

Part II

The Celestial Empire

178 CE

Sometime during September, during the years of the reign of Emperor Ling in the Eastern Han dynasty, court astronomers looked out onto the night sky and saw the emergence of a long, brightening object, one that looked like a central star with streaming bristles emerging from it, stretching for many degrees of the arc of the sky. It appeared somewhere in the vicinity of what we know as the constellation of Hercules, and as the days went by, its brightness increased, becoming a bright white and red streak cutting across a vast swath of the sky. The court astronomers tracked the star for about 80 days, as it brightened then slowly faded, and finally disappeared from sight. It was a “broom star”—they recorded it and moved on. Though had seen such things many times before, this was a particularly magnificent appearance. This broom star vastly outshined and outreached anything the court astronomers had ever seen. Seeing such an amazing and unprecedented celestial display must have caused some of those astronomers, as well as other members of society, to wonder. The empire seemed to be in decline, the powers of eunuchs and members of elite families often getting in the way or eclipsing that of the emperor himself. Numerous scholars were writing of the decline of morality, the intellectual stagnation of the court, and its increasingly weak and reactive style of governing.

They had to wonder: was this the end?