



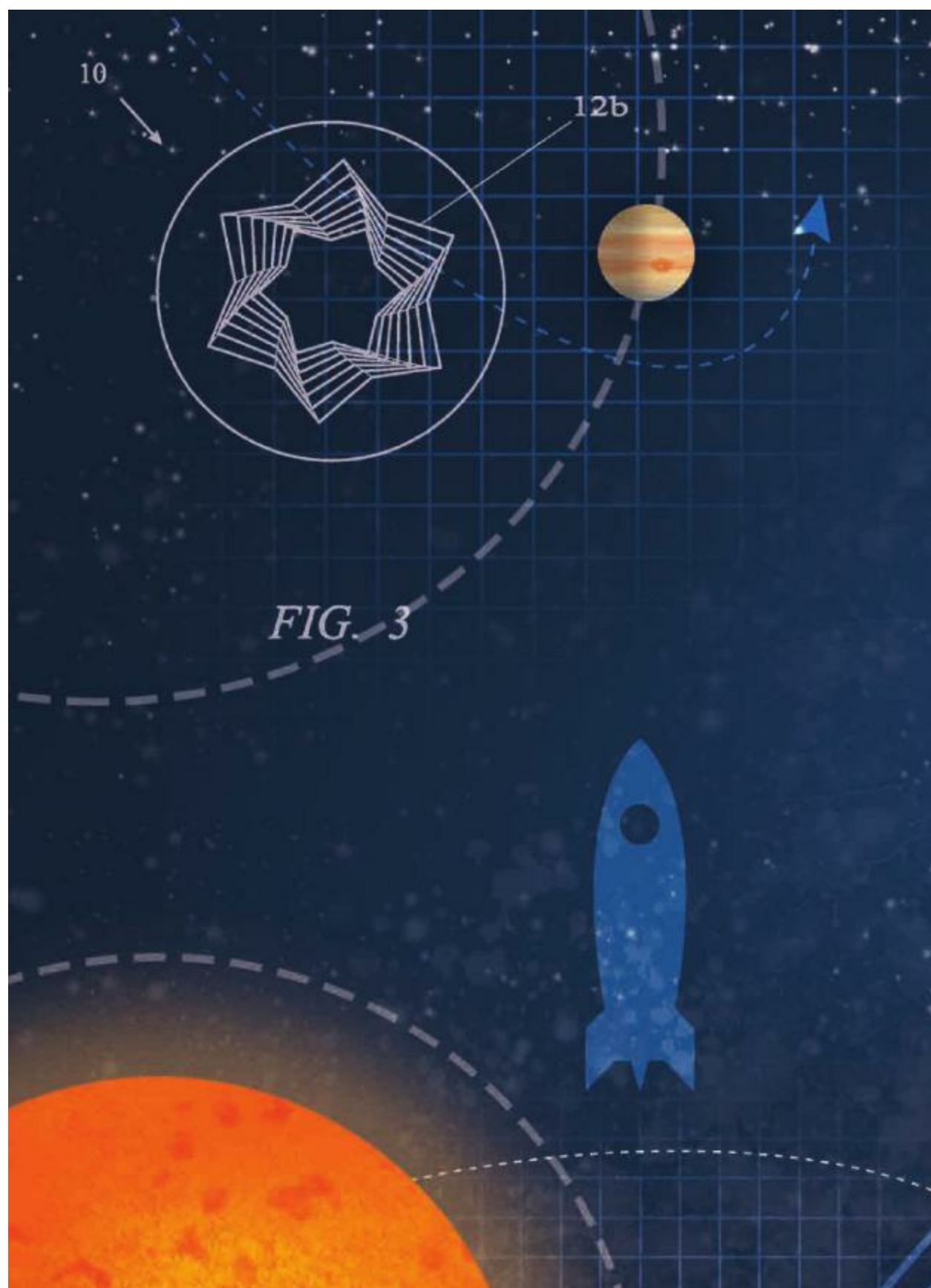
$$dv = -v_e \frac{dM}{M}$$

ROCKET SCIENCE

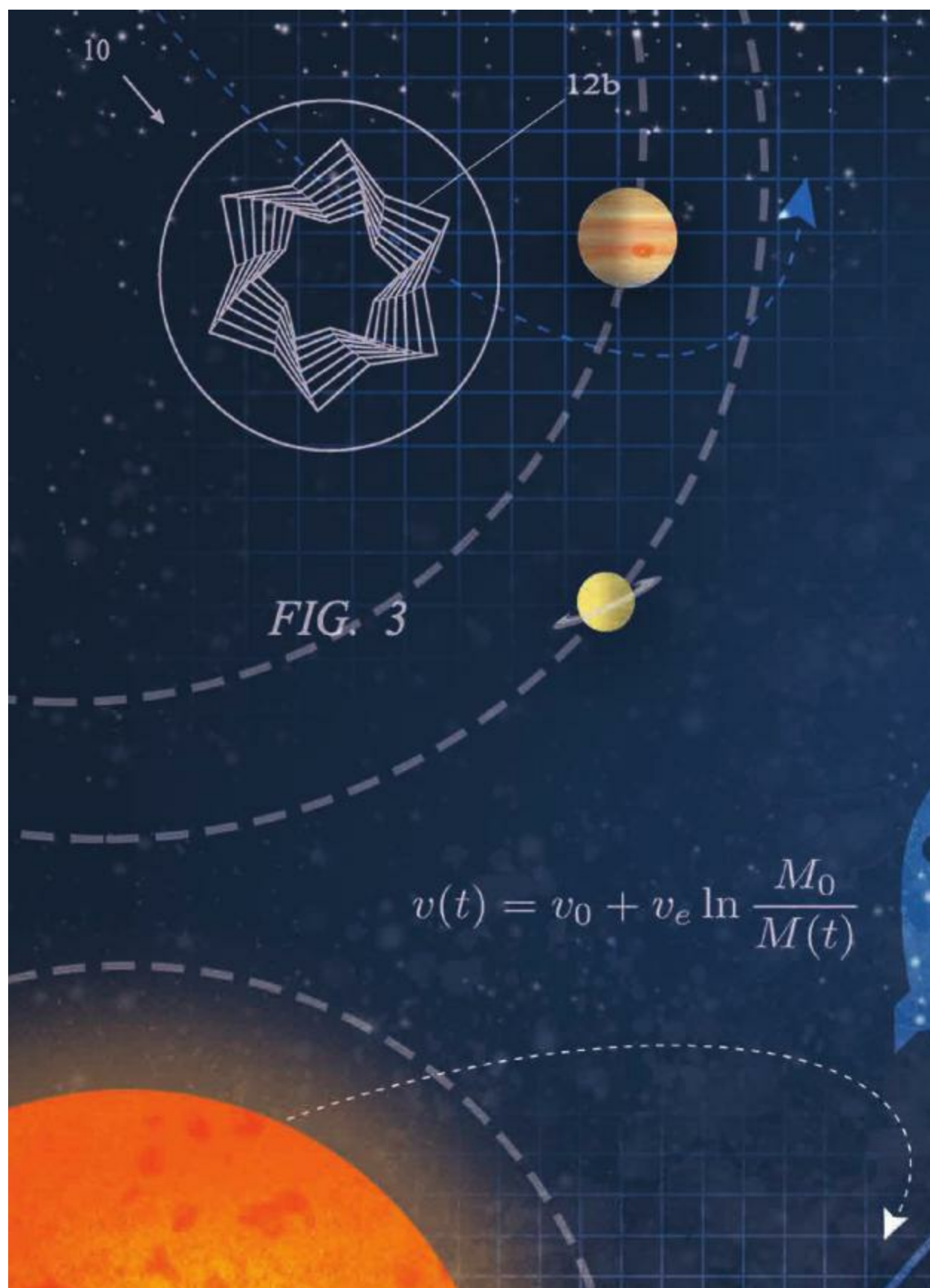
ANDREW RADER

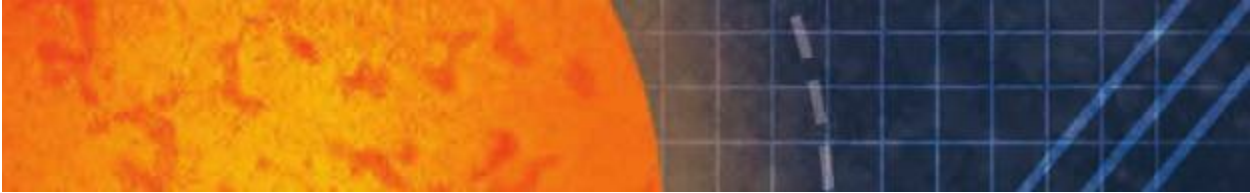
ILLUSTRATION BY GALEN FRAZER











The Universe is vast. We live among billions upon billions of galaxies, each containing billions upon billions of stars. There are more stars in the Universe than all the grains of sand on all the beaches of Earth, and thousands more are born every second.







