters are "tied" to each other in the following sense: There

[^0]exists a function $f$ depending only on $\mathcal{F}$ such that $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant f\left(\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)\right)$ for every graph $G$. This was shown by Robertson and Seymour $[27]^{*}$ and is a consequence of their wellknown excluded grid theorem [27]. It is often referred to as the Erdős-Pósa property of $\mathcal{F}$ (or more accurately, of the set of graphs contractible to some graph in $\mathcal{F}$ ), because Erdős and Pósa [11] proved the existence of such a function $f$ when $\mathcal{F}=\left\{K_{3}\right\}$.

Robertson and Seymour's result is best possible in the sense that no such function $f$ exists if no graph in $\mathcal{F}$ is planar (see [27]). However, the function $f$ that follows from their proof is huge (exponential). This is because, as mentioned above, the proof relies on their excluded grid theorem, namely for every $r \in \mathbb{N}$ there exists a minimum integer $g(r)$ such that every graph with no $r \times r$-grid minor has treewidth at most $g(r)$, and the current best upper bound on $g(r)$ is exponential: $g(r) \in 2^{O\left(r^{2} \log r\right)}$ [20,23]. (As for lower bounds, only $g(r) \in \Omega\left(r^{2} \log r\right)$ is known [26].)

The situation changes drastically if instead of simply assuming that some graph in $\mathcal{F}$ is planar, we further require that $\mathcal{F}$ contains a forest $F$. Bienstock, Robertson, Seymour, and Thomas [2] proved that every graph with pathwidth at least $|F|-1$ contains $F$ as a minor. Using this result, one can derive without much difficulty that $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \in O_{\mathcal{F}}(k \log k)$ where $k=\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$; see Proposition 2.6 in Section 2. As far as we are aware, this is the best bound that is currently known.

In this paper we prove that a linear bound holds when $\mathcal{F}$ contains a forest:
Theorem 1.1. Let $\mathcal{F}$ be a finite set of graphs containing at least one forest. Then there exists a computable constant $c=c(\mathcal{F})$ such that $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ for every graph $G$.

If for some $t \in \mathbb{N}$, we let $\mathcal{F}$ be the (finite) set of minimal forbidden minors for the class of graphs with pathwidth at most $t$, then $\mathcal{F}$ contains at least one tree. This follows from the fact that trees have unbounded pathwidth (for instance, the complete binary tree of height $h$ has pathwidth $h$ ). Using that $\mathcal{F}$ is computable [1, 22], we obtain the following corollary from Theorem 1.1.

Corollary 1.2. For every $t \in \mathbb{N}$ there exists a computable constant $c=c(t)$ such that, for every graph $G$ and every $k \in \mathbb{N}$, either $G$ contains $k$ vertex-disjoint subgraphs each with pathwidth at least $t+1$, or $G$ has a vertex subset $X$ of size at most $c \cdot k$ such that $G-X$ has pathwidth at most $t$.

Interestingly, Corollary 1.2 becomes false if we replace pathwidth by treewidth, even for $t=1$ : A graph has treewidth at least 2 if and only if it contains a cycle, and there are graphs with no $k$ vertex-disjoint cycles such that every cycle transversal has size $\Omega(k \log k)$ (see [11]). More generally, for every fixed set $\mathcal{F}$ containing a planar graph but no forest, there are graphs $G$ with $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=k$ and $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \in \Omega_{\mathcal{F}}(k \log k)$; this follows from the existence of $n$-vertex graphs $G$ with treewidth $\Omega(n)$ and girth $\Omega(\log n) .^{\dagger}$ In this sense Theorem 1.1 is best possible.

[^1]Our proof of Theorem 1.1 can very briefly be described as follows: First suppose for simplicity that $\mathcal{F}=\{T\}$ with $T$ a tree; the general case can be reduced to this one without much difficulty. We show that every graph $G$ either has a model of $T$ of constant size, or a reduction operation can be applied to $G$, producing a graph $G^{\prime}$ with $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=\nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G^{\prime}\right)$ and $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=\tau_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G^{\prime}\right)$ which is smaller than $G$. In the first case we remove all vertices of the model and apply induction, while in the second case we are done by applying induction on $G^{\prime}$. The reduction operation is described in Section 3. Section 4 is devoted to the proof that every reduced graph contains a constant-size $T$-model. Section 5 describes a number of algorithmic applications of (the proof of) Theorem 1.1.

We conclude the introduction by mentioning two recent related results. First, Diestel, Kawarabayashi, and Wollan [9] studied the $\mathcal{F}=\left\{K_{t}\right\}$ case and showed that, while $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ cannot be bounded from above by a function of $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ when $t \geqslant 5$, such a function exists for graphs with high enough vertex-connectivity compared to $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ and $t$ : There exists a function $f$ such that, for every $t, k \geqslant 0$, every $(k(t-3)+14 t+14)$-connected graph $G$ either has an $\mathcal{F}$-packing of size $k$ or an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of size at most $f(k, t)$. Moreover, for fixed $t$ the connectivity requirement is best possible up to an additive constant.

Second, Fomin, Saurabh, and Thilikos [15] considered restricting the graphs $G$ under consideration to belong to some fixed proper minor-closed family of graphs $\mathcal{G}$, and showed that if $\mathcal{F}=\{H\}$ with $H$ a connected planar graph, then there exists a constant $c=$ $c(\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{G})$ such that $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant c \cdot \nu_{F}(G)$ for every $G \in \mathcal{G}$. Note that, as mentioned above, there is no such linear bound if we do not impose $G \in \mathcal{G}$.

## 2. Definitions and Preliminaries

All graphs in this paper are finite, simple, and undirected, unless otherwise stated. Let $V(G)$ and $E(G)$ denote the vertex and edge sets of a graph $G$. Let $[i, j]:=\{i, i+1, \ldots, j\}$.

A tree decomposition of a graph $G$ is a pair $\left(T,\left\{B_{x}: x \in V(T)\right\}\right)$ where $T$ is a tree, and $\left\{B_{x}: x \in V(T)\right\}$ is a family of subsets of $V(G)$ (called bags) such that

- $\bigcup_{x \in V(T)} B_{x}=V(G)$;
- for every edge $u v \in E(G)$, there exists $x \in V(T)$ with $u, v \in B_{x}$, and
- for every vertex $u \in V(G)$, the set $\left\{x \in V(T): u \in B_{x}\right\}$ induces a subtree of $T$.

The width of a tree decomposition $\left(T,\left\{B_{x}: x \in V(T)\right\}\right)$ is $\max \left\{\left|B_{x}\right|-1: x \in V(T)\right\}$. The treewidth of $G$ is the minimum width among all tree decompositions of $G$. See [8] for an introduction to the theory of treewidth. A path decomposition of $G$ is a tree decomposition of $G$ where the underlying tree $T$ is a path. We will denote such a decomposition simply by the sequence $B_{1}, \ldots, B_{p}$ of its bags (in order). The pathwidth of $G$ is the minimum width of a path decomposition of $G$.

[^2]A graph $H$ is a minor of a graph $G$ if $H$ can be obtained from a subgraph of $G$ by contracting edges. (Note that, since we only consider simple graphs, loops and parallel edges created during an edge contraction are deleted.) An $H$-model in $G$ is a collection $M=\left\{S_{x}: x \in V(H)\right\}$ of vertex-disjoint connected subgraphs of $G$ (called branch sets) such that, for every edge $x y \in E(H)$, some edge in $G$ joins a vertex in $S_{x}$ to a vertex in $S_{y}$. The vertex set of $M$ is $V(M):=\cup\left\{V\left(S_{x}\right): x \in V(H)\right\}$. Clearly, $H$ is a minor of $G$ if and only if $G$ contains an $H$-model.

The following result of Bienstock, Robertson, Seymour, and Thomas [2] will be routinely used in our proofs (see [7] for a short proof).

Theorem 2.1 ([2]). Every graph with pathwidth at least $t-1$ contains every forest on $t$ vertices as a minor.

Note that the bound in Theorem 2.1 is best possible.
We proceed with a few simple lemmas that will be used in our proof of Theorem 1.1. The following lemma is a special case of (8.6) in [27].

Lemma 2.2 ([27]). Let $P$ be a path and let $\mathcal{P}_{1}, \ldots, \mathcal{P}_{m}$ be families of subpaths of $P$. Let $x_{1}, \ldots, x_{m} \geqslant 0$ be integers, and let $k:=x_{1}+\cdots+x_{m}$. Suppose that for each $i \in[1, m]$ there are $k$ members of $\mathcal{P}_{i}$ that are pairwise vertex-disjoint. Then there exist $x_{i}$ members $P_{1}^{i}, \ldots, P_{x_{i}}^{i}$ in $\mathcal{P}_{i}$ for each $i \in[1, m]$ such that $P_{1}^{1}, \ldots, P_{x_{1}}^{1}, P_{1}^{2}, \ldots, P_{x_{2}}^{2}, \ldots, P_{1}^{m}, \ldots, P_{x_{m}}^{m}$ are all pairwise vertex-disjoint.

The next lemma can be derived from the proof of (8.8) in [27]. We provide a proof for completeness.

Lemma 2.3. Let $\mathcal{F}$ be a set of $q \geqslant 1$ graphs, each with at most $r$ components, and let $t \geqslant 1$. Then $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant 2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ for every graph $G$ with pathwidth strictly less than $t$.

Proof. The claim is trivially true if $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=0$, so assume $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \geqslant 1$. Let $\mathcal{F}=$ $\left\{H_{1}, \ldots, H_{q}\right\}$. For each $i \in[1, q]$, let $H_{i, 1}, \ldots, H_{i, c_{i}}$ denote the components of $H_{i}$, where $c_{i} \leqslant r$. Let $s:=\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)+1$. Let $B_{1}, \ldots, B_{p}$ denote a path decomposition of $G$ of width at most $t-1$. Let $P$ denote the path on $p$ vertices with vertex set $\left\{B_{1}, \ldots, B_{p}\right\}$ (in order).

For each $i \in[1, q]$ and $j \in\left[1, c_{i}\right]$, let $\mathcal{M}_{i, j}$ be the set of $H_{i, j}$-models in $G$. Observe that for each $M \in \mathcal{M}_{i, j}$ we have that $V(M)$ induces a connected subgraph of $G$, since $H_{i, j}$ is connected; thus vertices in $V(M)$ appear in consecutive bags of the path decomposition, and hence $M$ defines a corresponding subpath $P_{M}$ of $P$. Notice that a sufficient condition for two models $M \in \mathcal{M}_{i, j}$ and $M^{\prime} \in \mathcal{M}_{i^{\prime}, j^{\prime}}$ being vertex-disjoint is that $P_{M}$ and $P_{M^{\prime}}$ are vertex-disjoint; this will be used below.

