The story of Icarus is one of the most famous Greek myths. Young Icarus is imprisoned alongside his father Daedalus, a genius inventor. They are locked in a tower or a labyrinth in some versions of the story, with no way out. Daedalus creates two sets of wings and gives one to his son. Before they attempt to escape by flying over the ocean, Daedalus gives Icarus an important warning. He tells him not to fly too low, or his feathers will soak up salt water, and he will crash. And he also says not to fly too high, or the sun will burn his wings. Icarus takes off and is overcome with joy. He is finally free. He climbs higher and higher, throwing caution to the wind. And as he nears the sun, his wings catch fire. Daedalus can only watch as his son falls into the ocean and drowns. The story of Icarus flying too close to the sun has many interpretations. Some say the moral is to find balance. Avoid the highs and lows, and find a middle path. Others say it is a lesson to listen to one’s elders. Others say it’s a warning against egoism and hubris. Not respecting our limitations and not knowing our place in the natural world is a recipe for failure. Nevertheless, testing boundaries is human nature. People are natural explorers and rule breakers. Our history is one of overcoming limitations and mastering our environment. Not even the sun is off-limits to the people of Rjukan in Norway. Because Rjukan is located in a narrow valley surrounded by mountains, its people only see the sun for six months of the year. Martin Anderson, a local artist, lobbied for a novel solution: a sun mirror. In 2013, three large mirrors were placed above the town. They are controlled by a computer that tracks the sun as it moves across the sky. The mirrors reflect light down into the once dark center of town. The Chinese city of Chengdu has an even more audacious plan to illuminate their town. They will build an artificial moon to light up the city at night. The plan is to send up a satellite in 2020 that will reflect the sun’s light down. According to Wu Chunfeng, the chairman of a tech company, the satellite will be eight times as bright as the real moon. And it will save the city $174 million in electricity. Some people fear that this will result in light pollution. No one knows what the effects of pervasive nighttime light on humans and animals will be. Only time will tell if this will be another triumph for humankind or simply another ill-fated flight of Icarus.

In 1948, 13 years before a human had ever even been to space, James Mangan did something audacious. He tried to create a new nation – a nation in space! The Nation of Celestial Space may have started as a publicity stunt, but Mangan made sure it became more than that. He created coins, gave deeds of space to friends, and fought for his nation to be recognized by the UN. He even raised a fuss about its borders. According to him, satellites were trespassing. Mangan’s space nation was never recognized, but his ideas live on in a new space nation called Asgardia. Igor Ashurbeyli is no stranger to space. He is an aerospace engineer with a long career in technology. He is also a billionaire. The Russian entrepreneur and rocket scientist is picking up where Mangan left off. And he’s bankrolling the project himself. He’s been dreaming of this since he was a kid. And he says this is not just a fantasy – he intends to do something very real. Ashurbeyli founded his space nation in 2016, which he calls Asgardia. While the Nation of Celestial Space claimed all of space as its territory, Asgardia will only consist of habitable platforms in low-earth orbits. The first of these will be about the same distance from Earth as the International Space Station is now. Within 40 hours of the project’s announcement in 2016, 100,000 people applied for citizenship. Within three weeks, that number rose to 500,000. Anyone over 18 can apply, but not all are accepted. There are now hundreds of thousands of citizens from hundreds of countries. Some are even applying for leadership positions. According to their constitution, their mission is to create permanent peace in space, equal opportunities for Asgardians, and to promote the welfare of humankind. In November of 2017, Asgardia took its first steps. A small satellite called Asgardia-1 was launched into space. It contained data on about 18,000 of Asgardia’s citizens, as well as the nation’s flag and constitution. The goal of the satellite was to fulfill Ashurbeyli’s promise of bringing his citizens to space – albeit digitally. Asgardia is currently trying to gain UN membership, but there are hurdles to jump along the way. They are in the process of creating their own government, which is one of the UN’s requirements. They also need a defined territory and a permanent population to be recognized by the UN. While they have yet to send anyone to space, the Asgardians seem undaunted. Only time will tell whether we are witnessing the birth of a nation or simply another flash in the pan.