Solar System

Our star, called the Sun, is an ordinary medium-sized star in the inner corner of a medium-sized galaxy called the Milky Way. The Sun is surrounded by planets, and ours is no exception. Planets form when enough material concentrates together for gravity to compress it into a ball, just like stars.



Earth and Moon

Earth is a medium-sized rocky planet, third from the Sun. What makes Earth special is that it's close enough to the Sun to stay warm, but far enough that it's not too hot. Of the planets in our solar system, it's just the right temperature to have liquid water.





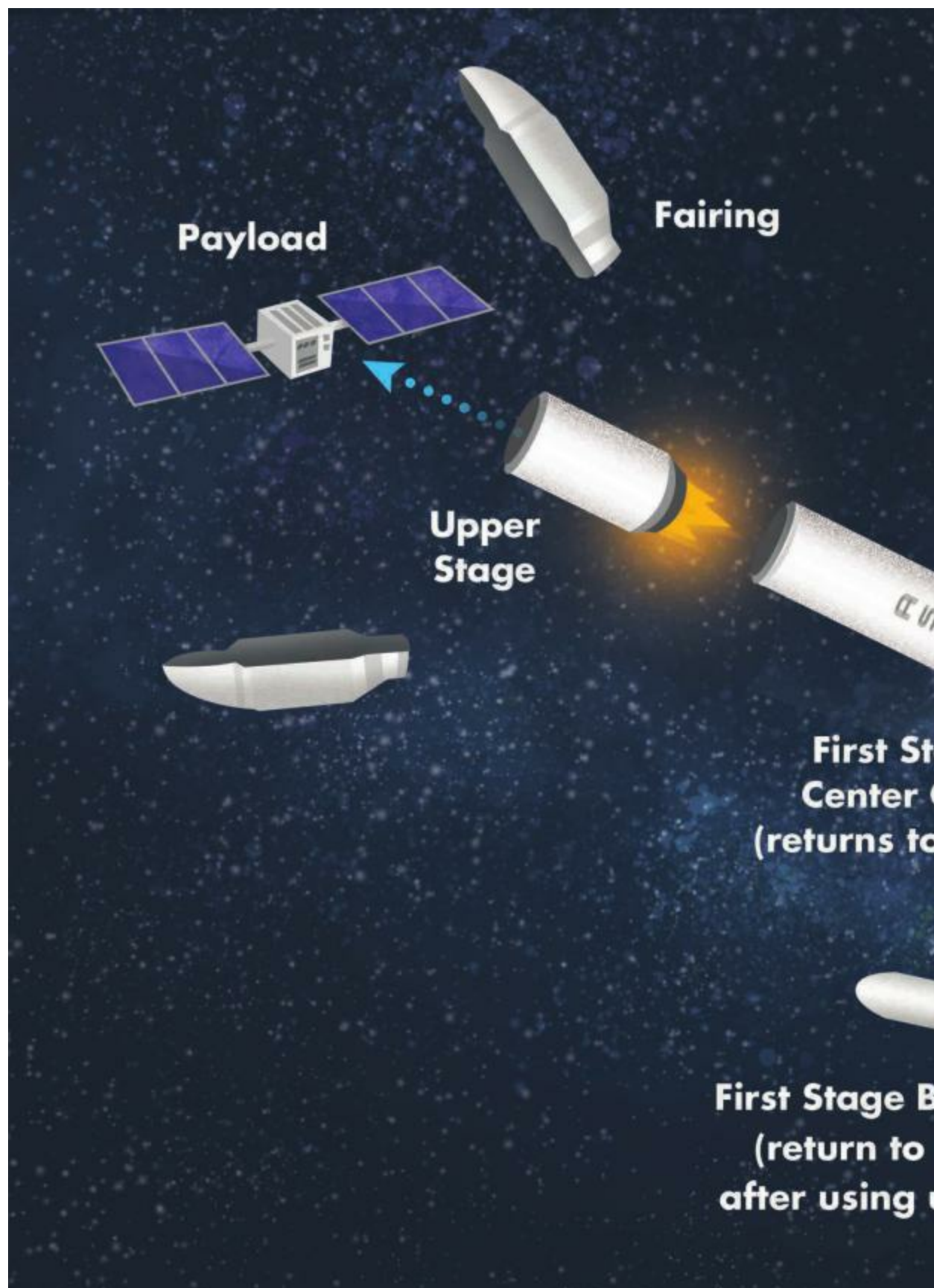
How Rockets Work: Engines

There is no air in space, so we can't use propellers or balloons that float. Rockets burn mixtures of fuel and oxygen against their own exhaust to accelerate forward. In space to burn, rockets bring their own oxygen.