First suppose that there exists an index $i \in[1, q]$ such that for each $j \in\left[1, c_{i}\right]$, there are $s c_{i}$ pairwise vertex-disjoint paths in $\left\{P_{M}: M \in \mathcal{M}_{i, j}\right\}$. Then by Lemma 2.2 (with $m=c_{i}, k=s c_{i}$ and $x_{1}=\cdots=x_{m}=s$, one can find $s H_{i, j}$-models $M_{i, j}^{1}, \ldots, M_{i, j}^{s}$ in $\mathcal{M}_{i, j}$ for each $j \in\left[1, c_{i}\right]$ such that $M_{i, 1}^{1}, \ldots, M_{i, 1}^{s}, M_{i, 2}^{1}, \ldots, M_{i, 2}^{s}, \ldots, M_{i, c_{i}}^{1}, \ldots, M_{i, c_{i}}^{s}$ are all pairwise vertex-disjoint. In particular, $G$ has $s$ vertex-disjoint $H_{i}$-models, which implies $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \geqslant s$, a contradiction. Hence there is no such index $i$.

For each $i \in[1, q]$, consider an index $j \in\left[1, c_{i}\right]$ such that $\left\{P_{M}: M \in \mathcal{M}_{i, j}\right\}$ has no $s c_{i}$ pairwise vertex-disjoint paths. Then, as is well-known, one can find a subset of at most (in fact, strictly less than) $s c_{i}$ vertices of $P$ that meet all the paths in $\left\{P_{M}: M \in \mathcal{M}_{i, j}\right\}$; let $X_{i}$ denote the union of the bags in the path decomposition corresponding to such a subset (thus $\left|X_{i}\right| \leqslant s c_{i} t$ ). Observe that $G-X_{i}$ has no $H_{i, j}$-minor, and hence no $H_{i}$-minor. Therefore, $X_{1} \cup \cdots \cup X_{q}$ is an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of $G$ of size at most $s c_{1} t+\cdots+s c_{q} t \leqslant s q r t=$ $q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)+q r t \leqslant 2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$.

If $\mathcal{F}$ is a set consisting of a single graph $H$, we simple write $\nu_{H}(G)$ and $\tau_{H}(G)$ for the invariants $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ and $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$, respectively.

Suppose that $\mathcal{F}$ is a finite set of graphs containing a forest $F$, and let $T$ be a tree on $|F|$ vertices containing $F$. The next lemma allows us to reduce the task of finding a small $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of $G$ to that of finding a small $\{T\}$-transversal of $G$. This will be used in the proof of Theorem 1.1.

Lemma 2.4. Let $\mathcal{F}$ be a set of $q \geqslant 1$ graphs, each with at most $r$ components, containing a forest $F$ on $t$ vertices. Let $T$ be a tree on $t$ vertices with $F \subseteq T$. Then

$$
\nu_{T}(G) \leqslant \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant \tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant \tau_{T}(G)+2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)
$$

for every graph $G$.

Proof. The inequalities $\nu_{T}(G) \leqslant \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant \tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ are obvious; let us show that $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant$ $\tau_{T}(G)+2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$. Let $X$ be a $\{T\}$-transversal of $G$ with $|X|=\tau_{T}(G)$. Then $G-X$ has no $T$-minor, and hence has pathwidth at most $t-2$ by Theorem 2.1. By Lemma 2.3, $G-X$ has an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal $Y$ with $|Y| \leqslant 2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G-X) \leqslant 2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$. It follows that $X \cup Y$ is an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of $G$ of size at most $\tau_{T}(G)+2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is not difficult to derive from Theorem 2.1 that, when $\mathcal{F}$ is a finite set of graphs containing a forest, $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \in O_{\mathcal{F}}(k \log k)$ where $k=\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$. We conclude this section with a proof of this statement, for completeness.

First we consider the case where $\mathcal{F}$ consists of a single tree.
Lemma 2.5. Let $T$ be a tree on $t$ vertices. Then $\tau_{T}(G) \leqslant 3(t+1) k \log _{2}((t+1) k)-t$ for every graph $G$ with $\nu_{T}(G)=k$.

Proof. The proof is by induction on $k$. If the pathwidth of $G$ is at least $t(k+1)-1$, then $G$ contains every forest on at most $t(k+1)$ vertices as a minor, and thus contains $k+1$ disjoint copies of $T$ as a minor. This implies $\nu_{T}(G) \geqslant k+1$, a contradiction. Hence, $G$ has pathwidth at most $t(k+1)-2$.

Let $B_{1}, \ldots, B_{p}$ be a path decomposition of $G$ of width at most $t(k+1)-2$. By modifying the decomposition if necessary, we may assume that $\left|B_{i} \triangle B_{i+1}\right|=1$ for each $i \in[1, p-1]$.

For each $i \in[1, p]$, let $L_{i}:=G\left[\left(B_{1} \cup \cdots \cup B_{i-1}\right)-B_{i}\right]$ and $\ell_{i}:=\nu_{T}\left(L_{i}\right)$, and similarly let $R_{i}:=G\left[\left(B_{i+1} \cup \cdots \cup B_{p}\right)-B_{i}\right]$ and $r_{i}:=\nu_{T}\left(R_{i}\right)$. Observe that $\ell_{i}+r_{i} \leqslant k$, since $L_{i}$ and $R_{i}$ are vertex-disjoint subgraphs of $G$. Also, since $\left|B_{i} \triangle B_{i+1}\right|=1$, we have
$\ell_{i+1} \in\left\{\ell_{i}, \ell_{i}+1\right\}$ for each $i \in[1, p-1]$. Thus there exists an index $j \in[1, p]$ such that $\ell_{j} \leqslant\left\lceil\frac{k}{2}\right\rceil$ and $r_{j} \leqslant\left\lfloor\frac{k}{2}\right\rfloor$.

For the base case of the induction, namely $k=1$, we have $\ell_{j} \leqslant 1$ and $r_{j}=0$. If $\ell_{j}=0$ then $Z:=B_{j}$ is an $\{T\}$-transversal of $G$ of size at most $t(k+1)-1$. Otherwise, $\ell_{j}=1$ and $j>1$ (since $\left.\ell_{1}=0\right)$. We may further assume that $j$ is chosen so that $\ell_{j-1}=0$. Then $Z:=B_{j-1} \cup B_{j}$ is an $\{T\}$-transversal of $G$ of size at most $t(k+1)\left(\right.$ since $\left.\left|B_{j-1} \triangle B_{j}\right|=1\right)$. Thus in each case the transversal $Z$ has size at most $t(k+1)=2 t \leqslant 3(t+1) \log _{2}(t+1)-t$.

For the inductive step, assume $k \geqslant 2$. By induction there are $\{T\}$-transversals $X$ and $Y$ of $L_{j}$ and $R_{j}$, respectively, such that $|X| \leqslant 3(t+1)\left\lceil\frac{k}{2}\right\rceil \log _{2}\left((t+1)\left\lceil\frac{k}{2}\right\rceil\right)-t$ and $|Y| \leqslant 3(t+1)\left\lfloor\frac{k}{2}\right\rfloor \log _{2}\left((t+1)\left\lfloor\frac{k}{2}\right\rfloor\right)-t$. Then $X \cup Y \cup B_{j}$ is an $\{T\}$-transversal of $G$ of size at most

$$
\begin{aligned}
& 3(t+1)\left\lceil\frac{k}{2}\right\rceil \log _{2}\left((t+1)\left\lceil\frac{k}{2}\right\rceil\right)-t+3(t+1)\left\lfloor\frac{k}{2}\right\rfloor \log _{2}\left((t+1)\left\lfloor\frac{k}{2}\right\rfloor\right)-t+t(k+1)-1 \\
\leqslant & 3(t+1) k \log _{2}(t+1)+3(t+1) k \log _{2}\left(\frac{k+1}{2}\right)+t k-t-1 \\
= & 3(t+1) k \log _{2}(t+1)+3(t+1) k \log _{2}(k+1)-2 t k-3 k-t-1 \\
\leqslant & 3(t+1) k \log _{2}(t+1)+3(t+1) k \log _{2}\left(\frac{3 k}{2}\right)-2 t k-3 k-t-1 \\
\leqslant & 3(t+1) k \log _{2}((t+1) k)-t
\end{aligned}
$$

as desired.

Combining Lemmas 2.4 and 2.5, we obtain the aforementioned $O_{\mathcal{F}}(k \log k)$ bound
Proposition 2.6. Let $\mathcal{F}$ be a set of $q \geqslant 1$ graphs, each with at most $r$ components, containing a forest on $t$ vertices. Then $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant 3(t+1) k \log _{2}((t+1) k)+2 q r t k-t$ for every graph $G$ with $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=k$.

## 3. A Reduction Operation

First we need to introduce some definitions. A rooted graph is a pair $(G, R)$ where $G$ is a graph and $R=\left(v_{1}, \ldots, v_{k}\right)$ is a (possibly empty) ordered subset of vertices of $G$ called roots. The notions of minors and models generalize in a natural way to rooted graphs: A rooted graph $\left(H, R^{\prime}\right)$ with $R^{\prime}=\left(w_{1}, \ldots, w_{\ell}\right)$ is a minor of $(G, R)$ if $k=\ell$ and there exists a collection $\left\{V_{u}: u \in V(H)\right\}$ of disjoint vertex subsets of $G$ (the branch sets), each inducing a connected subgraph in $G$, such that $v_{i} \in V_{w_{i}}$ for each $i \in[1, k]$, and there exists an edge between $V_{u}$ and $V_{v}$ in $G$ for every $u v \in E(H)$. The collection $M:=\left\{V_{u}: u \in V(H)\right\}$ is called a model of $\left(H, R^{\prime}\right)$ in $(G, R)$. We write $V(M)$ to denote the set $\cup_{u \in V(H)} V_{u}$ of vertices of the model $M$.

Isomorphism between rooted graphs is defined in the expected way (the $i$-th root of the first graph is required to be mapped to the $i$-th root of the second). We write $R^{\prime} \subseteq R$ for an ordered subset of an ordered set $R$ (thus, the ordering of $R^{\prime}$ is consistent with the ordering of $R$ ). Also, if $X$ is an (unordered) set then $R-X$ is ordered as in $R$.

