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Mecha Prototypes in a Field of Camomiles

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It is common knowledge that Japan's goal in the 21st century is to create the perfect giant robot — hence the nation's global leadership in machinery. Now this work continues in Russia with a touch of "Russian soul," whatever benefit it may offer.

The dwarfing Hitachi excavator plant in Tver, which made its inaugural shipment on Wednesday, sits at 1 Hitachi Ulitsa. An orange excavator looms by the entrance, an alien fixture against the backdrop of a Russian fairy tale — all gloomy forest and darkened sky.

The machine is digging through rubble. The operation serves no visible purpose, but it feels like the excavator is waiting for a nod from the company's chief to transform into a man-shaped contraption that would walk inside to listen to a host rattling superlatives at the guests like a cornered Marine with an unlimited supply of ammo.

Giant metal joints lining the production-room floor look for all intents and purposes like

component parts of *mecha*, the giant machines of anime cartoons.

A platoon of fresh produce, painted in immaculate anime colors, festoons the pastoral-looking backyard brimming over with camomiles.

Top officers of Hitachi Construction Machinery, including company president Yuichi Tsujimoto, and Tver Governor Andrei Shevelyov traded places on stage to shower each other and anyone else within their line of sight with niceties and smash open a barrel of sake with tiny wooden hammers.

"We were so scared 17 years ago when we sold our first, imported Hitachi excavator," a dealer's representative says as trucks cart the first shipment away amid fireworks. "Here's to not being as scared now!"

But humans are not the stars of the show — at least, not metal-less humans. An excavator rolls out, a brush on its bucket, to paint symbols for "Hitachi," or "dawn," and "success" on white canvases.

It returns after a woman in a polka-dot dress warbles a Soviet torch song in Russian and Japanese. By way of an encore, the excavator arranges martini glasses in a pyramid and pours a steaming, poison-purple liquid.

It looks like Optimus Prime of "Transformers" fame serving drinks — he has dealt with worse, but it is not really his cup of sake. Until true robots are perfected, an excavator will have to do.

The excavator's driver was flown in from Japan — a lean, gray-haired man in twinkling glasses. Involvement by Russian employees was limited to arranging canvases and glasses.

The factory surpasses Japanese Hitachi plants in at least one aspect — quality control, a company representative tells The Moscow Times.

"Some Russian components are used," she hastens to add. She can name one: The counterweight — a slab of metal filled with concrete. It looks like Russia's contribution to the robot future will be limited in the immediate future.

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