THE STORY

SCENE ONE
ON THE BED OF THE RHINE RIVER
Three Rhine Daughters, Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Floshilde, swim in the river, guarding their gold, while Alberich admires from above. They tease and mock him and repel his flirtations. Angered, he vows to be revenged. His eye catches the Rhine gold, and the Rhine Daughters explain its magical powers—if someone were to renounce love, he could fashion the Rhine gold into a ring which would give its wearer power over the world. Alberich boldly manages to steal the gold, to the Rhine Daughters’ protestations.

SCENE TWO
AN OPEN SPACE ON A MOUNTAIN, A CASTLE GLIMMERING IN THE DISTANCE
Wotan marvels at the newly completed castle, future home of the gods. His wife Fricka reminds him that the giants Fasolt and Fafner only agreed to build the castle because Wotan promised to give them her sister Freia. Freia tends the crucial golden apples, which grant the gods eternal youth. Freia begs Wotan to protect her, but Wotan is confident that the ever-slick and slithery Loge will find a clever way to resolve the issue.

Fasolt and Fafner come to take possession of Freia; her brothers, Froh and Donner, rush to her defense. Loge arrives, belatedly, and tempts the giants by explaining how Alberich the Nibelung discovered something more valuable than love: gold. The giants agree to accept Alberich’s gold as a substitute for Freia, whom Fasolt loves—but they take the goddess as hostage for the treasure. The gods, deprived of Freia and eternal youth, suddenly grow old. Wotan, who now desires the ring for himself, and Loge, who insists it must be returned to the Rhine, descend to Nibelheim to steal Alberich’s treasure.

SCENE THREE
THE SUBTERRANEAN CAVERNS OF NIBELHEIM
Alberich has forced his brother Mime to craft the Tarnhelm, a magic helmet that renders its wearer invisible or transforms his shape. Loge and Wotan arrive; Mime explains how Alberich’s ring has made him a tyrant over the Nibelungs, whom he forces to toil ceaselessly, mining gold for his ever-growing hoard. Loge, who calls Alberich ‘kinsman,’ pretends to worry that Alberich will not be safe as he sleeps—his slaves may rebel. Alberich is confident the Tarnhelm will protect him. Loge asks for a demonstration. The over-confident tyrant first changes into a large dragon and then a small toad, at which point Loge and Wotan overpower him and take him prisoner.

SCENE FOUR
AN OPEN SPACE ON A MOUNTAIN
In exchange for Alberich’s freedom, Wotan demands all his gold, so Alberich commands the Nibelungs to bring the hoard up from the depths. Wotan also takes the Tarnhelm and ring, and Alberich puts a curse on the ring—it will bring its wearer only misery and death. Fasolt and Fafner return with Freia. Fasolt insists the gold be piled high enough to conceal her beauty, thus making the parting easier. They demand the Tarnhelm and ring as well, but Wotan refuses. Erda, the primeval earth goddess, mysteriously appears and warns Wotan that the ring spells doom for the gods. Reluctantly he concedes the ring.

The brothers immediately fall to brawling over the ring, and Fasolt is killed. Donner calls the clouds together to clear the atmosphere, and Froh creates a rainbow bridge. Wotan, naming the castle Valhalla,
leads the gods across the rainbow bridge over the river to enter their new home. Loge foresees that the gods are moving toward their doom. The Rhine Daughters, below, lament the loss of their gold.

<sidebar> WHO’S WHO IN WAGNERIAN MYTH

IN THE WATERS:
Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde, fishy sisters, daughters of the Rhine River.

IN THE EARTH:
Alberich and Mime, Nibelung brothers. Alberich is full of ambition and energy; Mime is the craftiest of blacksmiths.
Other Nibelungs, enslaved by Alberich’s ring.

ON THE EARTH:
Fasolt and Fafner, Giant brothers. Fasolt loves Freia; Fafner resents the gods and intends to weaken them by taking Freia away from them.

FROM THE EARTH:
Erda, primeval mother of wisdom.

OF THE AIR:
Wotan, king of the gods. What power he has comes from the agreements carved on his spear.
Fricka, goddess of marriage. Her three siblings are:
Freia, goddess of love, youth, and beauty.
Froh, god of springtime and the rainbow.
Donner, god of thunder.

FIRE
Loge, spirit of cunning, trickery, and fire, related to the Nibelungs.

Some of the ‘gods’ in Das Rheingold draw inspiration from the Old Norse eddas and sagas (Odin, Frigg, Freyja, Freyr, Thor, Loki).