For our reduction operation we will need to keep track of rooted minors of bounded sizes of a given rooted graph $(G, R)$. For an integer $q \geqslant 1$, the $q$-folio of $(G, R)$ is the $\left.2^{|R|}\right|_{-}$ tuple which, for each set $R^{\prime} \subseteq R$, records the set of all minors $\left(H, R^{\prime}\right)$ of $\left(G, R^{\prime}\right)$ with
$|H| \leqslant q$ (keeping one member per isomorphism class). For integers $p \geqslant 0$ and $q \geqslant 1$, the $p$-deletion $q$-folio of $(G, R)$ is the $(p+1)$-tuple which, for each $i \in[0, p]$, records for each $X \subseteq R$ with $|X| \leqslant i$ the set of all $q$-folios of $(G-(X \cup Y), R-X)$ taken over all subsets $Y \subseteq V(G)-R$ with $|X|+|Y|=i$. (Informally speaking, we record the different $q$-folios obtained by deleting $i$ vertices in or outside the set of roots, for each $i \in[0, p]$.)

The following lemma on $p$-deletion $q$-folios is an adaptation of Lemma 2.2 in [18], its proof relies on standard monadic second-order logic techniques.

Lemma 3.1. Let $p, r, z \geqslant 0$ and $q \geqslant 1$. Then there exists a computable function $g(p, q, r, z)$ such that, for every rooted graph $(G, R)$ such that $G$ has treewidth at most $z$ and $|R|=r$, there exists a rooted graph $\left(G^{\prime}, R\right)$ with $\left|G^{\prime}\right| \leqslant g(p, q, r, z)$ and such that $(G, R)$ and $\left(G^{\prime}, R\right)$ have the same $p$-deletion $q$-folio.

Proof. Fix an ordered set $R$ with $|R|=r$. Let $\mathcal{G}(R, q)$ denote the set of (non-isomorphic) rooted graphs $(G, R)$ with $|G| \leqslant q$. Clearly $|\mathcal{G}(R, q)|$ is bounded from above by a function of $r$ and $q$.

Let $\mathcal{S}(R, q)$ denote the set of vectors $s$ having one entry $s\left(R^{\prime}\right)$ per subset $R^{\prime} \subseteq R$ and such that $s\left(R^{\prime}\right) \subseteq \mathcal{G}\left(R^{\prime}, q\right)$. Again, $|\mathcal{S}(R, q)|$ is bounded from above by a function of $r$ and $q$. By definition, for each rooted graph $(G, R)$ there is exactly one vector in $\mathcal{S}(R, q)$ that encodes the $q$-folio of $(G, R)$. (Note that, on the other hand, some vectors $s \in \mathcal{S}(R, q)$ might not correspond to the $q$-folio of any rooted graph $(G, R)$.)

Let $\mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$ denote the set of vectors $d=\left(D_{0}, \ldots, D_{p}\right)$ such that, for each $i \in[0, p], D_{i}$ has one entry $D_{i}(X)$ for each $X \subseteq R$ with $|X| \leqslant i$, and $D_{i}(X) \subseteq \mathcal{S}(R-X, q)$ for each such set $X$. The size of $\mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$ is bounded from above by a function of $r$, $q$, and $p$. By the definition of $\mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$, the $p$-deletion $q$-folio of a rooted graph $(G, R)$ is encoded by exactly one vector in $\mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$.

It is well-known that the property that a fixed graph $H$ is a minor of a graph $G$ can be expressed by a monadic second-order logic (MSO) sentence $\varphi_{H}$ (see Grohe [17] for an introduction to monadic second-order logic). Similarly, for each $s \in \mathcal{S}(R, q)$ one can write an MSO-sentence $\varphi_{s}$ such that a rooted graph $(G, R)$ satisfies $\varphi_{s}$ if and only if its $q$-folio equals $s$. More generally, for each $d \in \mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$ one can express by an MSO-sentence $\varphi_{d}$ the property that $d$ is the $p$-deletion $q$-folio of $(G, R)$.

By Seese's theorem [29], there is an algorithm which given an MSO-sentence $\varphi$ and an integer $t$ decides whether there exists a graph of treewidth at most $t$ satisfying $\varphi$. It is also known that there is a computable function $h(\varphi, t)$ such that if an MSO-sentence $\varphi$ is realizable by (or more accurately, admits a model consisting of) a graph of treewidth at most $t$, then there is such a graph with at most $h(\varphi, t)$ vertices. This can be derived using (among others) a theorem of Thatcher and Wright [30], as explained in the proof of Lemma 2.2 in [18].

Now clearly the set $\mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$ is computable. It follows that, for each $d \in \mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$, we can use Seese's algorithm to compute the subset $\mathcal{D}_{z} \subseteq \mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$ of vectors $d \in \mathcal{D}(R, q, p)$ such that there exists a rooted graph $(G, R)$ of treewidth at most $z$ that satisfies $\varphi_{d}$.

Moreover, for each $d \in \mathcal{D}_{z}$, we can compute a rooted graph $\left(G^{\prime}, R\right)$ whose $p$-deletion $q$ folio equals $d$ and such that $\left|G^{\prime}\right| \leqslant h\left(\varphi_{d}, z\right)$. The lemma follows by setting $g(p, q, r, z):=$ $\max \left\{h\left(\varphi_{d}, z\right): d \in \mathcal{D}_{z}\right\}$.

A separation of a graph $G$ is a pair $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of two induced subgraphs of $G$ such that $G=G_{1} \cup G_{2}$, its order is $\left|V\left(G_{1}\right) \cap V\left(G_{2}\right)\right|$. Let us point out that $G_{1} \subseteq G_{2}$ or $G_{2} \subseteq G_{1}$ is allowed in this definition, that is, we do not require $V\left(G_{1}\right)-V\left(G_{2}\right)$ and $V\left(G_{2}\right)-V\left(G_{1}\right)$ to be nonempty.

Lemma 3.2. For every tree $T$ there exists a computable function $b$ such that, for every graph $G$ having a separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of order $t$ with $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant b(t)$ such that $G_{1}$ has no $T$-minor, there exists a graph $G^{\prime}$ satisfying $\nu_{T}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\nu_{T}(G), \tau_{T}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\tau_{T}(G)$, and $\left|G^{\prime}\right|<|G|$.

Proof. Since $G_{1}$ has no $T$-minor, its pathwidth is at most $|T|-2$ by Theorem 2.1, and hence so is its treewidth. We will prove the lemma with $b(t):=g(t, q, t,|T|-2)+1$, where $q:=t(|T|+1)$ and $g$ is the function from Lemma 3.1. Let $X:=V\left(G_{1}\right) \cap V\left(G_{2}\right)$ and let $R$ be an arbitrary ordering of $X$. Using Lemma 3.1, let $\left(G_{1}^{\prime}, R\right)$ be a rooted graph with the same $t$-deletion $q$-folio as $\left(G_{1}, R\right)$, and with $\left|G_{1}^{\prime}\right| \leqslant g(t, q, t,|T|-2)<b(t) \leqslant\left|G_{1}\right|$. Assume without loss of generality that $V\left(G_{1}^{\prime}\right) \cap V\left(G_{2}\right)=X$. Let $G^{\prime}$ be the graph obtained from $G_{1}^{\prime} \cup G_{2}$ by removing every edge linking two vertices in $X$ that is included in $G_{2}$ but not in $G_{1}^{\prime}$. (Thus $G[X]$ and $G^{\prime}[X]$ could possibly be distinct graphs.) Then $\left|G^{\prime}\right|<|G|$, and it remains to show that $\nu_{T}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\nu_{T}(G)$ and $\tau_{T}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\tau_{T}(G)$.

First we prove that $\nu_{T}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\nu_{T}(G)$ by showing that $\nu_{T}(L) \geqslant \nu_{T}(K)$ for $(K, L) \in$ $\left\{\left(G, G^{\prime}\right),\left(G^{\prime}, G\right)\right\}$. If $K=G$, let $K_{1}:=G_{1}$ and $L_{1}:=G_{1}^{\prime}$, otherwise let $K_{1}:=G_{1}^{\prime}$ and $L_{1}:=G_{1}$. Consider $k:=\nu_{T}(K)$ vertex-disjoint $T$-models $M_{1}, \ldots, M_{k}$ in $K$, where $M_{i}=\left\{V_{u}^{i}: u \in V(T)\right\}$ for each $i \in[1, k]$. We may assume that these models are ordered so that $V\left(M_{1}\right), \ldots, V\left(M_{\ell}\right)$ each intersects $V\left(K_{1}\right)$, while none of $V\left(M_{\ell+1}\right), \ldots, V\left(M_{k}\right)$ intersects $V\left(K_{1}\right)$, for some index $\ell \in[1, k]$. Observe that, since $T$ is connected and $K_{1}$ has no $T$-minor, each of $V\left(M_{1}\right), \ldots, V\left(M_{\ell}\right)$ must intersect $X$. It follows that $\ell \leqslant t$.

For each $i \in[1, \ell]$, let $X_{i}:=V\left(M_{i}\right) \cap X$ (thus $X_{i}$ and $X_{j}$ are disjoint for $i \neq j$ ), let $A_{i}$ be the set of vertices $u \in V(T)$ such that $V_{u}^{i}$ intersects $X_{i}$, and, for every $u \in A_{i}$, let $s_{u, i}:=\left|V_{u}^{i} \cap X_{i}\right|$ and arbitrarily partition $V_{u}^{i} \cap V\left(K_{1}\right)$ into $s_{u, i}$ parts $W_{u, 1}^{i}, \ldots, W_{u, s_{u, i}}^{i}$, so that each part induces a connected subgraph of $K_{1}$ and contains exactly one vertex from $V_{u}^{i} \cap X_{i}$. Also let $B_{i}$ be the set of vertices $u \in V(T)$ such that $V_{u}^{i}$ intersects $V\left(K_{1}\right)$ but not $X_{i}$ (thus $A_{i}$ and $B_{i}$ are disjoint). For $u \in B_{i}$, let $s_{u, i}:=1$ and let $W_{u, 1}^{i}:=V_{u}^{i}$.