Liquid Fuel









How Rockets Work: Landing

Since the beginning of spaceflight, most rockets throw away their stages to break up in the atmosphere for simplicity and to maximize performance, but it's expensive because it means that an entirely new rocket must be built for each flight.

Now for the first time in history, rocket stages can land with precise guidance after flight, either on a ship or a platform in the ocean or by turning around and landing on land. This allows rockets to be reused—a major step in making it easier to get to space.



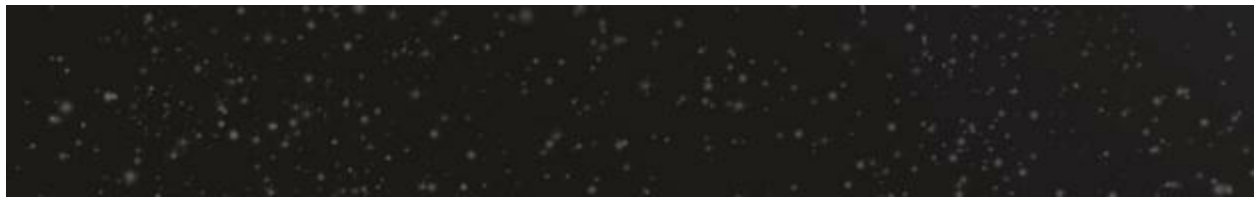
Orbits

For rockets and spacecraft, the hardest part is not getting to space, but staying up there. Even in space, gravity pulls spacecraft down toward Earth, just like it pulls you and other objects toward the ground.

But if a spacecraft is moving very, very fast, by the time it would normally hit the ground, the ground is no longer there.



Orbital Path



The International Space Station

Right now there's a space station up in the sky above your head, orbiting our planet. People go there by traveling in a small spaceship launched on top of a giant rocket.

The astronauts floating around on the space station have lots of supplies like food, water, clothes, and tools for science experiments. We send supplies to the station using cargo ships that are steered by computers controlled from the ground. Then astronauts on the space station steer the ships into a smooth landing, sometimes with the help of a robotic arm.



Going to the Moon

In order to send astronauts beyond Earth orbit, really big rocket. In the 1960s and 1970s, NASA built the largest rocket ever built, Saturn V, to send 27 people to the Moon over 9 missions. Saturn V rockets were as tall as skyscrapers. This was called the Apollo program and each flight used a series of spacecraft in order to reduce weight as much as possible in each segment of the mission.





Going to Mars

Getting to planets like Mars works the same way as getting to the Moon, except that it takes a much longer time. Mars is much farther than the Moon—and that's at closest approach. Since Earth and Mars orbit the Sun, the distance and time between them varies based on their positions. Earth takes 365 days (1 year) to circle the Sun, but Mars takes

To get from Earth to Mars, first you have to get into orbit around Earth. From there, you fire your engine to escape Earth's orbit and put you on a path to Mars. This is still an orbit, but it's around the Sun. Once your spacecraft reaches Mars, you need to slow down to enter Mars orbit before you can land.



Exploring Mars

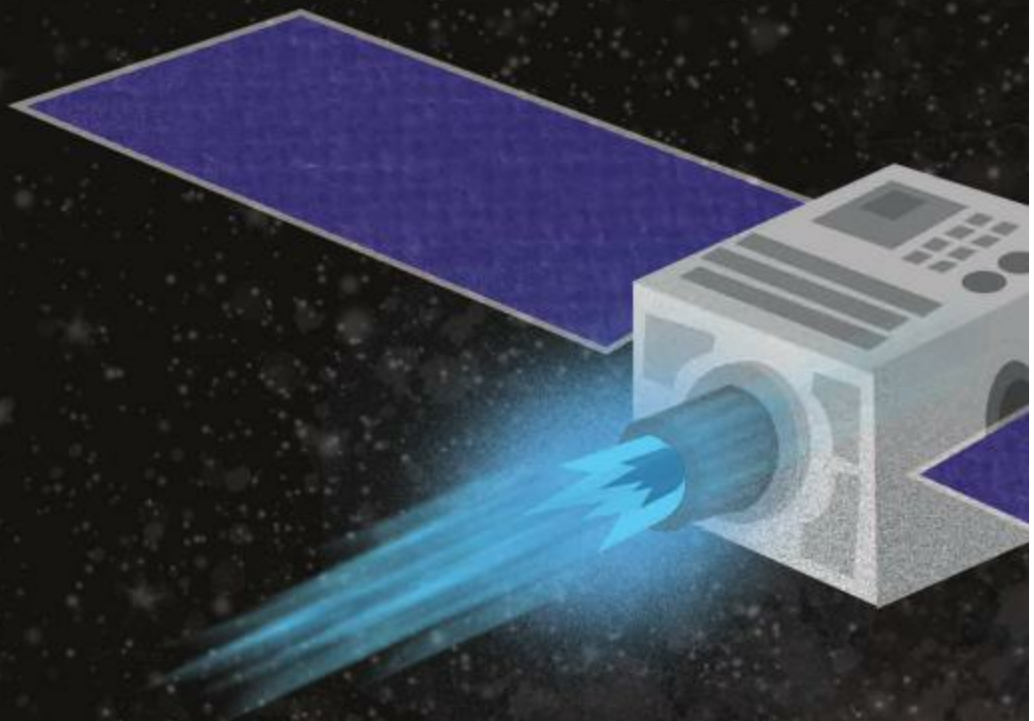
Over the years, we have sent more than 50 robotic missions to Mars, with around half of these successful (getting to Mars is hard!). In fact, there are several exploring Mars right now! Some of these observe the planet from orbit, others land in place, and some have wheels to drive around.





