Manga Players

Manga posters cover two walls that converge. Colorful, Japanese characters. Anime schoolgirls with high skirts and pink hair, ninjas with big watches, etc. No windows.

Two tables along (and perpendicular to) the back wall. One near the corner. Four seated on each side. Colorful manga cards spread all over the table. Cards in stacks. Cards in play. An identical, second table. Four seated on each side, here as well. Not too much room between the tables; the four seated at the end table with their backs to the second table, and the four seated at the second table with their backs to the end table — the backs of their chairs touch. A third table is hinted at, off the page. Besides just the cards on the table, the sheer number of players gathered here and the posters on the wall suggest that this is a tournament taking place in a manga store. The absence of windows, that we're in the store's basement.

The manga players all look Japanese, about the age of high schoolers. Most wear dark blue or light blue down jackets. Others wear fleece jackets. So it's cold in here. Lending further credence to our theory that this is the basement. Most are boys. But some are girls. The eye is drawn across the page, and slightly upwards, towards the end of the corner table, where a boy sits at the table squeezed into the corner. He is wearing a maroon fleece, and glasses. He's turned to his left, towards us, smiling at the girl sitting next to him, who is looking away from him, at the cards on the table, also smiling. Across from her is another girl, with her hands over her mouth. Trying not to laugh. Next to the laughing girl, and across from our smiling boy in the corner, is another girl. So this boy is surrounded by three girls, and smiling. Distracted by girls, and smiling. All other players are boys. A dozen or so. Serious expressions on their faces. Looking at the

cards on the table, or the cards in their hands.

But there is one person standing. And there is one adult. And they are one and the same. He is a man in a plaid shirt with round, wire glasses, leaning over the second table from the wall. His right hand on his hip, his left hand on his chin. A slight smile. He's old enough to be the father of the boys he's watching play, but more likely, he's the shopkeeper, or tournament director. The teacher observing his students. The master and his apprentices. A man old enough to have perhaps lived through World War II, when he was their age. And these manga players, playing at war, who will never know real war, or no war like that, as long as they live.

"This is how kids ought to learn," thinks the old shopkeeper hosting the manga tournament.