Let $H^{*}$ be the graph with one vertex per triple $(i, u, j)$ where $i \in[1, \ell], u \in A_{i} \cup B_{i}$, and $j \in\left[1, s_{u, i}\right]$, and where two distinct vertices $(i, u, j)$ and $\left(i^{\prime}, u^{\prime}, j^{\prime}\right)$ are adjacent if and only if there is an edge in $K_{1}$ connecting a vertex of $W_{u, j}^{i}$ to a vertex of $W_{u^{\prime}, j^{\prime}}^{i^{\prime}}$. Observe that $V_{u}^{i}$ corresponds to one vertex of $H^{*}$ if $V_{u}^{i} \subseteq V\left(K_{1}\right)-X$, and to $s_{u}$ vertices of $H^{*}$ otherwise. Let $R^{*}$ be the ordering of $X_{1} \cup \cdots \cup X_{\ell}$ induced by $R$. By the definition of $H^{*}$, the rooted graph $\left(H^{*}, R^{*}\right)$ is a minor of $\left(K_{1}, R^{*}\right)$. Since

$$
\left|H^{*}\right|=\sum_{i=1}^{\ell} \sum_{u \in A_{i}} s_{u, i}+\sum_{i=1}^{\ell}\left|B_{i}\right|=\sum_{i=1}^{\ell}\left|X_{i}\right|+\sum_{i=1}^{\ell}\left|B_{i}\right| \leqslant|X|+\ell|T| \leqslant t+t|T|=q
$$

$\left(H^{*}, R^{*}\right)$ is in the $q$-folio of $\left(K_{1}, R\right)$. (More precisely, the $R^{*}$-entry of the $q$-folio of $\left(K_{1}, R\right)$ contains $\left(H^{*}, R^{*}\right)$.) Hence $\left(H^{*}, R^{*}\right)$ is also in the $q$-folio of $\left(L_{1}, R\right)$, since the $q$-folios of $\left(K_{1}, R\right)$ and $\left(L_{1}, R\right)$ are the same (up to isomorphism, as always). Now consider a model of $\left(H^{*}, R^{*}\right)$ in $\left(L_{1}, R^{*}\right)$, and let $Y_{u, j}^{i}$ denote the branch set corresponding to the vertex $(i, u, j)$ of $H^{*}$. Define, for each $i \in[1, k]$ and $u \in V(T)$, the set $Z_{u}^{i}$ as follows:

$$
Z_{u}^{i}:= \begin{cases}\left(V_{u}^{i}-V\left(K_{1}\right)\right) \cup Y_{u, 1}^{i} \cup \cdots \cup Y_{u, s_{u, i}}^{i} & \text { if } i \leqslant \ell \text { and } u \in A_{i} \cup B_{i} \\ V_{u}^{i} & \text { otherwise. }\end{cases}
$$

For each $i \in[1, k]$, we have that $L\left[Z_{u}^{i}\right]$ is connected for each $u \in V(T)$, which follows from the fact that $K\left[V_{u}^{i}\right]$ is connected. Also, there exists an edge between $Z_{u}^{i}$ and $Z_{v}^{i}$ in $L$ for each $u v \in E(T)$. Let $M_{i}^{\prime}:=\left\{Z_{u}^{i}: u \in V(T)\right\}$. Since $Z_{u}^{i}$ is disjoint from $Z_{v}^{j}$ for distinct $i, j \in[1, k]$ and $u, v \in V(T)$, we deduce that $M_{1}^{\prime}, \ldots, M_{k}^{\prime}$ are $k$ vertex-disjoint models of $T$ in $L$. Hence $\nu_{T}(K) \leqslant \nu_{T}(L)$, as desired.

Now we show that $\tau_{T}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\tau_{T}(G)$ by showing that $\tau_{T}(L) \geqslant \tau_{T}(K)$ for $(K, L) \in$ $\left\{\left(G, G^{\prime}\right),\left(G^{\prime}, G\right)\right\}$. As before, if $K=G$, let $K_{1}:=G_{1}$ and $L_{1}:=G_{1}^{\prime}$, otherwise let $K_{1}:=G_{1}^{\prime}$ and $L_{1}:=G_{1}$.

Let $J$ be a minimum-size transversal of $L$, and let $J_{1}:=J \cap V\left(L_{1}\right)$. We have $\left|J_{1}\right| \leqslant|X|=$ $t$, because $\left(J-J_{1}\right) \cup X$ is also a transversal of $L$, and thus must have size at least that of $J$. (Here we use the fact that $L_{1}$ has no $T$-minor, and that $T$ is connected.) Since the $t$-deletion $q$-folios of $\left(K_{1}, R\right)$ and $\left(L_{1}, R\right)$ are the same, there exists a subset $I_{1}$ of vertices of $K_{1}$ with $\left|I_{1}\right|=\left|J_{1}\right|$ such that the $q$-folios of $\left(L_{1}-J_{1}, R-J_{1}\right)$ and $\left(K_{1}-I_{1}, R-I_{1}\right)$ are the same (by definition).

We claim that the set $I:=\left(J-J_{1}\right) \cup I_{1}$, which has the same size as $J$, is a transversal of $K$. Arguing by contradiction, assume not, and let $M:=\left\{V_{u}: u \in V(T)\right\}$ denote a $T$-model in $K-I$. Let $A$ be the subset of vertices $u \in V(T)$ such that $V_{u}$ intersects $X$, and let $B$ be the set of those such that $V_{u} \subseteq V\left(K_{1}\right)-X$ (thus $A$ and $B$ are disjoint). For every $u \in A$, let $s_{u}:=\left|V_{u} \cap X\right|$, and partition $V_{u} \cap V\left(K_{1}\right)$ into $s_{u}$ parts $W_{u, 1}, \ldots, W_{u, s_{u}}$, so that each part induces a connected subgraph of $K_{1}$ and contains exactly one vertex from $V_{u} \cap X$. Also let $s_{u}:=1$ and $W_{u, 1}:=V_{u}$ for every $u \in B$. We define $H^{*}$ as the minor of $K_{1}-I_{1}$ modeled by the $W_{u, j} \mathrm{~s}$, exactly as previously: $H^{*}$ has one vertex for every couple $(u, j)$ where $u \in A \cup B$ and $j \in\left\{1, \ldots, s_{u}\right\}$, and two distinct vertices $(u, j)$ and $\left(u^{\prime}, j^{\prime}\right)$ of $H^{*}$ are adjacent if and only if there is an edge between $W_{u, j}$ and $W_{u^{\prime}, j^{\prime}}$ in $K_{1}-I_{1}$.

Let $R^{*}$ be the ordered subset of $R$ induced by the vertices in $V(M) \cap X$. Thus $\left(H^{*}, R^{*}\right)$ is a minor of $\left(K_{1}-I_{1}, R^{*}\right)$. Since $\left|H^{*}\right|=\sum_{u \in A} s_{u}+|B| \leqslant|X|+|T| \leqslant q$, the rooted graph $\left(H^{*}, R^{*}\right)$ is in the $q$-folio of $\left(K_{1}-I_{1}, R-I_{1}\right)$, and hence also in the $q$-folio of $\left(L_{1}-J_{1}, R-J_{1}\right)$. Consider a model of $\left(H^{*}, R^{*}\right)$ in $\left(L_{1}-J_{1}, R^{*}\right)$; let $W_{u, j}^{\prime}$ denote the branch set corresponding to the vertex $(u, j)$ of $H^{*}$ in that model. For every $u \in V(T)$, let

$$
V_{u}^{\prime}:= \begin{cases}\left(V_{u}-V\left(K_{1}\right)\right) \cup W_{u, 1}^{\prime} \cup \cdots \cup W_{u, s_{u}}^{\prime} & \text { if } u \in A_{i} \cup B_{i} \\ V_{u} & \text { otherwise }\end{cases}
$$

It can be checked that $V_{u}^{\prime}$ is disjoint from $V_{v}^{\prime}$ for every distinct $u, v \in V(T)$, that $L\left[V_{u}^{\prime}\right]$ is connected for every $u \in V(T)$, and that there is an edge between $V_{u}^{\prime}$ and $V_{v}^{\prime}$ in $L$ for every $u v \in E(T)$. We deduce that $M^{\prime}:=\left\{V_{u}^{\prime}: u \in V(T)\right\}$ is a model of $T$ in $L-J$,
a contradiction. Therefore, the set $I$ is a transversal of $K$, and $\tau_{T}(K) \leqslant \tau_{T}(L)$, as claimed.

Even though we will not use this fact, we would like to point out that Lemma 3.2 remains true more generally if the tree $T$ is replaced by a connected planar graph $H$ :

Lemma 3.3. For every connected planar graph $H$ there exists a computable function $b$ such that, for every graph $G$ having a separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of order $t$ with $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant b(t)$ such that $G_{1}$ has no $H$-minor, there exists a graph $G^{\prime}$ satisfying $\nu_{H}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\nu_{H}(G), \tau_{H}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=$ $\tau_{H}(G)$, and $\left|G^{\prime}\right|<|G|$.

This can be shown using the exact same proof as for Lemma 3.2, the only difference being that $G_{1}$ now has treewidth at most $c_{H}$ for some constant $c_{H}$ (by [27]), and thus the function $b(t)$ should now be defined as $b(t):=g\left(t, q, t, c_{H}\right)+1$.

## 4. Proof of Main Theorem

Let us start by recalling the overview of the proof of Theorem 1.1 given in the introduction for the special case where $\mathcal{F}$ consists of a single tree $T$. The proof is by induction on $|G|$; we show that one can always either apply the reduction operation described in Lemma 3.2 (in which case we are done by induction), or find a $T$-model in $G$ of size at most $c$. In the latter case, we delete all vertices of the model and apply induction on the remaining graph. The key step is thus proving that $T$-models of constant size can be found in $G$ when the reduction operation cannot be applied. This is achieved by Lemma 4.6, which is the main lemma of this section.

Our basic strategy for finding a $T$-model of constant size when the reduction operation cannot be applied to $G$ is to consider a ball $B$ of large but constant radius around an arbitrary vertex of $G$. If all vertices in $B$ have bounded degree then $B$ has bounded size, and it turns out it is not difficult to show that $B$ must contain $T$ as a minor (in which case we found a $T$-model of constant size) because otherwise the reduction operation could have been applied to $G$. However, difficulties arise when $B$ contains vertices of high degrees. This is why in Lemma 4.6 we do not directly try and find a $T$-model of constant size, but instead look for a subgraph of $G$ of constant size having some specified pathwidth $t$. This is enough, since by Theorem 2.1 every graph with pathwidth at least $|T|-1$ contains $T$ as a minor, and allows us to set up an inductive argument that handles vertices of high degree in $G$.

First we need to introduce a few definitions and results. Lemmas 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5 below are short lemmas that will be used in the proof of Lemma 4.6.

Given a graph $G$ and $t \in \mathbb{N}$, a pw-t-separation of $G$ is a separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ such that $G_{1}$ has a path decomposition $B_{1}, \ldots, B_{p}$ of width at most $t$ with $V\left(G_{1}\right) \cap V\left(G_{2}\right)=B_{1} \cup B_{p}$. Notice that the order of such a separation is at most $2 t+2$.

Lemma 4.1. Let $G$ be a graph of pathwidth at most $t$ with $k \geqslant 0$ marked vertices. Then there is a pw-t-separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ with $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant \frac{|G|-k(t+1)}{k+1}$ such that no vertex in $V\left(G_{1}\right)-V\left(G_{2}\right)$ is marked.

Proof. Consider a path decomposition $B_{1}, \ldots, B_{p}$ of $G$ with width at most $t$. If $k=0$, then $G_{1}:=G$ and $G_{2}:=G\left[B_{1} \cup B_{p}\right]$ defines the desired pw- $t$-separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$. Now assume $k \geqslant 1$.