Ion Engines

Ion engines use electricity to accelerate positive ions toward a negatively charged grid at extremely high speeds, up to 90,000 miles per hour. That's more than 10 times faster than a speeding bullet! Since they use only tiny amounts of propellant, ion engines are very efficient for deep space





Solar Sails

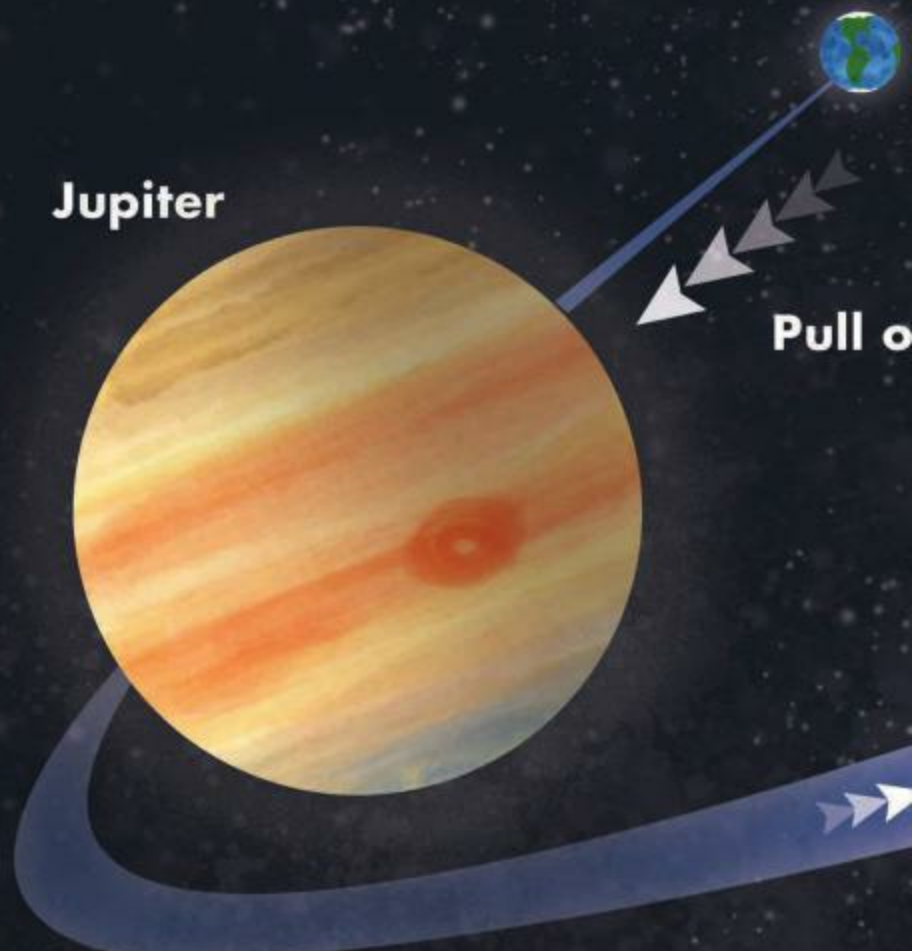
The light and heat of the Sun is carried by tiny invisible particles called "photons", and each of them gives a tiny push. Individually, this push is too small to feel, but if you collect enough photons, you can propel a spacecraft. A solar sail is a very large but very light surface that captures as many photons as possible.

