Once again Margaret traveled south to Italy in the winter. The drab, cold weather did not improve her feelings of despair over the ruin of the Netherlands and dread at the prospect of joining Ottavio at the new palace in Piacenza. However, she had obtained her freedom from the prison created by Philip's orders and Alva's demands and contempt. Once she was on the road, Alva had to face the situation on his own. She left Brussels with a large military escort that accompanied her to Namur. As the party traveled beyond Luxembourg, the escort became much smaller and she had a modest entourage for the remainder of the journey. Marchi wrote of her impatience to get back to the friendly climate and people of Italy. As Margaret made her way along the Rhine she received a mixed welcome, but her reception became warmer when she reached Basle and Lucerne. She felt growing relief as she drew closer to the snow fields of the Alps. There the oppression of serving Philip II finally lifted completely as her party battled its way through the St. Gothard Pass and swiftly descended toward the Po River valley. Ottavio greeted her at Bellinzona near Milan and the two of them made the final part of the journey together, arriving in Piacenza in February 1568. There, a newly completed wing of the palace that Margaret had helped to plan awaited her, and an elaborate formal entry into the city ended with her reception in its rooms.

Margaret’s release from the cares and burdens of office showed in her improved health, although the gout and liver problems she had developed in the Netherlands never left her. The fright and the horror of strife was, she thought, over for her and she abandoned the search for power and glory. Although she wrote to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese of her contentment at being with family, she had not longed to return to Ottavio and

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settled uneasily into the court dominated by her husband and son, both of whom followed a licentious lifestyle that she had to ignore, at least temporarily. Margaret had no intention of slipping into the role of Ottavio's wife, something he did not want in any event, and she took up residence in Piacenza while he stayed in Parma. The years in the Netherlands had not changed her often aloof personality. Margaret became more introverted, susceptible to moods, and irritable, all of which made her seek the same solitude that had attracted her father as he grew older.2

She did seek to cultivate some personal and family relationships. Her daughter-in-law Maria and two of her grandchildren, Rannucio and Marga-

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