For each marked vertex $v$, choose an arbitrary bag that contains $v$ and mark it. Let $m_{1}, \ldots, m_{\ell}$ denote the indices of the marked bags. Observe that $1 \leqslant \ell \leqslant k$ (note that $\ell<k$ if some bag is marked more than once). Also let $m_{0}:=1$ and $m_{\ell+1}:=p$.

For $1 \leqslant i<j \leqslant p$, let $Y_{i, j}:=\left(B_{i+1} \cup \cdots \cup B_{j-1}\right)-\left(B_{i} \cup B_{j}\right)$. Observe that $Y_{i, j}$ is disjoint from $Y_{i^{\prime}, j^{\prime}}$ when $j \leqslant i^{\prime}$ (this is a consequence of the axioms of path decompositions). In particular, the $\ell+1$ sets $Y_{1, m_{1}}, Y_{m_{1}, m_{2}}, \ldots, Y_{m_{\ell-1}, m_{\ell}}, Y_{m_{\ell}, p}$ are pairwise disjoint. Hence, among them there is a set $Y_{a, b}$ satisfying

$$
\left|Y_{a, b}\right| \geqslant \frac{\sum_{j=0}^{\ell}\left|Y_{m_{j}, m_{j+1}}\right|}{\ell+1} \geqslant \frac{|G|-\sum_{j=1}^{\ell}\left|B_{m_{j}}\right|}{\ell+1} \geqslant \frac{|G|-\ell(t+1)}{\ell+1} \geqslant \frac{|G|-k(t+1)}{k+1} .
$$

On the other hand, none of $Y_{1, m_{1}}, Y_{m_{1}, m_{2}}, \ldots, Y_{m_{\ell-1}, m_{\ell}}, Y_{m_{\ell}, p}$ contains a marked vertex (as follows again from the axioms of path decompositions). Thus $G_{1}:=G\left[Y_{a, b} \cup B_{a} \cup B_{b}\right]$ and $G_{2}:=G\left[V(G)-Y_{a, b}\right]$ define a separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ with $V\left(G_{1}\right) \cap V\left(G_{2}\right)=B_{a} \cup B_{b}$ such that $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant \frac{|G|-k(t+1)}{k+1}$ and $V\left(G_{1}\right)-V\left(G_{2}\right)\left(=Y_{a, b}\right)$ has no marked vertex. Since $B_{a}, B_{a+1}, \ldots, B_{b}$ is a path decomposition of $G_{1}$ with width at most $t$, we deduce that $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ is the desired pw-t-separation of $G$.

Lemma 4.2. Let $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ be a pw-t-separation of a graph $G$ with $k \geqslant 0$ marked vertices, and let $\ell$ be an integer satisfying $1 \leqslant \ell \leqslant\left\lceil\left|G_{1}\right| /(k+1)\right\rceil$. Then there exists a pw-tseparation $\left(G_{1}^{\prime}, G_{2}^{\prime}\right)$ of $G$ with $G_{1}^{\prime} \subseteq G_{1}, G_{2} \subseteq G_{2}^{\prime}$, and $\left|G_{1}^{\prime}\right|=\ell$, such that no vertex in $V\left(G_{1}^{\prime}\right)-V\left(G_{2}^{\prime}\right)$ is marked.

Proof. Case 1: $\ell \leqslant t+1$. Let $Y$ be an arbitrary subset of $\ell$ vertices of $G_{1}$, let $G_{1}^{\prime}:=G[Y]$ and let $G_{2}^{\prime}:=G$. Then $V\left(G_{1}^{\prime}\right)-V\left(G_{2}^{\prime}\right)$ is empty and $G_{1}^{\prime}$ has a trivial path decomposition of width at most $t$ consisting of a single bag $B_{1}:=Y$. Hence ( $G_{1}^{\prime}, G_{2}^{\prime}$ ) is a pw- $t$-separation of $G$ as desired.

Case 2: $\ell>t+1$. Let $B_{1}, \ldots, B_{p}$ be a path decomposition of $G_{1}$ of width at most $t$ such that $B_{1} \cup B_{p}=V\left(G_{1}\right) \cap V\left(G_{2}\right)$. We may assume that $\left|B_{i} \triangle B_{i+1}\right|=1$ for each $i \in[1, p-1]$, by modifying the path decomposition if necessary (observe that this can be done without changing the first and last bags).

Mark bags $B_{1}, B_{p}$, and for each marked vertex $v$ mark an arbitrarily chosen bag that contains $v$ (thus the same bag can be chosen several times). Let $q$ be the total number of marked bags, and let $m_{1}, \ldots, m_{q}$ denote the indices of these bags, in order. (Thus $m_{1}=1$ and $m_{q}=p$.) Since $\left|B_{1}\right| \leqslant t+1$ and $\ell>t+1$, it follows that $p \geqslant 2$, and hence $q \geqslant 2$. Let $Y_{a, b}:=B_{a} \cup B_{a+1} \cup \cdots \cup B_{b}$ for $1 \leqslant a<b \leqslant p$. Since $Y_{m_{1}, m_{2}} \cup \cdots \cup Y_{m_{q-1}, m_{q}}=V\left(G_{1}\right)$ and $q-1 \leqslant k+1$, there exists $j \in[1, q-1]$ such that

$$
\left|Y_{m_{j}, m_{j+1}}\right| \geqslant\left\lceil\frac{\left|G_{1}\right|}{q-1}\right\rceil \geqslant\left\lceil\frac{\left|G_{1}\right|}{k+1}\right\rceil \geqslant \ell .
$$

Now, since $\left|B_{i} \triangle B_{i+1}\right|=1$ for each $i \in[1, p-1]$ and since $\ell>\left|B_{m_{j}}\right|$, there exists an index $b \in\left[m_{j}+1, m_{j+1}\right]$ such that $\left|Y_{m_{j}, b}\right|=\ell$. It follows from the axioms of a path decomposition that no vertex in $Y_{m_{j}, b}-\left(B_{m_{j}} \cup B_{b}\right)$ is marked. Therefore, setting
$G_{1}^{\prime}:=G\left[Y_{m_{j}, b}\right]$ and $G_{2}^{\prime}:=G-\left(Y_{m_{j}, b}-\left(B_{m_{j}} \cup B_{b}\right)\right)$, and using that $B_{m_{j}}, \ldots, B_{b}$ is a path decomposition of $G_{1}^{\prime}$ of width at most $t$, we deduce that ( $G_{1}^{\prime}, G_{2}^{\prime}$ ) is a pw-t-separation of $G$ with the required properties.

With a slight abuse of notation, we simply write $(G, v)$ to denote the rooted graph $(G, R)$ where $R$ consists only of the vertex $v$. The height of a rooted tree $(T, v)$ is the maximum length of a path from $v$ to a leaf, where the length of a path is the number of its edges. (Thus the height of $(T, v)$ is zero if $|T|=1$.) For $u \in V(T)$, the notions of parent, ancestors, children, descendants of $u$ in $(T, v)$ are defined as expected. When the root $v$ is clear from the context, we simply denote by $T_{u}$ the subtree of $(T, v)$ induced by $u$ and all its descendants. For $h \geqslant 1$, the complete binary tree of height $h$, denoted $\mathcal{B}_{h}$, is the unique rooted tree of height $h$ where the root has degree 2, every other non-leaf vertex has degree 3 , and every path from the root to a leaf has length exactly $h$. It is known, and not difficult to prove, that the pathwidth of $\mathcal{B}_{h}$ equals $h$.

Lemma 4.3. Let $(T, v)$ be a rooted tree of height $h$ and maximum degree $\Delta$. If $(T, v)$ does not contain $\mathcal{B}_{k+1}$ as a (rooted) minor, then $|T| \leqslant(h+1)^{k+1}(\Delta+1)^{k+1}$.

Proof. The proof is by induction on $k$. If $k=0$, then the tree $T$ is a path, and thus satisfies $|T|=h+1 \leqslant(h+1)(\Delta+1)$. For the inductive step, assume $k \geqslant 1$. We may assume that $\mathcal{B}_{k}$ is a minor of $(T, v)$, because otherwise we are done by induction. Let $u \in V(T)$ be a vertex such that $\left(T_{u}, u\right)$ contains $\mathcal{B}_{k}$ as a minor and $u$ is at maximum distance from $v$ in $T$. Let $q$ denote that distance. Let $u_{1}, \ldots, u_{\ell}$ denote the children of $u$. Observe that $\ell \geqslant 2$ since $\left(T_{u}, u\right)$ has a $\mathcal{B}_{k}$-minor, $k \geqslant 1$, and $q$ is maximum. Let $v_{1}, \ldots, v_{q+1}$ be the vertices on the path from $v$ to $u$ in $T$, in order. Thus $v_{1}=v$ and $v_{q+1}=u$. For each $i \in[1, q]$, let $w_{i, 1}, \ldots, w_{i, a_{i}}$ denote the children of $v_{i}$ in $T$ that are distinct from $v_{i+1}$ (note that possibly $a_{i}=0$ ).

We claim that, for each $i \in[1, q]$ and $j \in\left[1, a_{i}\right]$, the rooted tree $\left(T_{w_{i, j}}, w_{i, j}\right)$ has no $\mathcal{B}_{k}$ minor. Indeed, otherwise a model of $\mathcal{B}_{k}$ in $\left(T_{w_{i, j}}, w_{i, j}\right)$ could be combined with a model of $\mathcal{B}_{k}$ in $\left(T_{v_{i+1}}, v_{i+1}\right)$ (which exists, by the definition of $u$ ) and the $v_{1}-v_{i}$ path in $T$ to give a model of $\mathcal{B}_{k+1}$ in $(T, v)$, a contradiction. By induction, we thus have $\left|T_{w_{i, j}}\right| \leqslant h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k}$, since the height of $\left(T_{w_{i, j}}, w_{i, j}\right)$ is at most $h-1$.

By the definition of $u$, the rooted tree $\left(T_{u_{i}}, u_{i}\right)$ has no $\mathcal{B}_{k}$ minor either for each $i \in[1, \ell]$. (Recall that $u_{1}, \ldots, u_{\ell}$ are the children of $u$.) Hence $\left|T_{u_{i}}\right| \leqslant h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k}$ by induction. It follows

$$
\begin{aligned}
|T| & =q+1+\sum_{i=1}^{q} \sum_{j=1}^{a_{i}}\left|T_{w_{i, j}}\right|+\sum_{i=1}^{\ell}\left|T_{u_{i}}\right| \\
& \leqslant h+1+\left[\sum_{i=1}^{q} \sum_{j=1}^{a_{i}} h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k}\right]+\ell h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k} \\
& \leqslant h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k}+h(\Delta+1) h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k}+\Delta h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k} \\
& =h^{k+1}(\Delta+1)^{k+1}+h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k+1} \\
& \leqslant(h+1)^{k+1}(\Delta+1)^{k+1}
\end{aligned}
$$

as desired. (In the second inequality, we used that $h+1 \leqslant h^{k}(\Delta+1)^{k}$, which follows from the fact that $h, k \geqslant 1$ and $\Delta \geqslant 2$.)