Solar sails might have to be miles across to capture photons to propel a large spacecraft, but since space is a vacuum, there's no friction to slow you down, so you could reach very high speeds. All in all, they use no fuel, so they never stop working. One day, they could someday be used to propel a spacecraft on a voyage that could take hundreds of years.



Gravity Slingshots

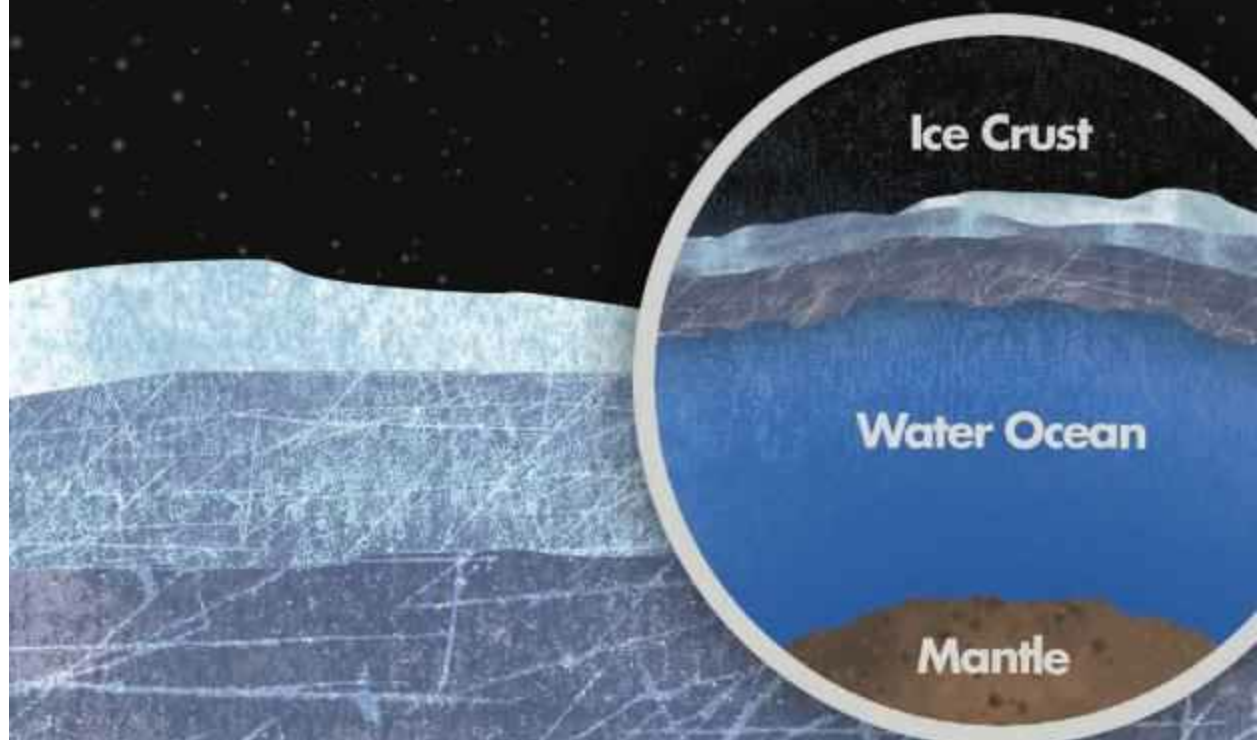
To get to planets far out from the Sun, we have to go really fast—even faster than a rocket. Spacecraft gain speed by flying past a planet really close, using gravity to "slingshot" deep out into space. The planet is so heavy, so gravity tugs the spacecraft, flinging





Jupiter

Jupiter is the largest planet, almost like a miniature star. In fact, it's so large and so far from the Sun that it creates more heat than it receives. A giant ball of swirling gas, Jupiter could fit 1,300 Earths inside. It features a "Giant Red Spot", a storm the size of Earth that has lasted for more than 300 years!





Saturn

Saturn is the second largest planet in the solar system, known for its giant rings. Like Jupiter, Saturn has a “solar system” of its own, supporting over 50 moons. These are especially interesting, and were explored by the Cassini spacecraft, which orbited Saturn from 2004 and 2017.

Titan

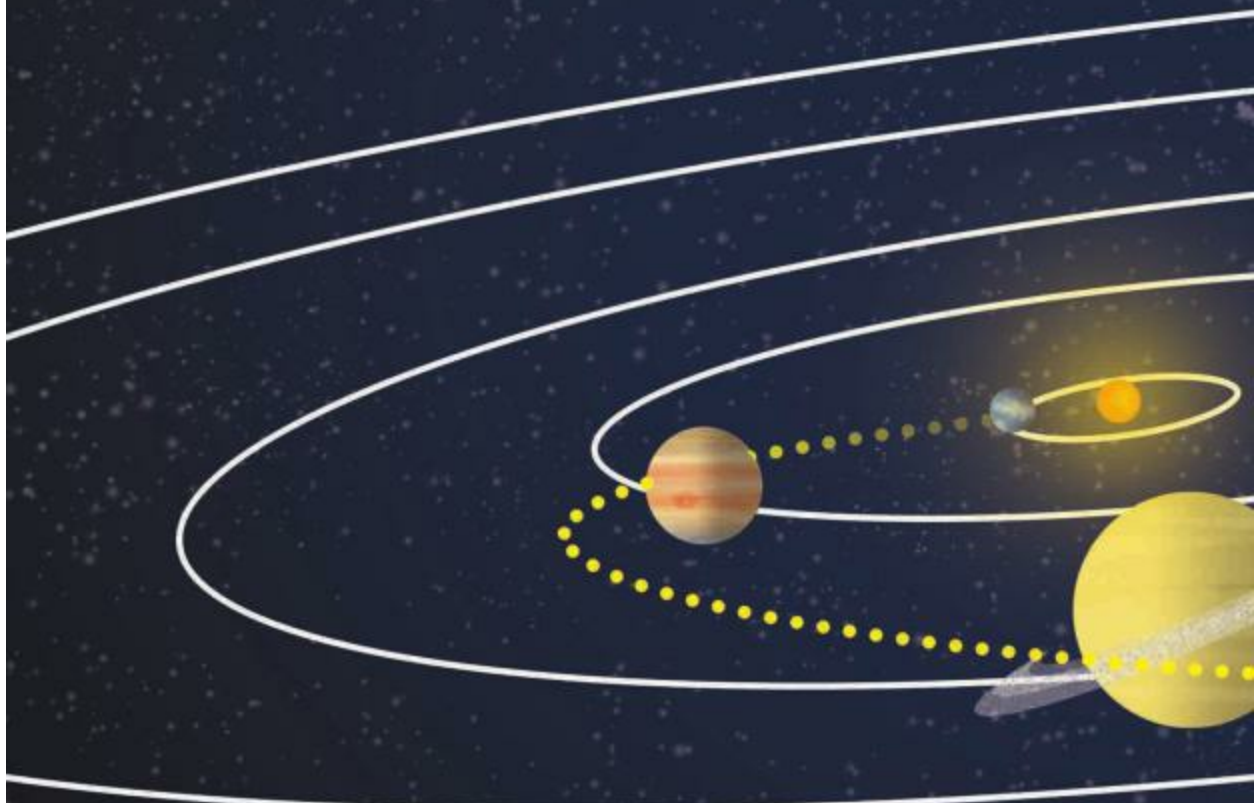


Enceladus is a small icy moon with a subsurface liquid ocean, geysers, and particles trailing into space. Saturn's largest moon, Titan, is larger than Earth's Moon and has the most Earthlike weather in the solar system. It's the only other planet with a thick atmosphere on its surface, but Titan has lakes of liquid methane at extremely cold temperatures ($-290^{\circ}\text{F}/-179^{\circ}\text{C}$). Titan is very similar to Earth's in thick atmosphere.



Ice Giants

Uranus and Neptune are a bit like Jupiter and Saturn, but because they contain more water, ammonia, and methane ice, they're sometimes called "Ice Giants". Each has moons of its own, the most interesting being Triton, which orbits in the opposite direction of most moons in the solar system.