Lemma 4.4. If $(T, v)$ is a rooted tree on $t$ vertices and $(G, w)$ is a connected rooted graph with pathwidth at least $2 t-2$, then $(G, w)$ contains $(T, v)$ as a minor.

Proof. Let $\left(T^{\prime}, v^{\prime}\right)$ be a copy of $(T, v)$. Let $T^{*}$ be the (unrooted) tree obtained from the disjoint union of $T$ and $T^{\prime}$ by identifying $v$ and $v^{\prime}$. Thus $T^{*}$ has $2 t-1$ vertices. Since $G$ has pathwidth at least $2 t-2$, it contains a $T^{*}$-minor (by Theorem 2.1), and hence has a model of $T^{*}$. Since $G$ is connected, we may assume that every vertex of $G$ is in a branch set of this model. Let $B_{v}$ denote the branch set of vertex $v=v^{\prime}$. Exchanging $T$ and $T^{\prime}$ if necessary, we may assume that the root $w$ of $(G, w)$ is in a branch set corresponding to a vertex from $T$. Thus we can find a path $P$ in $G$ with one endpoint being $w$ and the other endpoint in $B_{v}$ such that $P$ avoids all branch sets of vertices in $V\left(T^{\prime}\right)-\left\{v^{\prime}\right\}$. Now, replacing the branch set $B_{v}$ by $B_{v} \cup V(P)$ and taking all branch sets corresponding to vertices of $T^{\prime}$ distinct from $v^{\prime}$, we obtain a model of $\left(T^{\prime}, v^{\prime}\right)$ in $(G, w)$. Therefore, $(G, w)$ contains $(T, v)$ as a minor.

The following lemma is well known; a proof is included for completeness (see Corollary 3.1 in [10] for a similar result).

Lemma 4.5. Let $G_{1}, G_{2}, G_{3}$ be three connected graphs, each with pathwidth at least $k$, and let $v_{i}$ be an arbitrary vertex of $G_{i}$, for $i=1,2,3$. Let $G$ be the graph obtained from the disjoint union of $G_{1}, G_{2}, G_{3}$ by adding a new vertex $v$ adjacent to $v_{1}, v_{2}, v_{3}$. Then $G$ has pathwidth at least $k+1$.

Proof. Arguing by contradiction, assume $G$ has a path decomposition $B_{1}, \ldots, B_{p}$ of width at most $k$. For every $w \in V(G)$, let $\left[\ell_{w}, r_{w}\right]$ denote the interval of indices $j$ such that $w \in B_{j}$. For each $i \in[1,3]$, let $I_{i}:=\cup\left\{\left[\ell_{w}, r_{w}\right]: w \in V\left(G_{i}\right)\right\}$. Since $G_{i}$ is connected, $I_{i}$ is again an interval; we denote by $\ell_{i}$ and $r_{i}$ its left and right endpoints, respectively. Reindexing $G_{1}, G_{2}, G_{3}$ if necessary, we may assume that $\ell_{1} \leqslant \ell_{2}$ and $r_{2} \leqslant r_{3}$. Since $v v_{i} \in E(G)$, it follows that $I_{i} \cap\left[\ell_{v}, r_{v}\right] \neq \varnothing$ for each $i \in[1,3]$. This implies that $I_{1} \cup I_{3} \cup\left[\ell_{v}, r_{v}\right]$ is again an interval, and this interval contains $I_{2}$. Hence, every bag $B_{j}(j \in[1, p])$ that includes a vertex of $V\left(G_{2}\right)$ contains also at least one vertex from $V(G)-V\left(G_{2}\right)$. Therefore, $B_{1} \cap V\left(G_{2}\right), \ldots, B_{p} \cap V\left(G_{2}\right)$ is a path decomposition of $G_{2}$ of width at most $k-1$, a contradiction.

The next lemma is our main tool. Informally, it shows that every connected graph $G$ with pathwidth at least $t$ and no pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ with $\left|G_{1}\right|$ "big" has a connected subgraph $G^{\prime}$ of constant size with pathwidth at least $t$. It turns out that a slightly stronger statement is easier to prove by induction, namely that for every vertex $w$ of $G$ one can find such a subgraph $G^{\prime}$ containing it. We note that the vertex $w$ will be an arbitrary vertex when this lemma is used in the proof of Theorem 1.1.

Lemma 4.6. There exists a computable function $f: \mathbb{N} \times \mathbb{N} \rightarrow \mathbb{N}$ such that for every $t, r \in \mathbb{N}$, every connected graph $G$ of pathwidth at least $t$, and every vertex $w \in V(G)$, at least one of the following holds:
(a) there exists a connected subgraph $G^{\prime}$ of $G$ with $w \in V\left(G^{\prime}\right)$ such that $G^{\prime}$ has pathwidth at least $t$ and $\left|G^{\prime}\right| \leqslant f(t, r)$,
(b) there exists a pw-( $t-1)$-separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ with $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant r$.

Proof. The proof is by induction on $t$. For $t=0$, the vertex $w$ itself provides a connected subgraph $G^{\prime}$ of $G$ of pathwidth 0 , and thus the claim holds with $f(0, r):=1$. Now assume $t \geqslant 1$. If $r \leqslant 1$, letting $G_{1}$ be the graph induced by an arbitrary vertex of $G$ and letting $G_{2}:=G$, we obtain a pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ with $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant r$. Thus we may also assume $r \geqslant 2$.

Let

$$
\begin{aligned}
& r_{1}:=(r+t-1)+(r+t) 2 t+r \\
& r_{2}:=(r+t-1)\left(1+f\left(t-1, r_{1}\right)\right)+(r+t) 2 t+r \\
& r_{3}:=(r+t-1)\left(1+f\left(t-1, r_{1}\right)+f\left(t-1, r_{2}\right)\right)+(r+t) 2 t+r
\end{aligned}
$$

Let $\Delta, \varepsilon$, and $d$ be constants defined as follows:

$$
\begin{aligned}
\Delta & :=(r+t)\left(\sum_{i=1}^{3} f\left(t-1, r_{i}\right)+2 t+1\right)+r-1 \\
\varepsilon & :=\frac{1}{2 r+t} \\
d & :=\max \left\{\frac{2 t \ln (\Delta+1)}{\ln (1+\varepsilon)},\left(\frac{2 t}{\ln (1+\varepsilon)}\right)^{2}\right\}
\end{aligned}
$$

We will prove the claim with

$$
f(t, r):=\left\lceil\max \left\{\Delta^{d+1}, \Delta+d+1\right\}\right\rceil
$$

(We remark that the ceiling is there only to ensure that $f(t, r)$ is an integer.) We may assume that $|G|>f(t, r)$, since otherwise we are done with $G^{\prime}=G$.

Case 1: Every vertex at distance at most $d$ from $w$ has degree at most $\Delta$. For $i=0,1, \ldots, d$, let $H_{i}$ be the subgraph of $G$ induced by all vertices at distance at most $i$ from $w$, and let $J_{i}$ be an arbitrary breadth-first search tree of $H_{i}$ from $w$. Since $\left|H_{d}\right| \leqslant \Delta^{d+1} \leqslant f(t, r)<|G|$, we deduce that $V\left(H_{i}\right)-V\left(H_{i-1}\right)$ is not empty for each $i \in[1, d]$. The graph $H_{d}$ is connected, includes the vertex $w$, and has at most $f(t, r)$ vertices. Thus we are done if the pathwidth of $H_{d}$ is at least $t$. So let us assume that $H_{d}$ has pathwidth at most $t-1$ (and thus, in particular, $J_{d}$ has pathwidth at most $t-1$ ).

The tree $\mathcal{B}_{t}$, which has pathwidth $t$, cannot be a minor of $\left(J_{d}, w\right)$. Hence we have

$$
\begin{equation*}
\left|H_{d}\right|=\left|J_{d}\right| \leqslant(d+1)^{t}(\Delta+1)^{t} \tag{1}
\end{equation*}
$$

by Lemma 4.3.
By the definition of $d$,

$$
d \geqslant \frac{d}{2}+\frac{\sqrt{d} \ln (d+1)}{2} \geqslant \frac{t \ln (\Delta+1)}{\ln (1+\varepsilon)}+\frac{t \ln (d+1)}{\ln (1+\varepsilon)}
$$

which implies $(1+\varepsilon)^{d} \geqslant(d+1)^{t}(\Delta+1)^{t}$. Thus, if $\left|H_{i}\right|>(1+\varepsilon)\left|H_{i-1}\right|$ for each $i \in[1, d]$, then

$$
\left|H_{d}\right|>(1+\varepsilon)^{d} \geqslant(d+1)^{t}(\Delta+1)^{t}
$$

contradicting (1). Hence there exists $j \in[1, d]$ such that $\left|H_{j}\right| \leqslant(1+\varepsilon)\left|H_{j-1}\right|$. Mark all $k:=\left|H_{j}\right|-\left|H_{j-1}\right|$ vertices of $H_{j}$ that are in $V\left(H_{j}\right)-V\left(H_{j-1}\right)$. We have $k \geqslant 1$, since $V\left(H_{j}\right)-V\left(H_{j-1}\right)$ is not empty, and also $k \leqslant \varepsilon\left|H_{j-1}\right| \leqslant \varepsilon\left|H_{j}\right|$. Since the pathwidth of $H_{j}$ is at most that of $H_{d}$, by Lemma 4.1 there is a pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(L_{1}, L_{2}\right)$ of $H_{j}$ such that no vertex in $V\left(L_{1}\right)-V\left(L_{2}\right)$ is marked and such that

$$
\left|L_{1}\right| \geqslant \frac{\left|H_{j}\right|-k t}{k+1} \geqslant \frac{\left|H_{j}\right|-\varepsilon t\left|H_{j}\right|}{2 k} \geqslant \frac{1-\varepsilon t}{2 \varepsilon}=r
$$

Now, the fact that no vertex in $V\left(L_{1}\right)-V\left(L_{2}\right)$ is marked implies that $V\left(L_{1}\right)-V\left(L_{2}\right) \subseteq$ $V\left(H_{j-1}\right)$, and hence no vertex in $V\left(L_{1}\right)-V\left(L_{2}\right)$ is adjacent in $G$ to a vertex in $V(G)-$ $V\left(L_{1}\right)$. Therefore, $G_{1}:=L_{1}$ and $G_{2}:=G-\left(V\left(L_{1}\right)-V\left(L_{2}\right)\right)$ defines a pw- $(t-1)$ separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ with $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant r$. This concludes the proof of Case 1.