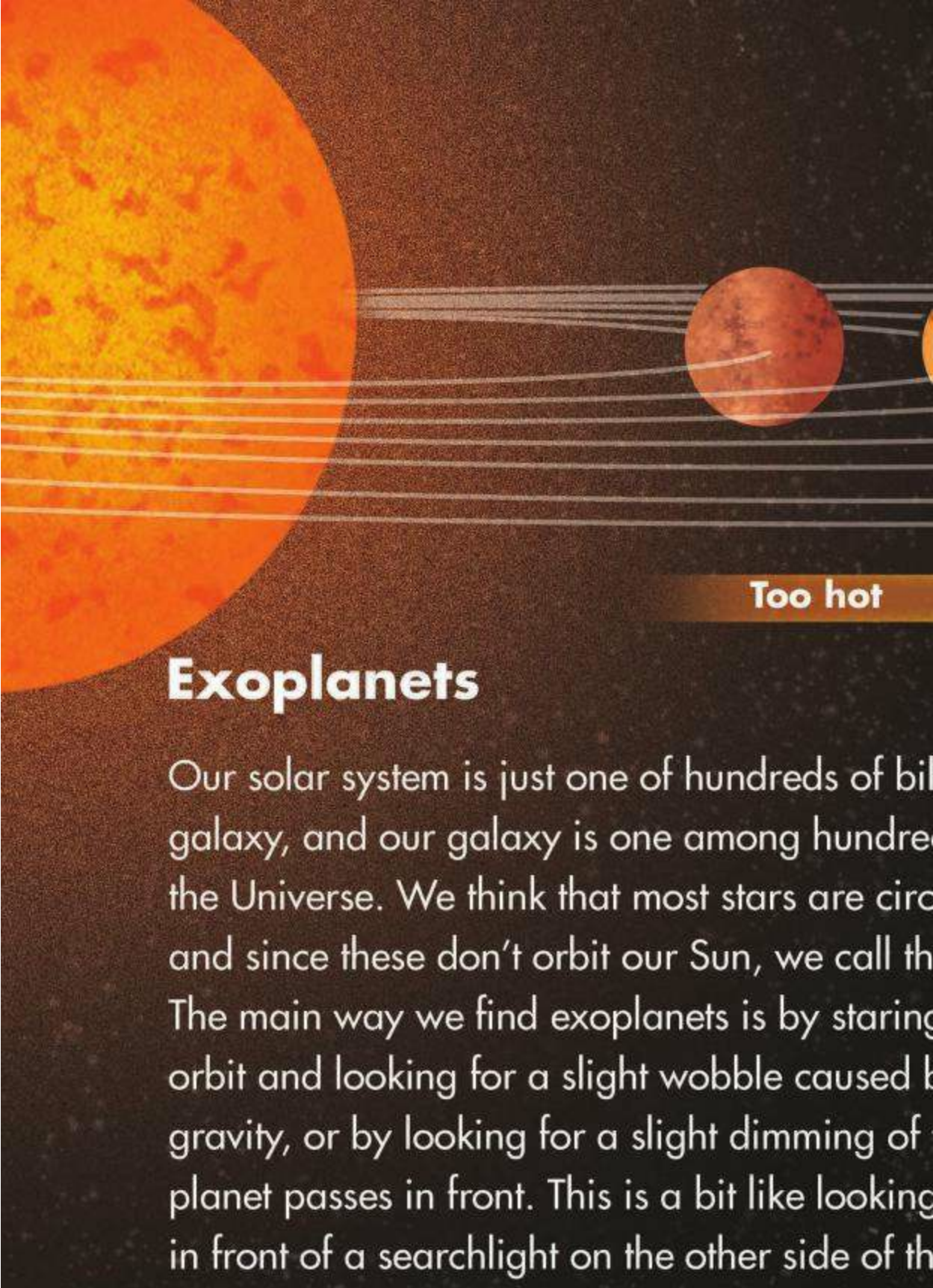




The Kuiper Belt

Beyond Neptune lies the Kuiper Belt, a region of icy worlds so far away that the Sun provides a full Moon on Earth. Pluto was the first Kuiper Belt object to be discovered, in 1930. Pluto is a bit smaller than Earth's Moon, but has five moons of its own, including Charon, which is half the size of Pluto itself. In 2015, the New Horizons spacecraft became the first to visit the Kuiper Belt, giving us a close-up look at its shape, composition, and internal structure.



An illustration of an exoplanet system. On the left, a large, bright orange star with a textured surface. To its right, a smaller, reddish-brown planet orbits in a circular path, indicated by several thin, light-colored lines. The background is a dark, textured brown.

Too hot

Exoplanets

Our solar system is just one of hundreds of billions in our galaxy, and our galaxy is one among hundreds of billions in the Universe. We think that most stars are circled by planets, and since these don't orbit our Sun, we call them exoplanets. The main way we find exoplanets is by staring at a star and looking for a slight wobble caused by the gravity of a planet passing in front. This is a bit like looking at a searchlight on the other side of the



Extraterrestrial Life

Are we alone in the Universe? We don't know. We think that life should be able to exist on many planets out there, and simple life forms should even be found in places in our solar system like Mars, Europa, or Titan. If we found life on one of these worlds, it would be a great discovery. Life often arises when the conditions are right. This suggests that life is common throughout the Universe.

What about intelligent life, like the aliens of science fiction? It is certainly possible that there are other intelligent beings out there that we may someday meet. Even on our own planet there are animals that are fairly intelligent, like chimpanzees, elephants, dolphins, and octopuses.