Case 2: Some vertex at distance at most $d$ from $w$ has degree more than $\Delta$. Let $x$ be such a vertex and let $x_{1}, \ldots, x_{p}$ denote its neighbors, where $p \geqslant \Delta+1$.

First we prove a few easy claims.
Claim 4.7. If there exists a connected subgraph $H$ of $G$ of pathwidth at least $t$ such that $|H| \leqslant f(t, r)-d$ and $x \in V(H)$, then the lemma holds.

Proof. Let $P$ be a shortest $w-x$ path in $G$ and let $G^{\prime}:=G[V(H) \cup V(P)]$. Then $G^{\prime}$ is connected and has pathwidth at least $t$; moreover, $w \in V\left(G^{\prime}\right)$ and $\left|G^{\prime}\right| \leqslant|H|+d \leqslant$ $f(t, r)$.

Claim 4.8. If there exists $X \subseteq V(G)$ with $|X| \leqslant \frac{f(t, r)-d-r}{r+t}-2 t$ such that $G[X]$ is connected, $x \in X$, and $H:=G-X$ has a pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(H_{1}, H_{2}\right)$ with $\left|H_{1}\right| \geqslant$ $(r+t-1)|X|+(r+t) 2 t+r$, then the lemma holds.

Proof. Using Lemma 4.2 with $k=0$ and $\ell=(r+t-1)|X|+(r+t) 2 t+r$, we may assume that the pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(H_{1}, H_{2}\right)$ of $H$ has been chosen so that $\left|H_{1}\right|=$ $(r+t-1)|X|+(r+t) 2 t+r$.

Let $J:=G\left[V\left(H_{1}\right) \cup X\right]$. If $J$ has pathwidth at least $t$, then since $H_{1}$ has pathwidth at most $t-1$ there is a unique component $J^{\prime}$ of $J$ of pathwidth at least $t$, namely the one containing $X$ (recall that $G[X]$ is connected). Since $x \in V\left(J^{\prime}\right)$ and $\left|J^{\prime}\right| \leqslant|J|=$ $\left|H_{1}\right|+|X|=(r+t)|X|+(r+t) 2 t+r \leqslant f(t, r)-d$, we are done by Claim 4.7. Thus we may assume that $J$ has pathwidth at most $t-1$.

Let $Y:=X \cup\left(V\left(H_{1}\right) \cap V\left(H_{2}\right)\right)$ and mark all vertices of $J$ that are in $Y$. Since $|J|=$ $(r+t)|X|+(r+t) 2 t+r \geqslant(r+t)|Y|+r$, by Lemma 4.1 there is a pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(J_{1}, J_{2}\right)$ of $J$ with $\left|J_{1}\right| \geqslant r$ such that $Y \subseteq V\left(J_{2}\right)$. Observe that no vertex in $V\left(J_{1}\right)-Y$ is adjacent in $G$ to a vertex in $V(G)-V\left(J_{1}\right)$. Hence, $G_{1}:=J_{1}$ and $G_{2}:=G-\left(V\left(J_{1}\right)-Y\right)$ defines a pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ with $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant r$.

Claim 4.9. If there exists $X \subseteq V(G)$ with $|X| \leqslant 1+\sum_{i=1}^{3} f\left(t-1, r_{i}\right)$ such that $G[X]$ is connected, $x \in X$, and every component of $G-X$ that includes some vertex in $\left\{x_{1}, \ldots, x_{p}\right\}$ has pathwidth at most $t-1$, then the lemma holds.

Proof. Let $q$ be the number of neighbors of $x$ that are not in $X$; let us assume without loss of generality that these neighbors are $x_{1}, \ldots, x_{q}$. Let $H$ be the union of all components of $G-X$ that include at least one of these vertices. Thus $H$ has pathwidth at most $t-1$ by the assumption of the claim. Since $|H| \geqslant q \geqslant p-|X| \geqslant \Delta+1-|X| \geqslant$ $(r+t-1)|X|+(r+t) 2 t+r$, by Lemma 4.1 there is a pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(H_{1}, H_{2}\right)$ of $H$ with $\left|H_{1}\right| \geqslant(r+t-1)|X|+(r+t) 2 t+r$. The claim follows then from Claim 4.8, since $|X| \leqslant \sum_{i=1}^{3} f\left(t-1, r_{i}\right)+1 \leqslant \frac{f(t, r)-d-r}{r+t}-2 t$.

Let $X_{0}:=\{x\}$. Apply the following argument first with $j=1$, then $j=2$, then $j=3$. Since $\left|X_{j-1}\right| \leqslant 1+\sum_{i=1}^{j-1} f\left(t-1, r_{i}\right)$, the graph $G\left[X_{j-1}\right]$ is connected, and $x \in X_{j-1}$, by Claim 4.9 we may assume that there is a component $C$ of $G-X_{j-1}$ with pathwidth at least $t$ that includes a neighbor $x_{n_{j}}$ of $x$ (otherwise we are done). By induction (on $t$ ), either $C$ has a connected subgraph $H_{j}$ of pathwidth at least $t-1$ with $\left|H_{j}\right| \leqslant f\left(t-1, r_{j}\right)$ and $x_{n_{j}} \in V\left(H_{j}\right)$, or there is a pw- $(t-2)$-separation $\left(C_{1}, C_{2}\right)$ of $C$ with $\left|C_{1}\right| \geqslant r_{j}$. In the second case, $\left(C_{1}, C_{2}^{\prime}\right)$ is a pw- $(t-2)$-separation of $G-X_{j-1}$, where $C_{2}^{\prime}$ is the union of $C_{2}$ with all components of $G-X_{j-1}$ distinct from $C$. Since $\left|X_{j-1}\right| \leqslant 1+\sum_{i=1}^{j-1} f\left(t-1, r_{i}\right) \leqslant \frac{f(t, r)-d-r}{r+t}-2 t$ and by the definition of $r_{j}$ we have $\left|C_{1}\right| \geqslant r_{j} \geqslant(r+t-1)\left|X_{j-1}\right|+(r+t) 2 t+r$, we are done by Claim 4.8. In the first case, let $X_{j}:=X_{j-1} \cup V\left(H_{j}\right)$. Observe that $\left|X_{j}\right| \leqslant 1+\sum_{i=1}^{j} f\left(t-1, r_{i}\right)$ and that $G\left[X_{j}\right]$ is connected (because of the vertex $x$ ).

Now that the sets $X_{0}, X_{1}, X_{2}, X_{3}$ are defined, let $P$ be a shortest path in $G$ from $w$ to $X_{3}$. Thus $|P| \leqslant d+1$, since $x \in X_{3}$ and $x$ is at distance at most $d$ from $w$ in $G$. Since $H_{i}$ is connected and has pathwidth at least $t-1$ for each $i \in[1,3]$, and since $H_{1}, H_{2}, H_{3}$ are pairwise vertex-disjoint, the graph $G\left[X_{3}\right]$ has pathwidth at least $t$ by Lemma 4.5. It follows that $G^{\prime}:=G\left[X_{3} \cup V(P)\right]$ is a connected subgraph of $G$ that includes $w$, with pathwidth at least $t$, and satisfying $\left|G^{\prime}\right| \leqslant\left|X_{3}\right|+|P|-1 \leqslant 1+\sum_{i=1}^{3} f\left(t-1, r_{i}\right)+d \leqslant f(t, r)$. This concludes the proof.

Now we turn to the proof of Theorem 1.1.

Proof of Theorem 1.1. The proof is in two steps: First we prove the theorem in the special case where $\mathcal{F}$ consists of a single tree, which we then use to handle the general case.

First consider the case where $\mathcal{F}=\{T\}$, where $T$ is a tree on $t$ vertices. Let $r:=\max \{b(i)$ : $0 \leqslant i \leqslant 2 t-2\}$, where $b$ is the function from Lemma 3.2. Let $G$ be an arbitrary graph. Let $c:=\max \{1,2(t-1), r, f(t-1, r)\}$, where $f$ is the function from Lemma 4.6. We will show that $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ by induction on $|G|$. If $|G|=1$ then the claim obviously holds since $c \geqslant 1$. Now assume that $|G|>1$. Since $T$ is connected, we have that $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=\nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G_{1}\right)+\cdots+\nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G_{\ell}\right)$ and $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=\tau_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G_{1}\right)+\cdots+\tau_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G_{\ell}\right)$, where $G_{1}, \ldots, G_{\ell}$ are the components of $G$. We may thus assume that $G$ is connected, since otherwise we are done by applying induction on its components.

If the pathwidth of $G$ is at most $t-2$, then we directly obtain that $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant 2(t-1)$. $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$ by Lemma 2.3. Hence assume that $G$ has pathwidth at least $t-1$.

Apply Lemma 4.6 on $G$ (with $w$ an arbitrary vertex of $G$ ) to obtain one of the two possible outcomes. If the outcome is a pw- $(t-2)$-separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$ with $\left|G_{1}\right| \geqslant r$ then by Lemma 4.2 (with no marked vertices) we may assume that $\left|G_{1}\right|=r \leqslant c$. If $G_{1}$ contains $T$ as a minor then $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G-V\left(G_{1}\right)\right) \leqslant \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)-1$. By induction, there is an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal $Y$ of $G-V\left(G_{1}\right)$ of size at most $c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G-V\left(G_{1}\right)\right) \leqslant c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)-c$, and hence $V\left(G_{1}\right) \cup Y$ is an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of $G$ of size at most $c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$. If $G_{1}$ has no $T$-minor, then since $q:=\left|V\left(G_{1}\right) \cap V\left(G_{2}\right)\right| \leqslant 2 t-2$ and $r \geqslant b(q)$, by Lemma 3.2 there is a graph $G^{\prime}$ with $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G), \tau_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G^{\prime}\right)=\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$, and $\left|G^{\prime}\right|<|G|$. Since by induction $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G^{\prime}\right) \leqslant c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G^{\prime}\right)$, we are done in this case.

Suppose now that the outcome of Lemma 4.6 is a subgraph $G^{\prime}$ of $G$ of pathwidth at least $t-1$ with $\left|G^{\prime}\right| \leqslant f(t-1, r) \leqslant c$. Then, since $G^{\prime}$ contains $T$ as a minor (by Theorem 2.1), $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G-V\left(G^{\prime}\right)\right) \leqslant \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)-1$. By induction, there is an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal $Y$ of $G-V\left(G^{\prime}\right)$ of size at most $c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}\left(G-V\left(G^{\prime}\right)\right) \leqslant c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)-c$, and hence $V\left(G^{\prime}\right) \cup Y$ is an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of $G$ of size at most $c \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)$. This concludes the proof of the case where $\mathcal{F}$ consists of a single tree.

Now let $\mathcal{F}$ be an arbitrary finite set of graphs containing a forest $F$. Let $q:=|\mathcal{F}|$ and let $r$ denote the maximum number of components of a graph in $\mathcal{F}$. Let $t:=|F|$. Let $T$ be an arbitrary tree obtained from $F$ by adding edges. By the proof above, there is a constant $c^{\prime}$ such that $\tau_{T}(G) \leqslant c^{\prime} \cdot \nu_{T}(G)$ for every graph $G$. Using Lemma 2.4, we obtain

$$
\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant \tau_{T}(G)+2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant c^{\prime} \cdot \nu_{T}(G)+2 q r t \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G) \leqslant\left(c^{\prime}+2 q r t\right) \cdot \nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)
$$

for every graph $G$. Therefore, the theorem holds with $c:=c^{\prime}+2 q r t$.

We remark that, while Corollary 1.2 was deduced from Theorem 1.1 and the computability of the obstruction set for graphs of pathwidth at most $t$ (see [1, 22]), it can alternatively be derived directly from Lemma 4.6.

## 5. Algorithmic Implications

While the focus of this article is not algorithms, we would nevertheless like to point out a few algorithmic implications of our results.

First, the proof of Theorem 1.1 can be turned into a polynomial-time algorithm that, for fixed $\mathcal{F}$, computes in polynomial time an $\mathcal{F}$-packing and an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of a given input graph $G$ differing in size by at most a factor $c$. This is explained in part by the fact that the graph $\left(G^{\prime}, R\right)$ in Lemma 3.1 can be computed in polynomial time using standard monadic second-order logic techniques (as done in [18], for instance), and the same is true for $G^{\prime}$ in Lemma 3.2. Moreover, it is not difficult to extend Lemma 3.2 to obtain that, given an $\mathcal{F}$-packing in $G^{\prime}$, one can compute an $\mathcal{F}$-packing in $G$ of the same size in polynomial time, and similarly given an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of $G^{\prime}$, one can compute an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal in $G$ of no larger size in polynomial time. (This is needed when applying
a reduction operation in the proof of Theorem 1.1, since after having obtained an $\mathcal{F}$ packing and an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal of a reduced graph $G^{\prime}$, we have to "lift back" these to the input graph $G$.)

Furthermore, the outcomes of Lemmas 4.1 and 4.2 can easily be computed in polynomial time (for fixed $t$ ). The same is true for Lemma 4.6 (for fixed $t$ and $r$ ), as its main computational steps are (i) breadth-first searches, (ii) calls to Lemmas 4.1 and 4.2, and (iii) tests of whether a graph has pathwidth at most $i$ for some $i \leqslant t$ (which can be done in linear time when $t$ is fixed, see [3]), and each is performed at most linearly-many times (in fact, only a constant number of times for (i) and (ii)).

Since the proof of Theorem 1.1 makes at most linearly-many calls to Lemmas 3.2, 4.6, and 2.3 , it remains to show that Lemma 2.3 can be realized in polynomial time. While the proof itself does not directly yield such an algorithm, we note that the problem of finding a maximum $\mathcal{F}$-packing and that of finding a minimum $\mathcal{F}$-transversal can both be defined in monadic second-order logic. Hence, by Courcelle's Theorem [4], both problems can be solved in linear time on graphs of bounded pathwidth, and therefore an $\mathcal{F}$-packing and an $\mathcal{F}$-transversal such as promised by Lemma 2.3 can be found in linear time.

Second, a closer inspection shows that the running time of the algorithm sketched above is not only polynomial for fixed $\mathcal{F}$, but is moreover of the form $O\left(g(\mathcal{F}) \cdot n^{\alpha}\right)$ for $n$-vertex graphs, where $g$ is a function depending only on $\mathcal{F}$, and $\alpha$ is a constant independent of $\mathcal{F}$. Building on this observation we now sketch a modification of the proof of Theorem 1.1 to obtain a single-exponential fixed-parameter tractable (FPT) algorithm for the problem of computing a minimum-size $\mathcal{P}_{t}$-transversal of a graph when parameterized by the size of the optimum, where $\mathcal{P}_{t}$ is the finite set of minimal excluded minors for the class of graphs with pathwidth strictly less than $t$. Here single-exponential FPT means that the running time of the algorithm is $O\left(d^{k} \cdot n^{\alpha}\right)$ on instances $G$ with $\tau_{\mathcal{P}_{t}}(G)=k$, where $d$ is a constant depending only on $t$, and as before $\alpha$ is an absolute constant. Finding such an algorithm was posed as an open problem by Philip et al. [25], who gave one for the $t=2$ case.

Given a pair $(G, k)$, our (recursive) FPT algorithm either finds a $\mathcal{P}_{t}$-transversal (abbreviated transversal) of $G$ of size at most $k$, or correctly answers that there is no such transversal. The algorithm can be briefly described as follows (leaving some details to the reader): (I) If $G$ is not connected, let $G_{1}, \ldots, G_{p}$ denote its components, and for each $i \in[1, p]$ and $\ell \in[0, k]$ recurse on $\left(G_{i}, \ell\right)$. Given the results of these recursive calls, decide whether $G$ has a transversal of size at most $k .^{\ddagger}$ (II) If $G$ is connected but has pathwidth strictly less than $t$, return an empty transversal. (III) If $G$ is connected with pathwidth at least $t$, apply Lemma 4.6 on $G$ (with $r$ defined as in the proof of Theorem 1.1). (III.a) If the outcome of Lemma 4.6 is a pw- $(t-1)$-separation $\left(G_{1}, G_{2}\right)$ of $G$, apply Lemma 3.2 to obtain a smaller graph $G^{\prime}$ and recurse on $\left(G^{\prime}, k\right)$; if $G^{\prime}$ has no transversal of size at most $k$ then so does $G$, otherwise "lift" the transversal of $G^{\prime}$ found back to $G$ and return it. (III.b) If the outcome of Lemma 4.6 is a connected subgraph $G^{\prime}$ of $G$ with pathwdith at least $t$ and at most $f(t, r)$ vertices, branch on every non-empty subset of $V\left(G^{\prime}\right)$ of size at most $k$, namely, for every such subset $Y$, recurse on $(G-Y, k-|Y|)$. Observe that

[^3]every transversal of $G$ contains at least one vertex of $G^{\prime}$. If a transversal of $G-Y$ of size at most $k-|Y|$ is found for some subset $Y$, return the union of that transversal with $Y$. If no transversal is found for any of the subsets $Y$, then $G$ has no transversal of size at most $k$.

It should be clear that the algorithm finds a transversal of size at most $k$ if there is one. The running time is $O\left(d^{k} \cdot n^{\alpha}\right)$ with $d:=2^{f(t, r)}$ and $\alpha$ some absolute constant, since we perform at most $d$ recursive calls in a branching step, and in each one the parameter is decreased by at least one.

We conclude this section by mentioning that the optimization problem of finding a minimum $\mathcal{F}$-transversal in a graph has been considered for various families $\mathcal{F}$ in several recent works, see $[5,6,12,14,19,21,25]$.

Very recently, and independently of this work, Fomin et al. [13] obtained a singleexponential FPT algorithm for the minimum $\mathcal{F}$-transversal problem for every finite set $\mathcal{F}$ of connected graphs containing at least one planar graph. Since all graphs in $\mathcal{P}_{t}$ are connected, this includes in particular a single-exponential FPT algorithm for finding a minimum-size $\mathcal{P}_{t}$-transversal. The authors of [13] also presented a randomized (Monte Carlo) constant-factor approximation algorithm for finding a minimum-size $\mathcal{F}$-transversal when $\mathcal{F}$ is a finite set of graphs containing at least one planar graph (here the graphs in $\mathcal{F}$ are not assumed to be connected). We note that, while our constant-factor approximation algorithm described at the beginning of this section is restricted to the case where $\mathcal{F}$ contains a forest, it is fully deterministic, and provides an $\mathcal{F}$-packing of size within a constant factor of optimal as well.

## 6. An Open Problem

For a finite set $\mathcal{F}$ of graphs containing a forest, let

$$
\rho(\mathcal{F}):=\sup \frac{\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)}{\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)}
$$

over all graphs $G$ with $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)>0$. By Theorem 1.1 this quantity is well defined. When $\mathcal{F}$ consists of a single forest $F$, we simply write $\rho(F)$ for $\rho(\mathcal{F})$. For $t \geqslant 1$, let $\phi(t):=$ $\max \{\rho(F): F$ forest, $|F|=t\}$.

A natural next step would be to investigate the order of magnitude of $\phi(t)$. Our proof gives an upper bound which is exponential in $t$, and almost certainly far from the truth. In particular, it would be interesting to decide whether $\phi(t)$ is polynomial in $t$. As for lower bounds, we have that $\rho(F) \geqslant|F|$ for every forest $F$, as can be seen by taking $G$ to be a large complete graph, and hence $\phi(t) \geqslant t$. But we do not know of any super-linear lower bound.

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[^1]:    *It should be noted that this result is proved in [27] in the special case where $\mathcal{F}$ consists of a single planar graph $H$. However the general case follows by a straightforward modification of the proof of (8.8) in [27].
    ${ }^{\dagger}$ Indeed, by [27] graphs containing no member of $\mathcal{F}$ as a minor have treewidth at most $c$ for some constant $c=c(\mathcal{F})$ (since $\mathcal{F}$ contains a planar graph). Thus $G-X$ has treewidth at most $c$ for every

[^2]:    $\mathcal{F}$-transversal $X$ of $G$, and hence $\tau_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=\Omega(n)$. On the other hand, every subgraph of $G$ containing a member of $\mathcal{F}$ as a minor has a cycle, and thus has $\Omega(\log n)$ vertices, implying $\nu_{\mathcal{F}}(G)=O(n / \log n)$.

    We remark that to obtain $n$-vertex graphs $G$ with treewidth $\Omega(n)$ and girth $\Omega(\log n)$ it suffices to consider $d$-regular $n$-vertex expanders of girth $\Omega(\log n)$ for some fixed $d$, such as the Ramanujan graphs constructed by Lubotzky, Phillips, and Sarnak [24] for instance. The fact that the treewidth is $\Omega(n)$ is a direct consequence of their positive vertex-expansion (or see [16, Proposition 1]).

[^3]:    ${ }^{\ddagger}$ Here we use the fact that all graphs in $\mathcal{P}_{t}$ are connected, which implies that $X$ is a transversal of $G$ if and only if $X \cap V\left(G_{i}\right)$ is a transversal of $G_{i}$ for each $i \in[1, p]$.

